

**Communities,
Community Workers
and Local Government:**
*Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned in a
Community Development Project in the
Downtown Eastside of Vancouver*

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INTRODUCTION

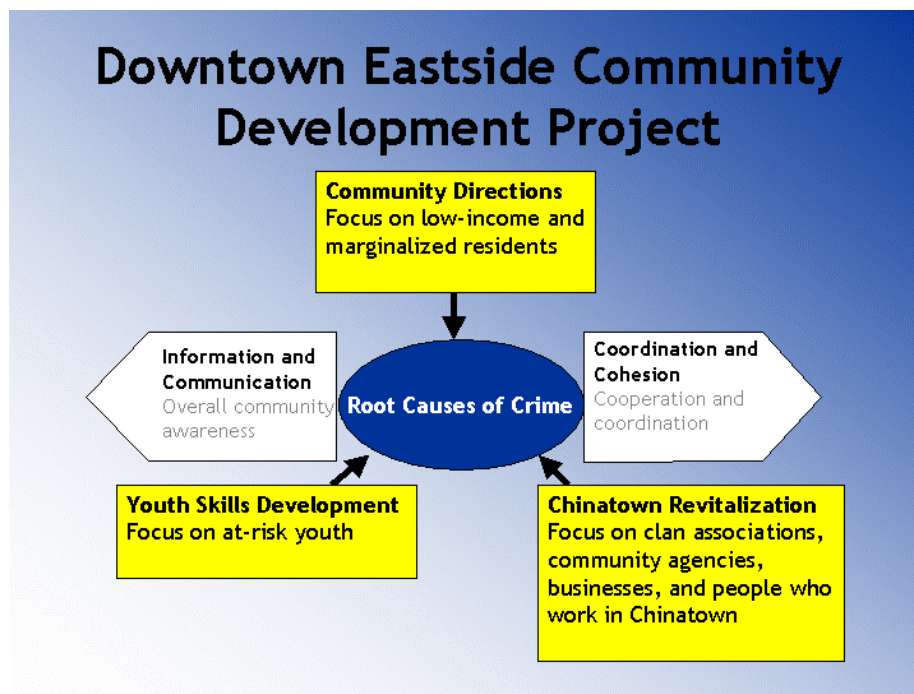
The Downtown Eastside Community Development Project (DTESCDP) was a five-year project funded by the National Crime Prevention Center (NCPC) as a demonstration project of “crime prevention through social development” in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (Coyne 2003). This project was sponsored by the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment. The project’s overall goals were to:

- Strengthen the participation of residents, agencies and businesses in community decision-making;
- Build community leadership;
- Promote community cohesion;
- Improve socio-economic conditions;
- Influence the implementation of public policy that addressed risk factors associated with crime and victimization; and
- Promote, within the broader Vancouver community, recognition of the strengths and capacities of the Downtown Eastside low-income community (City of Vancouver 2003).

The DTESCDP was organized around five components that targeted specific functional areas, geographical boundaries and/or population groups:

- *Coordination and cohesion:* A project structure that coordinated different initiatives and enabled relationship-building and participation amongst the diverse groups within the community, creating opportunities for diverse neighbourhoods and groups to work together.
- *Community Directions:* A process and means of involving local communities and community agencies in building capacity and leadership among low-income residents in the Downtown Eastside.

- *Chinatown Revitalization*: A structure/committee for local participation, capacity-building and leadership by residents, small businesses and community associations in the revitalization of Chinatown.
- *Youth Skills Development*: A focus on at-risk youth in addressing the root causes of crime.¹
- *Communications*: The dissemination of informed understanding about issues facing the DTES and promotion of this to the various local communities and, more broadly, to the city and province.



This report examines – from the perspective of the City of Vancouver’s project workers – the process, challenges and lessons learned in the five years (1999-2004) of implementation of the DTESCDP. It takes a critical look

¹ This component of the project is not examined in this report as the project staff were not directly involved with it. It was administered and led instead by a local community centre in the Strathcona area.

at community capacity-building and mobilization processes in a neighbourhood beset by social and economic marginalization, a history of distrust between community and government, a tradition of community mobilization and protest, and various forms of conflict between communities, local agencies, and the three levels of government (municipal, provincial, federal).

