

Winning the War on Poverty

The Canadians are doing it; we're not.



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Opinion Columnist

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Jesus said the poor will always be among us, but there are a lot of people in Canada testing that proposition.

According to recently released data, between 2015 and 2017, Canada reduced its official poverty rate by at least 20 percent. Roughly 825,000 Canadians were lifted out of poverty in those years, giving the country today its lowest poverty rate in history.

How did it do it?

The overall economy has been decent but not robust enough to explain these striking outcomes. Instead, one major factor is that Canadians have organized their communities differently. They adopted a specific methodology to fight poverty.

Before I describe this methodology, let's pause to think about what it's often like in American poor areas. Everything is fragmented. There are usually a bevy of public and private programs doing their own thing. In a town there may be four food pantries, which don't really know one another well. The people working in these programs have their heads down, because it's exhausting enough just to do their own work.

A common model is one-donor-funding-one-program. Different programs compete for funds. They justify their existence using randomized controlled experiments, in which researchers try to pinpoint *one* input that led to *one* positive output. The foundation heads, city officials and social entrepreneurs go to a bunch of conferences, but these conferences don't have much to do with one another.

In other words, the Americans who talk about community don't have a community of their own. Every day, they give away the power they could have if they did mutually reinforcing work together to change whole systems.

In Canada it's not like that. About 15 years ago, a disparate group of Canadians realized that a problem as complex as poverty can be addressed only through a multisector comprehensive approach. They realized that poverty was not going to be reduced by some innovation — some cool, new program nobody thought of before. It was going to be addressed through better systems that were mutually supporting and able to enact change on a population level.

So they began building citywide and communitywide structures. They started 15 years ago with just six cities, but now they have 72 regional networks covering 344 towns.

They begin by gathering, say, 100 people from a single community. A quarter have lived with poverty; the rest are from business, nonprofits and government.

They spend a year learning about poverty in their area, talking with the community. They launch a different kind of conversation. First, they don't want better poor; they want fewer poor. That is to say, their focus is not on how do we give poor people food so they don't starve. It is how do we move people out of poverty. Second, they up their ambitions. How do we *eradicate* poverty altogether? Third, they broaden their vision. What does a vibrant community look like in which everybody's basic needs are met.

After a year they come up with a town plan. Each town's poverty is different. Each town's assets are different. So each town's plan is different.

The town plans feature a lot of collaborative activity. A food pantry might turn itself into a job training center by allowing the people who are fed do the actual work. The pantry might connect with local businesses that change their hiring practices so that high school degrees are not required. Businesses might pledge to raise their minimum wage.

The plans involve a lot of policy changes on the town and provincial levels — improved day care, redesigned transit systems, better work-force development systems.

By the time Canada's national government swung into action, the whole country had a base of knowledge and experience. The people in the field had a wealth of connections and a sense of what needed to be done. The two biggest changes were efforts in city after city to raise the minimum wage and the expansion of a national child benefit, which can net a family up to nearly \$6,500 a year per child. Canada essentially has guaranteed income for the young and the old.

The process of learning and planning and adapting never ends. The Tamarack Institute, which pioneered a lot of this work, serves as a learning community hub for all the different regional networks.

Paul Born, the head of the institute, emphasizes that the crucial thing these communitywide collective impact structures do is change attitudes. In the beginning it's as if everybody is swimming in polluted water. People are sluggish, fearful, isolated, looking out only for themselves. But when people start working together across sectors around a common agenda, it's like cleaning the water. Communities realize they can do more for the poor. The poor realize they can do more for themselves. New power has been created, a new sense of agency.

Born doesn't think you can really do social change without a methodology, without creating communitywide collective impact structures. But in many American communities we're mostly scattershot. That's the problem with our distrust and polarization. We often don't build structures across difference. Transformational change rarely gets done.

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