



## Evaluating Neighbourhood Initiatives

There has been a growing interest among policy makers, service providers, urban planners, and community developers in locally driven, integrated, collaborative neighbourhood development. With a common purpose to build healthy, resilient and sustainable communities, we are seeing the emergence of more holistic and comprehensive place-based initiatives.

Governments are seeking new ways to **engage citizens** in decisions about the places they live, work, and play and are shifting towards **horizontally**, working across departments on issues of common interest. Cross jurisdictional and multi-level government initiatives are also evolving. Non-profit and voluntary organizations are forming networks and coalitions to leverage their collective impact and to renegotiate their relationship with governments and their complementary roles in building civil society.

A plethora of community-based and neighbourhood initiatives has emerged across Canada including Vibrant Communities, Sustainability Communities, Action for Neighbourhood Change, and the newly launched local organization, Creative Neighbourhoods. While these initiatives differ in terms of their scope, nature, and source of funding, they seem to share the following **common goals** to:

- Improve the wellbeing of citizens
- Create cohesion within the neighbourhood/community
- Strengthen the relationships between the neighbourhood and governments
- Involve residents in local decision-making/planning
- Establish linkages among service providers from the public, private, and voluntary sectors
- Build community capacity (leadership, organizational development)
- Increase community engagement/civic participation
- Facilitate access to services
- Integrate (government) departmental planning/programming

How will we know if these initiatives are making a difference? How do we measure their impact through a multi-stakeholder lens? How do you manage the creative tensions between those that advocate for providing the space and resources for a neighbourhood to grow organically, focusing on citizen engagement and social infrastructure and those who want to follow a pre-determined critical path focusing on achieving milestones and concrete results? How do you find a balance between **measuring the process** and **measuring the impact**?

There has been a wide variety of measurement models developed including:

- Quality of Life Indicators Projects
- Asset Mapping Tools
- Social Capital Indices
- Perceptual Snapshots
- Participants' & Stakeholders' Feedback
- Social Return on Investment Tools (SROI)

### **Quality of Life Indicators Projects**

These projects typically look at the **social, economic, and environmental dimensions of wellbeing** and identify indicators that can be measured at regular intervals. These indicators are reported on through public data such as employment rates, pollution levels, public housing waiting lists, and crime statistics.

There are currently 20 municipalities using the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' **Quality of Life Reporting System** ([www.fcm.ca](http://www.fcm.ca)). With input from the participating municipalities across the country, they produce three reports:

- Incomes, Shelter, and Necessities
- Dynamic Society and Social Change
- Growth, The Economy and the Urban Environment

The Community Foundations of Canada has just launched **Vital Signs** in five communities (including Ottawa), modeled after the successful Toronto Vital Signs project. The Toronto Vital Signs, which was originally published as an overview of the 1990's, clusters a number of indicators into four dimensions; working, living, learning, and growing.

Common criteria used for selecting the specific indicators for Quality of Life Indicators Projects are:

- Data is available and reliable
- Data is accessible at regular intervals
- Trends can be identified over time

Aside from the selection of indicators and focus on the data, the reporting tool and format is also important. While the information itself may be neutral, these reports are typically used as a call to action to increase public awareness and to inform public policy.

### **Asset Mapping Tools**

These tools have been developed to help communities, neighbourhoods, and organizations create a graphic representation of existing assets including programs and services, technology, financial resources, profile, public facilities, social capital, knowledge and information, and skills and human resources. This can also take the form of an inventory of **social, environmental, and economic infrastructure**.

John McKnight and John Kretzmann (Building Communities from the Inside Out, 1993) popularized **asset-based community development** (ABCD) in North America asserting that if you invest in growing and protecting your assets, as opposed to meeting needs and fixing problems, you would build a more resilient and sustainable community. Asset-Mapping emerged as the counter-approach to the traditional *needs assessments*. The five steps McKnight and Kretzman describe in asset-based community development are:

- Asset-mapping
- Building relationships
- Mobilizing for economic development and information sharing
- Convening the community to develop a common vision
- Leveraging outside resources to support locally driven development

There is a local **ABCD Network** in Ottawa.

### **Social Capital Indices**

These are indices developed to measure social capital including volunteer rate, voting behaviour, membership in organizations, participation in associations, and family and social networks. Robert D. Putman popularized the concept of social capital with his theory of **bridging and bonding** in *Bowling Alone* (2000) and many sociologists and economists have developed indices, including Rose Anne Devlin, Chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Ottawa. Since that time, many Canadian organizations have also undertaken **social and economic impact studies**, including the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation for their Volunteers in Education Program ([www.ocri.ca](http://www.ocri.ca))

Social capital indices can be used to measure the social capital of individuals comparing their ranking to their social and economic health. In doing so, we can see how gender, ethnicity, and regional differences may affect these rates and explore how public policy can respond to bridge these gaps.