The DTESCDP marked a significant departure from the ways in which the municipal government typically communicated with and established partnerships with local communities. It was the first time that the City of Vancouver (or any other level of government in BC, for that matter) endorsed a large-scale community development strategy that included resident-driven community mobilization. Underlying this commitment was a guiding assumption that “risk factors associated with crime and victimization are best addressed when low-income and marginalized people are valued and respected and actively involved in community decision-making” (City of Vancouver 2001, Appendix 1, “DTES Community Building Project,” p. 1).

The actual implementation of the project, however, posed many challenges for the project staff, both in terms of addressing inconsistencies between the project goals and traditional government planning and consultation practices and in negotiating how to work with the various communities in the area. From the perspectives of the project staff, the effective implementation of such a vision came to be understood as dependent upon the dynamic interplay of the following internal and external factors:

- The development of basic agreements that defined the goals of the various players;
- The allocation of government resources (time/money/staffing) to community mobilization and leadership development processes;
- The understanding of community development as a process of capacity- and relationship-building requiring a willingness on the

part of both project staff and funders to take risks, operate in non-traditional ways, be flexible and accept unpredictability;

- A commitment to and explicit focus on process, along with an appreciation of the diversity of perspectives, processes and priorities of the various communities/groups;
- An understanding of the role of community (city) workers as supportive and bridging agents who identify resources and provide information to all parties involved in the project (community, city, funders, other levels of government);
- The establishment of sustainable structures and partnerships for community-driven decision-making and for the support of grassroots leadership;
- An open and clear communication strategy as key to overcoming historical mistrust; and
- The active support from other levels of government (provincial and federal) and city departments for the strategies and action plans developed by the communities and their integration with those of the government.

The report is divided into four sections: a methodological section that describes how the information and key ideas of this report were collected; a contextual section that provides a description of the neighbourhoods and a historical overview of the processes followed in this project; and two final and pivotal sections that discuss the challenges faced and lessons learned by the project staff in the implementation of this project.

METHODOLOGY

Information and key ideas for the writing of this report were collected between December 2003 and August 2004 by the following means:

- **Group interview:** An in-depth group interview was conducted in December 2003 with the four staff who were involved in the project;
- **Individual in-depth** interviews were conducted with:
 - Six staff who had worked on the project;
 - The City of Vancouver manager;
 - Three community members who had been directly involved in the project.
- **Review of documentation and relevant literature:** Relevant literature on community development, the project's annual and quarterly reports, evaluation reports and any material written by the staff were reviewed.
- **Feedback sessions:** Three sessions to examine the information compiled, the preliminary findings and the draft report were conducted with the project staff.

CONTEXT AND PROCESS

The Downtown Eastside

The area known as the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver is comprised of very distinct neighbourhoods, including Gastown, Chinatown, Strathcona and the area bounded by the Burrard Inlet. These geographical boundaries, however, are differently constructed in the imagination of Vancouver residents, who most commonly identify the Downtown Eastside with a smaller area historically labelled as “skid row.” The very diverse communities within the DTES also have contrasting perceptions of neighbourhood borders, with each community holding divergent views of where the boundaries are and who should be included in them. The Downtown Eastside is the city’s oldest neighbourhood and the city’s original town site (Shlomo and Ley 1994; City of Vancouver 2000).

The area has been home to working-class single men, low-income and disadvantaged people, Chinese migrants, family clans and small businesses in the Chinatown area, and to Japanese Canadians until 1942 when the Canadian government decided to intern them.² During the early part of the 1900s, the DTES was a residential, recreational and access-to-work area for a significant proportion of working-class men. Over time and with the westward movement of City Hall, the main library, the business district and middle-class residences, the area became marginalized, leaving mostly retired resource workers living in rooming houses, bunkhouses and row cabins (Shlomo and Ley 1994; <<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/communityhistory.htm>>). Since the 1950s, the neighbourhood has been labelled as “skid row” in government and popular narratives, due to the concentration of a population made up of older single men and alcohol

² See <<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/neighbourhoods.htm#oppenheimer>>.

and drug users and to the overall marginalization from society of the residents of this area (Sommers 2001).

