

Canadian Social Policy in the 2000s: Bringing Place In

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CPRN Research Report | November 2008



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Abstract

This article explores departures in Canadian public policy toward more “place-based” approaches to social development. Focusing on the federal government, it describes a series of recent initiatives designed to enable local actors to participate in policy development processes and take greater control of their own destinies. Using the categories of “municipal empowerment” and “community building” to map new patterns, the article examines innovation and learning across federal and local scales. The article concludes that Canadian governments have now joined a robust and evolving international conversation about leveraging local assets to meet significant national policy challenges, but that more work needs to be done to build high performing, durable multi-level partnerships.

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1. Introduction¹

In recent years there has been growing awareness that today's major public policy challenges play-out in *local spaces*. As MERIC Gertler has observed: "a central paradox of our age is that, as economic processes move increasingly to a global scale of operation, the centrality of the local is not diminished but is in fact enhanced" (Gertler, 2001). Geographers studying innovation in the knowledge-based economy now emphasize the importance of localized knowledge clusters for national economic success. Analysts of social inclusion encounter the multiple barriers that individuals and families face living in distressed neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, rural areas and smaller centres confront another set of risks altogether, managing change with declining, often aging, populations. Common to all of these perspectives is appreciation of how local geographic contexts – the form and nature of *places* – shape people's life chances.

For national governments these dynamics frame a novel set of challenges. Their policy interventions must increasingly work from the ground up to generate solutions rooted in the particular concerns of local communities, attuned to the specific needs and capacities of residents. But what policy frameworks and institutional arrangements will enable such multi-level collaboration to actually work? The conceptual and practical challenges remain daunting for national governments everywhere as they rethink and retool for an era of more intensive global-local interaction.

The purpose of this article is to highlight innovations in policy thought and governing practices among OECD countries, and, in particular, to bring Canadian policy communities more fully into the international conversation on what has come to be known as place-based policy. Our concern is with the federal level in Canada, which may seem surprising given constitutional traditions and policy legacies. Yet, as we demonstrate, there has been a considerable degree of federal policy experimentation recently aimed at better integrating policies for places and people. The activity has been quite diffuse and partial in its roll-out, and the disparate threads have not yet been systematically conceptualized. Putting the various streams in analytical context, we trace the possible emergence of a new national-local policy paradigm responsive to the changing times.

¹ This paper was prepared for Human Resources and Social Development Canada and appeared in *Plan Canada*, January-February 2009.

2. New Ideas: Policies for People *in* Places

The “new localism” is a term that now resonates across a multi-disciplinary literature analyzing how globalization’s most important flows –of people, investment, and ideas – intersect in cities and communities around the world (Polèse and Stren, 2000). The research underpinning the new localism makes three central claims (Bradford, 2007). First, to deliver on the country’s major challenges of economic innovation, social and cultural inclusion, and ecological sustainability, national governments must engage local governance networks. Joining up is necessary because “wicked problems” – deeply rooted, interconnected, and unfamiliar – require holistic interventions addressing multi-faceted causality. Second, the particular expression of globalization’s localizing flows and policy challenges varies significantly across places. Social exclusion in large urban centers traps already vulnerable people such as recent immigrants or lone parent families in rundown neighbourhoods with few connections to the mainstream. The same issues of exclusion in smaller, more remote places take a different form, often threatening the viability of the entire community as globalization radically depletes the local economic base. Finally, with issues of such national consequence expressed in complex, differentiated ways across the country, national governments need a spatially-sensitive perspective to inform their policies. Traditional approaches – typically centralized and top-down – that ignore local voices and devalue community and municipal assets will not build the *high quality places* that are the foundation for the prosperity of nations in a global age. Nor will they be capable of the robust policy learning necessary to tackle wicked problems. A “local lens” is needed to assess the spatial impacts of national policies and maximize their benefits for people.