### **Perceptual Snapshots**

While many of the tools and models for measuring community and neighbourhood wellbeing are quantitative in nature, perceptual snapshots incorporate qualitative data, seeking out the perceptions of people about their neighbourhoods and communities. Residents are asked for their sense of how safe they feel, how proud they are to say they live in their neighbourhood,

whether or not they can rely on their neighbours for assistance, whether they have a sense of belonging, and whether government officials are responsive to their issues. Once the baseline survey is taken, people are subsequently asked whether they perceive there to be any changes in these areas. Calgary carried out a **Sense of Community** project in 2001. The following is a sample of the statements tested through their survey:

- When I travel I am proud to tell others where I live
- I feel very much like I belong in Calgary
- My neighbourhood is a safe place to live
- I recognize a number of the children and adults in my neighbourhood
- I have influence in changing my neighbourhood for the better
- I get involved in neighbourhood events or activities

These perceptions are analyzed and checked against other data such as those collected in Quality of Life Indicators projects to see if there is a correlation between, for example, a strong sense of community and community safety. Again, these reports are often used to promote public support and enabling policy for community engagement activities.

### **Participants' Feedback**

Many community and neighbourhood development projects use a variety of tools to measure participants' **level of satisfaction** and to solicit feedback from stakeholders throughout their processes. For example, evaluation forms are distributed at events, electronic surveys are promoted and evaluators hold key informant interviews.

### **Social Return on Investment (SROI) Models:**

Social Capital Partners ([www.socialcapitalpartners.ca](http://www.socialcapitalpartners.ca)), a leading Canadian foundation that support social enterprise, defines Social Return on Investment (SROI) as *"an attempt to quantify the social value being generated by an organization as a result of an investment made in that organization"*. Those that provide financial support to social enterprises tend to see themselves as *"investors"* as opposed to *"funders"* and SROI models measure the results of their investment, largely based on the work of the Robert; Enterprise Development Fund, the U.S.

Inner City Renovation: Community Based Residential and Commercial Construction, a social enterprise established in Winnipeg to provide employment and training to low-income people, worked with Social Capital Partners to development their SROI reporting tool. They calculated the costs of the supports that the individuals had been receiving prior to their employment (including shelter space, social assistance, and other subsidized services) and the cost-savings and tax contributions following their employment against the human resource and financial investment in the enterprise.

In their report on the Round Table on Community Change, (Building Knowledge about Community Change: Moving Beyond Evaluations, November 1994), The Aspen Institute outlines the following challenges and considerations when evaluating community change initiatives.:

- **Horizontal complexity:** They work across multiple sectors simultaneously and aim for synergy among them
- **Vertical complexity:** They aim for change at the individual, family, community, organizational, and systems levels
- **Community building:** They aim for strengthened community capacity enhance social capital, an empowered neighbourhood, and similar outcomes that are not easily quantifiable
- **Contextual issues:** They aim to incorporate external political, economic and other conditions in to their framework even though they may have little power to affect them
- **Community responsiveness and flexibility over time:** they are designed to be community specific and to evolve in response to the dynamics of the neighbourhood and the lessons being learned from the initiative
- **Community Saturation:** Because Comprehensive Community Initiatives aim to reach all members of a community, it is infeasible to randomly assign individual residents to treatment and control groups for the purposes of assessing the impact. Finding equivalent comparison communities is also extremely difficult.

The tools, models, resources, and knowledge that have been generated about neighbourhood development and evaluation models are considerable and organizations are enthusiastically sharing with others and making accessible what they have learned. In designing an evaluation framework for a neighbourhood development initiative, there are a number of key considerations:

- What is the time frame of the initiative?
- What resources are available?
- Who are the target groups and what are the intended outcomes?
- Will the initiative potentially be expanded?
- Are there other initiatives within the city or country with whom you want to collaborate?

The Carleton Centre for Urban Research and Education (CURE) Network agreed to provide research and evaluation support to the City of Ottawa for their Neighbourhood Planning Initiative (NPI). As a springboard for our work together, we organized an Evaluation Design Workshop to identify the potential benefits, target groups, milestones, and indicators of the intended outcomes of the initiative.

We had 14 participants including City of Ottawa employees, researchers, and neighbourhood association representatives. We asked them the following questions:

- Who might benefit from the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative (NPI)?
- What might the short-term and long-term benefit be for each of these target groups?
- How will we know if NPI is making a difference for these target groups? (How would we measure, document, and demonstrate the benefits, changes, and impacts?)
- Who needs to know that the initiative is having an impact and when?

#### **Target Groups Identified as Potentially Benefiting from NPI:**

1. **Residents – Citizens**
2. **Local Business**
3. **Community Based Organizations**
4. **Surrounding Neighbourhoods**
5. **Service-Providers and Facilities**
6. **City of Ottawa (Staff and Departments)**
7. **Politicians**
8. **Media**
9. **Key Influencers and Leaders**
10. **Non-resident consumers, employees, and visitors**
11. **City –at-large**

#### **Residents – Citizens:**

This group was described as those *people living in the neighbourhood*. For some, using the word “citizen” is problematic as a person’s citizenship is with their country and not their neighbourhood, community, or municipality. Additionally, new immigrants and refugees living in a neighbourhood are not yet Canadian citizens.