Over the years, much of the disadvantaged population has converged in this area. The profile of the area's residents in the 1990s is predominantly male (over 65%), over 45 years old (49% of the total residents of the area) and living in a single-resident occupancy (SRO) room (City of Vancouver 2002c). The neighbourhood is the poorest district in the country, with approximately 65% of its residents living below the poverty line (Coyne 2002b). While 80% of the SRO units of the city are located in this area, homelessness has increased since the end of the 1990s and the number of SROs has been declining.³ Contrastingly, the DTES is one of the most stable districts in terms of years of residence of the population (City of Vancouver 2002b). Since the 1990s, the area has been under pressure by two forces. On the one hand, there has been an increase in the drug trade and in drug use with an attendant health crisis⁴ and rise of crime, and on the other hand, a growing trend to new, upscale residential developments (Coyne 2002b).

The Chinatown area has experienced dramatic changes over the last 30 years. Since the late 1800s, Chinatown had been the central commercial and cultural district of the Chinese community. Until the late 1980s, Chinatown and neighbouring Strathcona were the areas of highest concentration of residence for both the Chinese population and consumers of Chinese food and produce. The large-scale migration from Hong Kong in the late 1980s, a residential trend of the Chinese community toward the suburbs and the emergence of several other commercial areas and chain stores that targeted

³ According to the 2002 Downtown Eastside Community Monitoring Report, the SRO housing stock declined from 7,543 in 1994 to 5,179 in 2001 (City of Vancouver 2002c).

⁴ MacPherson (2001) provides some of the numbers that illustrate the health crisis: an average of 147 people dying per year of overdose with 1998 as the year in which overdose was the leading cause of death for males 30-49 years old; HIV infection at a rate higher than many comparable cities; and a dramatic increase in hepatitis C infection resulting from injection drug use.

the Chinese community impacted negatively on the economic and cultural dynamics of the Chinatown area (Yan 2001). Other environmental factors such as the increase of drug use and the drug trade in the Downtown Eastside further contributed to a decline of visitors and residents in the area. By the mid-1990s, Vancouver's Chinatown was facing an economic decline and a significant loss of residents, businesses and customers (Yan 2001).

***The History of the Project:
Moments and Milestones***

This section describes the three major moments that characterize the process undergone in this project. In each of these moments, the convergence of a variety of internal and external factors and specific political and ideological forces made possible the emergence of particular kinds of initiatives and actions (Barndt 2002).

NCPC Funding, Community Distrust and Participation

The DTESCDP was launched in 1999 when the NCPC allocated funds to the City of Vancouver for a "five-year community mobilization and development effort in the Downtown Eastside" (City of Vancouver 1998, p. 6). This was the first time that the city had engaged in a sizeable process of community mobilization and its preliminary phase was marked by tension with the various communities in the Downtown Eastside. The local organizations and individuals working with low-income groups reacted with suspicion and anger to the news of the project. The initial meetings with the city manager and project coordinator registered the many questions of the community about the absence of community consultation, their suspicions that the project was purely a political move by the city, the questioning of the absence of strategies for community participation in the project and their demands that the money should be given directly to the community.

Through an intense and lengthy process, community participants and the city representatives came to some agreement as to how the project could best be implemented: what to do, what the city/community relationship would be, what the city's role would be, and how it could support the process. The recent change to a city manager who was more willing to make compromises and negotiate the terms of the project facilitated the task of developing agreements. The city agreed to re-orient the project from its initial focus on mediation and facilitation to one on community mobilization, and amidst confrontation, some common ground was found. It was agreed, in principle, that funds would be committed to a community-driven mobilization process that would prioritize low-income and marginalized residents' participation. This process was named "Community Directions" (CD).