These three claims have inspired a rich body of policy analysis and administrative inquiry that identifies the changes required to create good places for people to live, work, and participate in community. The overarching idea is moving from *government to governance* (Saint-Martin, 2004). Governance processes find ways to leverage diverse ideas, coordinate collective resources, and use new tools and techniques to inspire and steer decision making. Rather than acting alone or resorting to jurisdictional claims, governments work with one another and through civil society partnerships for joint problem-solving.

In practice, governance involves a “double devolution” of policy responsibility from upper-level governments to local representatives (External Advisory Committee, 2006). Devolution’s two tracks can usefully be understood as *municipal empowering* and *community building*. Progress along each results in multi-level collaborations where a host of policy resources and governing tools – recognition, voice, authority, and money – come to be shared with *in situ* networks of municipal officials, community organizations, and residents. Successful outcomes for both governments and communities come through negotiated relationships around context-sensitive strategies integrating priorities formerly dealt with sequentially or, worse, traded-off: social development; economic innovation; cultural inclusion; and ecological sustainability.

However, for double devolution to deliver on its promise for both governments and communities it is essential that it not become, in practice, offloading or downloading to actors on the front lines. Community-based public policy implemented in local places must be supported by appropriate macro-level measures that supply essential individual and family income security, health, education, employment, care, and so forth (Jenson and Mahon, 2002; Torjman, 2007).

As the OECD summarized in its study of urban regeneration: “National policies are increasingly important, not only to provide better framework conditions for local initiatives, but also and especially to take better account of the many sectoral and macroeconomic policies which have a territorial impact” (OECD, 2002a).

Here the two inter-connected components of place-based policy come into focus: on the one hand, upper level governments need to use the local lens to align and tailor their generally available sectoral policies; and on the other hand, for the extraordinary challenges in distressed areas, targeted or community-specific action designed collaboratively can seed transformative local change (Seguin and Divay, 2002; Seidle, 2002; Bradford, 2008). Most important is recognition of the synergy between the two policy components: targeted interventions are policy laboratories, generating fresh new insights about how sectoral policies work, or do not work, on the ground. With appropriate feedback loops, the macro-level policy focus is sharpened, suggesting where and how mandates and operating rules ought to be reformed. Designed and delivered in isolation from one another, however, neither targeted nor general policies will reach their potential.

In sum, the new dynamics of the global-local relationship have invited systematic change in policy-making structures and processes. Table 1 summarizes transitions from government to governance, and sets the stage for the recent Canadian policy innovations described in the rest of the article.

Table 1. Two Public Policy Frameworks

	Traditional Government Administration	Place-Based Governance
Organizational Logic	Departmental Mandates/ Constitutional Allocations	Multi-level Collaboration/ Framework Agreements
Design Principles	Central Control/Standards	Local Discretion/Priorities
Delivery Mechanisms	Government Programs	Negotiated Partnerships
Policy Goals	Palliative Management	Transformative Prevention
Policy Discourse	Discrete Files	Wicked Problems
Policy Knowledge	Rationalist Expert	Constructivist Experiential
Policy Skills	Design/Delivery/Direction	Convening/Brokering/Facilitating
Evaluation Frames	Government Outputs	Community Outcomes
Learning Dynamic	Departmental Reporting	Social Dialogue

3. New Ideas in Action: A Canadian Perspective

Across the OECD over the last two decades, the place-based strategy has been widely taken-up (OECD, 2006). The British case under the New Labour government is the exemplar with more than 5,550 local governance networks created with an array of central government supports and incentives. The tone was set with Prime Minister Blair's declaration that within 10 to 20 years no one in the United Kingdom would be disadvantaged by where they live. The United States represents an alternative route forward. There the push has come from below as a myriad of community organizations and institutional intermediaries from the foundation and think tank worlds have long worked in inner cities. Progress has come through conceptual breakthroughs such as "asset-based development" and "comprehensive community initiatives" (Siranni and Friedland, 2001).