It was recognized that certain groups in the community are at greater risk of being isolated and marginalized and strategies will need to be developed in order to include the voices, needs, and interests of such groups including:

- Frail senior adults
- Youth
- Sex-Trade Workers
- Commuters
- New Comers
- At-home Parents

Potential Benefits to residents included:

- Social, political, and economic wellbeing
- Healthier and safer neighbourhood
- Increased programs and services
- Closer connections among residents
- Better places to meet
- Co-ordinated and co-operative transportation
- Inclusive and non-judgemental culture
- Sensitized service-providers to local issues
- Satellite services in the neighbourhood
- Better neighbourhood Infrastructure
- Physical capacity of buildings improved
- People engaged in neighbourhood matters
- Greater democracy
- Sustainability
- Enhanced profile and neighbourhood identity
- Better co-ordinated services
- Use of technology to create neighbourhood space, dialogue, and information sharing



**Local Businesses:**

This group was understood to include any **business located within the neighbourhood**, whether or not it is locally owned and operated. It was also noted that there needs to be consideration for externally located businesses that may be doing business in the neighbourhood, either temporarily or on an ongoing basis, such as construction companies, real estate managers, and other others in the service industry.

Potential benefits identified for businesses included:

- Increased security and safety
- Closer relationship with residents
- Co-ordination of physical improvement
- Attracting people from outside the neighbourhood
- Stronger voice regarding municipal services, zoning, and by-laws
- Better understanding of the neighbourhood needs (and their market niche)
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**Community-based Organizations:**

Regardless of size, structure, or mandate, this group includes **community-based organizations with a local focus**, such as neighbourhood associations, community councils, tenants associations, and special interest groups. There will be some organizations in this group that are also service-providers.

Potential Benefits for community organizations included:

- closer relationship with community
- better understanding of neighbourhood issues
- better access to city services, support, and resources

**Surrounding Neighbourhoods:**

Given the reality that people living in one neighbourhood are likely to be spending time in the surrounding areas, either shopping, playing, working, going to school, participating in community events, or using recreational facilities, it was felt that surrounding neighbourhoods needed to be included in neighbourhood planning.

Potential benefits to the surrounding neighbourhoods included:

- opportunities for joint initiatives
- sharing and pooling of resources
- stronger voice when promoting public access to services, support, and facilities
- exchange of ideas, tools, and resources
- co-ordination of community events

**Service-Providers and Facilities:**

This group was defined as those providing some type of **service, program, or space for people living and working, in the neighbourhood**, such as schools, community

centres, clinics, post offices, parks, employment services, home support, addictions counselling, sports leagues, and day care centres. This group includes all services and facilities whether they are provided by a non-profit organization, business, or federal, provincial, or municipal government department.

Potential benefits for service-providers included:

- Increased understanding of service needs
- Ability to develop and modify programs and services
- Opportunities to co-ordinate services and programs with other service providers
- Better understanding of the neighbourhood as a whole

### **City of Ottawa Staff and Departments:**

This group includes City of Ottawa staff members and departments involved in **co-ordinating and integrating planning processes** and providing information, services, programs, and facilities in the neighbourhood.

Potential benefits for city of Ottawa Staff and Departments included:

- Opportunities to co-ordinate planning activities
- Enhanced cross-departmental communications
- Closer relationship with the residents
- Better understanding of residents' views and perspectives
- Access to services-providers from other sectors

### **Politicians:**

This group includes **elected officials** in the federal, provincial, or municipal government, whose riding includes the neighbourhood. It may also include other elected officials who chair committees, task forces, or spearhead other initiatives that have an impact on the neighbourhood or relate to its issues and interests.

The potential benefits identified for politicians included:

- More informed about views of constituents when making decisions
- Better understanding of neighbourhood assets
- Stronger ties to businesses, service-providers, and residents
- Opportunity to participate and promote in multi-sector initiatives

### **Media:**

This group includes print, broadcast, and electronic media that **covers news, events, and issues in the neighbourhood**, including local newspapers, cable television, as well as the city-wide daily newspapers, radio programs, and regional television stations.

Potential benefits for the media include:

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**Key Influencers and Leaders:**

This group includes individuals in the neighbourhood who have the ability **to engage, inspire and organize people to create a common vision and take collective action.** They may be people in formal leadership positions such as presidents or staff of community organizations, clergy, and school principals or they may be well-connected active residents

**Non-Residents:**

This group is described as all ***those who work, shop, access services, and visit the neighbourhood but do not live there.*** This would include employees of local businesses and service-providers, as well as those who regularly participate in recreational programs, attend worship services, and attend cultural events.

**City-at-large:**

Other neighbourhoods in Ottawa and the city as a whole have been identified as a group to potentially benefit from the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative.

**Others:**

It was also noted that there are other groups who may be interested in the work but are not direct or primary target groups such as other Neighbourhood Planning Initiatives, Think Tanks, and networks of policy makers.

**Potential Benefits:** Participants worked in small, mixed groups to identify potential benefits for the target groups.

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