In the months leading up to the implementation of the project, DTES community leaders and some agencies had engaged in a consultative process as to how to involve DTES residents in community development and decision-making about their neighbourhood. The consensus was that resident participation was minimal and that community capacity-building and revitalization initiatives should be resident- rather than agency-driven. A local foundation provided funds to do a community assets inventory that would inform further community work. When the city, some residents and some agencies finally agreed on the principle of a resident-driven process, the results of this assets inventory helped to formulate the CD project component. Community Directions, it was agreed, was a community mobilization and capacity-building *process* to achieve a healthy and safe community. Its central mandate was formulated as the building of capacity among *low-income residents* and the development of community plans to address key issues and strategies in the DTES.

The Chinatown process began in 2000 when the city approached local leaders and invited them to establish a community steering group to address health,

safety and economic issues in the area. At the time, the climate was one of significant tension and distrust as a local organization, Community Alliance, made up of Chinatown, Strathcona and Gastown's more vocal leaders had gone public in their opposition to the city's initiative to curtail the open drug market at the heart of the neighbourhood. They were concerned that the harm reduction approach behind the proposed redesign of the corner of Main and Hastings Streets would strike a further blow to the already weakened economy of Chinatown. They furthermore opposed the development of any new health facilities in the immediate area and demanded enforcement strategies instead of harm reduction approaches. Supporters of the city initiative also staged protests, resulting in an adversarial relationship.

When project workers began working in Chinatown, they encountered and had to respond to this climate of distrust and anger. Similarly to the Community Directions process, the project staff and community members embarked on a negotiation of goals and process. The project staff stipulated that to build trust between the Chinatown community and the municipal government, a clear community education and communication strategy should be put in place that provided information on what exactly the city was doing, on the roles and differences between government levels and about policies and frameworks such as the four pillars approach.⁵ The

⁵ In the Four Pillars website of the City of Vancouver, the Four Pillars Drug Strategy is described as the City of Vancouver's policy and plan for reducing drug-related harm in Vancouver. The "four pillars" are: **Harm reduction** - reducing the spread of deadly communicable diseases, preventing drug overdose deaths, increasing substance users' contact with health care services and drug treatment programs, and reducing consumption of drugs in the street; **Prevention** - using a variety of strategies to help people understand substance misuse, the negative health impacts and legal risks associated with substance use and abuse, encouraging people to make healthy choices, and providing opportunities to help reduce the likelihood of substance abuse, including affordable housing, employment training and jobs, recreation and long-term economic development; **Treatment** - offering individuals access to services that help people come to terms with substance misuse and lead healthier lives, including outpatient and peer-based counseling, methadone programs, daytime and residential treatment, housing support, and ongoing medical care; and, **Enforcement**

communication strategy considered cultural and language issues, ensured the translation of information into Chinese and targeted ethnic and community media for the dissemination of information. It was eventually agreed that the group would form a committee – the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee (VCRC) – to engage in a community process to work out a long-term vision and a workplan for the revitalization of Chinatown as well as to develop communication and public education strategies that addressed health and crime and safety issues. At this stage, two project staff worked directly with the committee.

The project was initiated externally by the municipal government, but given the specific forces within the community, it had to be negotiated and redefined according to the communities' vision, interests and processes. It was clear in this phase that separate approaches and focal points were needed for CD and VCRC. The Community Directions process focused on how to rally low-income residents, while the Chinatown process focused on how to mobilize the community in its economic and social revitalization. Underlying these were flexible and varying definitions of community and sometimes contesting definitions of capacity-building. While the focus on low-income residents conveyed a definition of community that crossed the geographical boundaries between neighbourhoods (Strathcona, Gastown, Chinatown), the focus on Chinatown involved not only a geographical boundary but also a cultural one: a recognition of Chinatown as both the historic regional centre of the Chinese-Canadian community and as the centre for culture and heritage for the entire city. The Chinatown process brought people together

- recognizing the need for peace and quiet, public order and safety in the Downtown Eastside and other Vancouver neighbourhoods by targeting organized crime, drug dealing, drug houses, problem businesses involved in the drug trade, and improving coordination with health services and other agencies that link drug users to withdrawal management (detox), treatment, counseling and prevention services. See <<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/fourpillars/>>.

from a range of sectors: small businesses and merchants, arts and cultural groups, family clans, service providers and residents.