In comparison with such countries, Canada has a thin policy record. In the 1990s – the pivotal decade when the British and American innovations came on stream – both federal and provincial governments were rightly criticized for their inattention to the rising policy significance of localities (Andrew, Graham, and Phillips, 2003). Their decisions – too often designed in isolation and delivered unilaterally – reflected what the OECD called Canada's "disjointed approach" and lagging engagement with municipal and community challenges (OECD, 2002b). The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) decried the "culture of non-recognition and neglect" that defined its relationship with upper level governments (Bradford, 2002). Community-based organizations similarly struggled for recognition of their contributions to place quality, and for a voice in social policy (Phillips, 2006).

Since the turn of the millennium, however, the Canadian storyline has changed. The past several years have witnessed a promising interaction among new localism research, municipal and community sector advocacy, and policy experimentation at all levels of the federation. In fact, Canadian policy communities are now well-positioned to adapt lessons from other jurisdictions in building their own place-based frameworks that combine national steering and support with local priorities and projects.

The story of Canada's shifting discourse and practice is not yet widely known. Our focus is on the federal government's role in enabling community-driven and municipally-led innovation. Certainly, provincial and municipal governments and civil society networks have also contributed to Canada's engagement with the new localism. Nonetheless, our concern with Ottawa can be justified on several grounds. With national responsibility for innovation, inclusion, and sustainability, the federal government brings both a unique pan-Canadian perspective on cities and communities and a strong interest in ensuring their vitality. Moreover Ottawa's very lack of formal constitutional authority in local affairs has made it the government in Canada most keen to explore new ideas about joining-up through devolved governance. In the late 1990s, the negotiation of the Social Union Framework (SUFA) signaled the move toward governance within Canadian federalism. Signed by the federal government and the provinces/ territories (except Quebec) the SUFA emphasized inter-governmental collaboration and public involvement in policy making. A national context for place-based social policy was established (Saint-Martin, 2004; Jenson, 2004).

To capture the breadth of the recent activity, we have identified two key place-based policy dynamics – a round of *innovation* that involves testing out new approaches and a process of *learning* through reflection and dialogue. Within these two categories, we map a number of initiatives along each of the municipal empowering and community building tracks. We also describe *bridging initiatives* that link the two tracks.

3.1 Policy Innovation

While SUFA's ethos of collaboration and engagement cleared a path for place-based policy in Canada, community and municipal observers soon identified gaps in the framework (Phillips, 2006). Municipalities were not part of the new approach to inter-governmental consultation and cooperation. And community or public voices were engaged only in relation to outcomes, thereby denied influence in policy formulation when crucial design decisions are taken.

These two gaps represented significant limitations to place-based policy. In fact, they were addressed in two subsequent federal frameworks. The 2000 Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) and the 2004 New Deal for Cities and Communities (NDCC) elaborated the intent of the SUFA in programmatic contexts for community building and municipal empowering.

3.1.1 Devolution (1): Community Building

The VSI aimed to strengthen the relationship between the voluntary sector and the federal government and specifically, enhance the policy capacity of community representatives. Federal investments were framed by policy codes on funding and dialogue. A priority was to open channels for community involvement in departmental policy making, and assist organizations in contributing their ideas and experiences.

Such VSI community building can be seen in the Social Development Partnership Program (SDPP) of Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Working with the non-profit sector, it builds policy knowledge in three areas: persons with disabilities; early childhood learning and care; and social inclusion for other vulnerable groups. The SDPP helps community organizations better serve their constituents *and* assists policy makers deliver more responsive programs. Three examples express the mutual benefits. First, Understanding the Early Years, initially an SDPP pilot project, invested in community-based non-profit organizations for local data gathering, benchmarking protocols, and hands-on tools to be used by parents, teachers, and policy makers in community action plans. Second, federal support for Vibrant Communities, a community-led 15 city anti-poverty project, enabled formation of a Government Learning Circle for substantive policy exchanges between numerous policy officials and grassroots practitioners. Third, the renewable three-year homelessness Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative saw the federal government work through the provinces/territories and with municipal and community leaders resources to research, develop, and implement strategies. Respecting variation in governance capacities, Ottawa offered a menu of partnership models to local networks.