For the project workers, the specific contextual and situational factors determined a working style that departed from the goal of community work as one of partnership. The workers also had to relinquish their role as organizers. As city staff charged with community development, they first had to focus on providing a supportive and informational role, and then come to terms with a process of trust-building that required a high tolerance for ambiguity and conflict along with a hands-off approach.

During the first phase of the project, mistrust on the part of municipal, provincial and federal politicians constituted another situational element that defined the work of the project staff and affected how they communicated with the various relevant parties. The support of the city manager, a clear and ongoing communication strategy and the bridging role played by the workers facilitated the ongoing negotiation and adherence to the principles of a community-driven process.

Plan Development and Consolidation

This second moment of the project was characterized by two separate but integrated forces. First, there was a community movement “inwards” in which each of the two main project areas (CD and VCRC) worked to promote community involvement and build capacity for participation. Both also worked to develop a broader vision for a safe and healthy neighbourhood and drafted strategies and plans to support this. While CD stressed the importance of an independent and arms-length process with the city, VCRC worked much more closely with the city’s community workers. This difference in collaboration and relationship with the city meant that each community process had a differential impact on the plans and actions of the municipal government and its various departments. A closer relationship of

collaboration with the city, the project staff observed, permitted an easier integration of community plans or recommendations into the overall municipal government plans.

The second set of forces influencing the activities and plans developed in this phase concerned the policy realm, with the approval of the Vancouver Agreement that targeted coordination and cooperation among the three levels of government. The first focus of this agreement was the Downtown Eastside. This policy development and the work implemented through the Vancouver Agreement⁶ facilitated a number of opportunities to fund and support specific community projects, although gaps remained in terms of the relationships between city plans and strategies for actions on issues and community processes. Another contextual political factor was the changing provincial and municipal landscape. First, there was the election of a new provincial government and its party's agenda of drastic reduction in social programs and social welfare, funding cutbacks and cancellation of programs such as the provincially-sponsored affordable housing program. Then, at the municipal level, there was the election of a city council that was committed to revitalizing the DTES. Both had a significant influence on the last year and a half of the project.

A contextual factor that influenced activities and working styles in this period was the eventual distancing of most agencies from the Community Directions process. Several external and internal factors shaped this distancing, including the tension generated by the lengthy resident-driven participation process; the pressure experienced by agencies because of program cuts, funding reduction and funders' demands for tangible outcomes; as well as philosophical differences about the focus of the community mobilization on

⁶ "The Vancouver Agreement is a five-year agreement, committed to by all three levels of government, to work together to support sustainable economic, social and community development in Vancouver, with the initial focus in Downtown Eastside" (City Manager 2000, p. 6).

the most marginalized. The distancing of the agencies posed challenges to the sustainability and support of grassroots participation once the project ended.

Community Directions set up monthly open general meetings as a key instance of horizontal community participation in decision-making. Two full-time community organizers, two part-time administrative assistants and a storefront office supported the process. Issue- and culture-based working groups were set up on economic development, housing, alcohol and drugs, children and youth, and by First Nations people, Latin Americans and Chinese seniors. These working groups aimed to strengthen resident leadership and to ensure that community-based structures responded to the broader goals of community mobilizing to address the root causes of crime. Planning, visioning and training workshops were conducted and an agreement on a broader vision for “a healthy and safe community that recognizes that each member brings his/her own vision” was developed through a process that involved residents and agency representatives (Community Directions 2001, p. 4). The housing and the alcohol and drugs working groups pioneered a process of extended grassroots consultation and outreach to develop their working plans and the First Nations Caucus and the Latin American Working Group worked to promote broader community involvement and plan implementation.

Supported by the community workers, the VCRC divided into working groups that developed their plans and eventually elected a committee chair. The key process during this stage was a participatory process of vision development for Chinatown that culminated with the endorsement by City Council of the “Chinatown Revitalization Program: Chinatown Vision” in July 2002. Ideas raised in this visioning processes were brought forward to the Vancouver Agreement process and the planning processes of the City of Vancouver. The working groups addressed plans and actions on arts and culture, lane clean-up and monitoring, the re-design of the corner at Main

and Hastings Streets, safety and parking, youth and vision development. Arts fairs, street markets, and festivals were organized and bilingual newsletters produced and disseminated. As well, research was conducted on the community history and experience and the changes that had occurred in the previous three decades (see Yan 2001). Having as an overall goal the implementation of the Chinatown vision, the VCRC moved during this period towards a collaborative and problem-solving approach in their partnership with the City of Vancouver and, over time, with other levels of government and neighbourhood community groups. Participation in community-wide activities and a better understanding of the relationship between addiction, crime and drug policy illustrated the shifts operating within the Chinatown process. The work of the sub-committee on the re-design of the Main and Hastings corner and a number of visits to harm reduction programs and new health facilities provided information and clarified the role of these initiatives.

A community perceptions survey conducted by the project's evaluator in 2001 concluded that there was a substantial increase in resident involvement, a profile of participants that was culturally representative of the diversity of the community, and a more positive perception by the community of their involvement in planning processes. By 2002, the project staff and participants in the various working groups considered that the community capacity built in the first years of the project was consolidated and strong.

Internal Changes, Community Cooperation and Building for Sustainability

This last moment in the project was characterized by the confluence of specific situational factors, such as the departure of the two full-time community organizers in CD⁷ and leadership consolidation in the working

⁷ Until their departure, the two full-time organizers maintained the institutional memory and were the main supporters of the community mobilization process. The CD steering committee encountered several challenges finding the right organizer to

groups. The other internal force determining decision-making and actions during this period both for VCRC and CD was the recognition by project staff and community participants that with only a year and a half left to go, issues (structure and process) of long-term sustainability had to become central. Contextual policy factors such as the adoption by the City Council, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and the federal government of some parts of the alcohol and drug plan left the alcohol and drugs working group without a clear role.

The movement in this last moment was “outwards,” to reach out to other community groups and initiatives and to engage in collaboration. During this period, several community cooperation initiatives reached significant milestones. The characteristic of these collaborations was that the various community groups worked together on an area of mutual interest and engaged in the planning and implementation of specific community projects, particularly in the areas of education, culture and health. The First Nations, Latin American and housing working groups worked together to implement a Pest Control Education project that trained and hired local residents to educate residents and managers of SROs on pest control. As well the First Nations Caucus and the Latin American Working Group organized a friendship day that brought together 500 people from both communities.

The VCRC collaborated with the Engineering Department of the City of Vancouver in lane clean-up activities and liaised with city planning staff regarding the impact of and changes to a proposed market housing development in the area. VCRC worked with Friends of Victory Square in the organization of the Chinese New Year’s celebrations and with the local community centre in the reconstruction of the courtyard of the Chinese

replace them. After hiring one organizer who did not last in the job and with over a year and a half left in the project, the committee decided not to hire an organizer for the entire community mobilization, and to focus the remaining financial resources on leadership development and support of the working committees.

Cultural Centre. In this project, the participants in the outreach and life skills initiative for low-income patrons of the DTES community centre developed mosaics based on the Chinese zodiac. As a result of these collaborations and the identification of a common interest in the areas of arts and culture, a successful fundraising event was organized by VCRC to celebrate Carnegie Community Centre's 100th anniversary and to raise money for an arts endowment fund. This was the first large community event to bring together leaders and communities from diverse neighbourhoods and socio-economic backgrounds who traditionally did not interact. These contacts and partnerships between VCRC and the low-income community underscored the importance of reinforcing throughout the process the value of working together and the recognition by VCRC of the need to reach out to other communities.