3.1.2. Devolution (2): Municipal Empowering

For the municipal empowering track, the NDCC supplies the place-based architecture. A variety of initiatives have been launched, engaging municipalities or their associations in policies enabling local priorities within broad national objectives. Federal investments in municipal infrastructures flowed through the Strategic Infrastructure Fund, the Municipal Rural Fund, and the Gas Tax Transfer. Different from previous federal infrastructure programs, these were designed in consultation with local representatives and included capacity building support for community planning around “green infrastructure” and stretched traditional infrastructure definitions to include investments in culture, tourism, recreation, and affordable housing. For its part, a Green Municipal Fund devolved management authority to the FCM for targeted federal investments in municipal infrastructure projects and feasibility studies to contain urban sprawl and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

3.1.3 Bridging Initiatives: Empowering and Building

Working across the community and municipal tracks, the federal government has launched a few initiatives that represent the most ambitious Canadian experiments in place-based policy. These ones seek to put all the elements in motion: vertical and horizontal collaborations; simultaneous attention to the four pillars (economic, social, environmental, cultural) of place quality; and context-sensitive application of the big macro policy levers.

Three such bridging initiatives are illustrative. First, in selected large cities, five-year Urban Development Agreements, formally joining up the three levels of government and involving community organizations, work at holistic neighbourhood regeneration strategies (Bradford, 2008). Second, for rural areas, the Canadian Rural Partnership drew together a host of government departments and agencies to develop a “Rural Lens” for strategic policy interventions based on resident dialogues, impact assessments and checklists, and comprehensive statistical community profiles. The third example comes from the 2005 Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement (COIA). Addressing a major policy challenge crossing federal and provincial jurisdictions, the COIA acknowledged the crucial role for community organizations and municipalities in immigrant settlement and inter-cultural understanding. Using several innovative engagement tools, the COIA empowers local actors in service planning and employment networking and makes available capacity building support for such participation.

3.2 Social Learning

Policy innovation, if it is to result in transformational change, must be flanked by systematic investments in learning. Such learning proceeds through action research and knowledge transfer that helps ensure only the most productive strategies become institutionalized. The federal government has initiated several modes of social learning along each of the community and municipal tracks.

3.2.1 Community Building

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) program connects local practitioners from the community and government sectors with scholars to conduct socially consequential and policy relevant research. Engagement and dialogue tools such as community forums and policy workshops help adapt research for community application as well as dissemination beyond traditional academic audiences. Another community-driven policy learning vehicle is demonstration and pilot projects that test out innovations in selected locales. Two leading examples are Action for Neighbourhood Change and the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, both generating practical knowledge for communities and governments through vitality indexes, youth mentorship programs, and asset building. The demonstration strategy has been taken further by the Social Research Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) that uses quasi-experimental designs to evaluate social investment strategies for individual and communities.

3.2.2 Municipal Empowering

Infrastructure Canada has partnered with federal research granting councils for knowledge generation and transfer resembling the CURA partnerships. Here the focus is on better policy understanding of public infrastructure, its funding and governance arrangements, and impacts on municipal place quality. These activities come together in a Research Gateway that catalogues research findings, practitioner tools, and relevant links. In the same spirit of knowledge outreach, Infrastructure Canada has also collaborated with the OECD in studies to situate Canadian developments internationally and facilitate cross-national policy learning. These research collaborations include a 30-year global study of infrastructure, and focused territorial reviews of Montreal and Toronto. The Metropolis Project is another federally-sponsored policy research network making both national and international connections to Canadian cities. Focused on immigrant integration and diversity, Metropolis uses numerous learning strategies for knowledge transfer among researchers and policy actors at all levels of government and in local civil societies.