Sustainability was addressed in the last part of the project through a partnership strategy between working groups and agencies, the consolidation of organizational structures, leadership training and the formation of societies. At this stage, working committees had gained legitimacy with their communities and had consolidated their action plans. As a result, they could consider a partnership on a more equal footing with local agencies. In the CD process, the working group on economic development formed an Economic Development Corporation that developed plans and activities for the creation of economic opportunities for low-income residents. The First Nations Caucus planned and established the Aboriginal front-door program in the DTES. The Latin American Working Group created a non-profit society. Each one of these groups established partnerships with agencies for the implementation of plans and to seek funding for the sustainability of activities and process. The VCRC structure of an executive, sub-committees and general membership meetings was strengthened and stabilized while emphasis was placed on leadership training. The VCRC had held several workshops involving

all stakeholders to discuss long-term sustainability plans and reaffirm support for the continuation of the committee.

Contextual and Situational Factors

There are a number of contextual and situational factors that influenced the process of community mobilization in the Downtown Eastside. The contextual factors refer to the wealth, health and demographics of the population that characterize the DTES and its critical social and economic condition at the end of the 1990s (Donnelly and Majka 1998). The physical and economic deterioration of the Downtown Eastside had by this time reached a crisis point with the declaration of a public health emergency, the rise in crime and an increased need to address issues of drug use, the HIV/AIDS epidemic among drug users and the socio-economic marginalization of its residents. In response to this situation, the City of Vancouver launched their program of strategic initiatives in 1998, while the mayor formed the Vancouver Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment. In the year 2000, the implementation of the Vancouver Agreement allowed for the allocation of funding and support to several community initiatives, and in 2003, the election of a new city council materialized the support to various initiatives of the project. All these factors created opportunities for the project to advance and achieve some of its successes.

As well, specific situational factors – such as the initial hiring of two community organizers that were committed to the integrity of a community-driven process, the eventual adoption of cooperative (though markedly different) working styles within each of the working areas and the city's direct endorsement of a community-driven process – worked to support the process. There were nevertheless historical and contextual factors that challenged the project since its inception. In particular, there was the historical mistrust of government on the part of communities. The condition of the DTES as the most marginalized and poorest area of the city, a history

of stigmatization and confrontation between government and DTES residents and the experiences of marginalization and discrimination experienced by Chinese residents and low-income residents had all resulted in deep-seated scepticism towards government. There was as well a lack of cohesion and internal conflict in the neighbourhood among the various communities (e.g., drug users and merchants in Chinatown) and the predominance of agencies as definers of needs, plans and strategies of action had determined that historically the voice of the residents had not been heard. Similarly, there was also cynicism on the part of politicians, City Hall staff and other levels of government about a community-driven process in the DTES.

CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

The DTESCDP marked the first time that the city engaged in a community development project that assumed that “community development and capacity-building approaches are the best approaches for increasing community participation” and for addressing the root causes of crime (Coyne 2002a, p. 83). The embracing of these principles required the transfer of control of process and decision-making to the community and a strategy of multi-layered negotiation not only with the various groups/interests in the community but also within City Hall and the various levels of government. Although ripe with potential, this new working style presented many challenges for the project staff. A discussion follows of some of the key tensions and forces affecting this process and the lessons that project workers learned in addressing these challenges.

Building Capacity and Grassroots Participation

The focus on the low-income/most marginalized population and the goal of capacity-building became areas of tension at different moments in the process. Initially, the project staff debated the extent to which focusing on the most marginalized/low-income population would exclude other sectors and groups within the community. The project staff discussed at length how to conceptualize capacity-building: Was it restricted to the work with the low-income community? Should the process of working with other communities be defined in different terms? Wasn't capacity-building a goal that should be equally applied to various groups in the community? Similar discussions took place between staff and community members and within Community Directions. Questions emerged as to whether focus on the lower income and most marginalized population would impact on the sustainability of the project. When the city decided to implement the Chinatown component of the project, CD was concerned that

a parallel process was taking place and questions emerged about the deviation from the focus on the most marginalized. Eventually the team decided that the focus should be on capacity-building, given that community cohesion was the overall goal. Having cohesion as the overall goal, different processes, strategies and working styles were implemented in Chinatown and Community Directions.