3.2.3 Bridging Initiatives: Empowering and Building

There are several mechanisms that have facilitated learning across the community and municipal processes. Most notable here is the external advisory committee on Cities and Communities that was mandated as part of the NDCC to provide a 30-year vision for cities and communities in sustaining national quality of life. Based on extensive local consultations, its 2006 report spoke directly to the ideas and practices of a place-based framework:

The Committee therefore recommends that all governments in Canada adopt a place-based approach to policy-making, which will allow them to foster better capacities to understand, develop and manage Canada's places for the future. Specifically, the Committee recommends that the leadership role of the federal government be one of facilitation and partnership with other orders of government and civil society, to deliver locally appropriate solutions to issues of national consequence playing out a local level (External Advisory Committee, 2006).

Indeed, the federal “facilitation and partnership” envisioned by the committee has been advanced by two other learning networks. Both bridge municipal and community perspectives within the federal government. First, the Federal Family for Collaborative Community Initiatives, comprised of officials from 25 departments and agencies, meets regularly to expand knowledge and skills for place-based policies. This network practices horizontality to help embed community and municipal perspectives – the local lens – across the federal bureaucracy. Second, the Policy Research Initiative has convened applied research networks for valuable analyses of urban development, social capital, social economy, and life course strategies.

All of these innovation and learning activities reflect a growing federal interest in expanding knowledge and practice about place-based policies. Table 2 summarizes the story.

Table 2. Place-Based Policy in Canada: An Illustrative Federal Policy Inventory

Action Frameworks	Community Building: Voluntary Sector Initiative (2001)	Municipal Empowering: New Deal for Cities and Communities (2004)	Bridging Initiatives
Policy Innovation	Understanding the Early Years Supporting Communities Partnership Initiatives Vibrant Communities	Gas Tax Transfer/ Integrated Sustainable Community Plans Infrastructure Canada Programs Green Municipal Fund	Urban Development Agreements Canadian Rural Partnership Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement
Social Learning	Community University Research Alliance Action for Neighbourhood Change Social Research Demonstration Corporation	Infrastructure Canada Knowledge Outreach and Awareness Initiative OECD Reviews Metropolis Project	External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities Federal Family for Collaborative Community Initiatives Policy Research Initiative

4. Moving Forward

Since the late 1990s, the federal government's progress in designing and implementing place-based policy has put Canada into the evolving international conversation about leveraging local assets for better national outcomes on major policy challenges. This article has taken stock of these developments by situating them conceptually, and mapping their different expressions across community and municipal tracks of the new localism. In so doing, we have helped clear the path for more probing critical analysis of these Canadian policy departures.

Certainly, our intent has *not* been to celebrate success. Indeed there are some major qualifiers to any such story. Key indicators of poverty and exclusion reveal the ongoing problems even as the new federal approaches roll-out – national poverty rates have not improved since the turn of the century; income polarization across urban neighbourhoods has grown alongside increasing spatial concentrations of vulnerable people; and more and more rural communities face structural decline. Additionally, federal-local relationships under both the VSI and NDCC have experienced significant growing pains on crucial funding matters and community and municipal policy engagement (Task Force, 2006). Finally, our story overstates the degree of coherence and focus accompanying the federal thrust. In fact, there is not yet an identifiable place-based policy community in Canada. Resources remain too scattered and the many initiatives insufficiently aligned or connected. Learning opportunities are missed.

Such deficiencies underscore both a need and an opportunity. What's needed is what Jane Jenson has termed a "meeting place" or "institutional locus where policy learning can take place" (Jenson, 2004). Such meeting places exist in countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States, taking different institutional forms reflecting policy legacies. They open opportunities to foster dialogue, build trust, share lessons, and mobilize leadership. Jenson's particular concern was with social policy architecture, but the message applies equally to the place-based framework. Here the agenda is clear, and we close by listing three meeting place priorities:

- *Work on Ideas*: build the knowledge base, informed by research, evidence-based practice, and experiential learning.
- *Work on Connections*: support the "bridge builders" as their boundary crossing is crucial for both vertical and horizontal collaboration.
- *Work on Leadership*: place-based policy expresses deep-seated pan-Canadian values of diversity, inclusion, autonomy, and community; there is a wide political coalition yet to be mobilized in support of this vision and these policies.

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