Team members were challenged from various angles (within the team, City Hall, city staff, communities and government) on the benefits of supporting processes in which the community had already established a confrontational model of work and/or had a distant relation with the city. This tension was expressed on several levels. First, at a conceptual level, in questioning whether it was possible to mobilize communities and build capacity when a confrontational relationship existed between government and community. Second, at a planning level, in identifying the difficulties in integrating community plans into government plans. Third, on a practical level, in the ways that the work of the project staff had to be constantly redefined. Workers sometimes assumed a bridging role between and across government and community spheres while at other times their work was limited to playing only a supportive role (e.g., supplying information) and constrained by the absence of trust among the different actors. The city project workers in particular had to assume a support and information provision role and ease away from suggesting project priorities or courses of action and from doing any direct community work. This peripheral and sometimes purely administrative role brought frustration for some of them as they continued to play a coordinating role yet could not be directly involved in community development work.

This challenge was expressed quite differently by the VCRC, as after the initial 18 months of tension a cooperative working relationship had developed and project staff could function in a more collaborative fashion by facilitating

meetings, helping with the development of action plans, providing training, and developing educational and communication strategies. The strategy adopted by the workers was to start from an acknowledgment of the issues the community had identified, working with the community in seeking alternatives to them and in creating an organizational structure while developing a strong public education campaign through media (local and ethnic media). With time the work with VCRC came to be consensus-based.

Quality of Process and Outcomes

A commitment to process underlined the work of the project staff. This was informed by their understanding that distrust and suspicion were best addressed by transferring control of the process to communities and by using “time” to demonstrate that the city was committed to the process. This key tenet, however, posed several challenges, as the project was conceived as a demonstration project and thus required a detailed evaluation model that identified tangible outcomes. The tension was also expressed at other points within the project. The project staff debated, for example, the extent to which a process that did not guide the community to move forward and achieve desired concrete/tangible results would be self-defeating. The integrity of the process of community consultation and participation into, for example, the drug and alcohol and housing plans by Community Directions was hampered by a lack of concrete avenues to implement these plans and a political presence at the decision-making tables. At the same time, the significance of these processes in terms of grassroots consultation and community mobilization raised the question as to whether quality of process instead should be the key consideration in evaluating outcomes. These issues questioned the very nature and goals of the community mobilization: Should the goal of mobilizing community be intrinsically tied to that of achieving concrete results in matters of community demands or community plans? Or was the goal the mobilizing process per se?

This discussion was also qualified by the fact that there were conflicting understandings among the different players as to what constitutes outcomes. While one understanding of outcomes might highlight non-measurable factors such as quality and transparency of process as crucially linked to effective capacity-building processes, another might stress that quality of process was determined by the concrete achievements and tangible outcomes of what the community set out to do. The cultural and social dynamics underlying the various initiatives within the project also informed the varying approaches to process and outcomes by each group. While VCRC saw process as intrinsically related to the achievement or implementation of specific actions, the emphasis of CD – particularly in the first phase of the project – was on engaging those who had traditionally been marginalized from these processes, thereby building capacity for decision-making and participation.

The decision to focus on the low-income/marginalized population provided an important conceptual base from which to cross invisible geographical boundaries and to work in an integrated manner with various communities (e.g., ethnocultural groups, issue-based groups, neighbourhood-based groups). In both Chinatown and Community Directions, the process integrated a variety of groups and recognized the different ways that each might approach decision-making and consultation. Over time, the ability of groups to work together was identified as a key indicator of capacity-building. The vision of integration provided support to the community mobilization processes. The project staff came to recognize, for example, that while doing a community consultation process with the VCRC participants, they could ask the city to show the plans that it had in mind and then have the community provide input.

The process was quite different with the low-income population who, given their distrust of government, did not want to be given any preset plans but wanted instead to formulate their own proposals. For the City of Vancouver

project staff this demanded a willingness to take risks with the process and a certain degree of tolerance for ambiguity. As a result, they could not guarantee tangible or positive/productive outcomes. This approach deviated significantly from strategies and approaches utilized by the city in the past (e.g., community consultation and planning) (Rich et al. 2001).

Decision-Making and Releasing Control

The length and pace of decision-making processes when a grassroots consensus model was adopted presented other sets of challenges. Was there a middle ground, some of the project staff wondered, between supporting community process, getting “something done” and having room to take action? Was the choice only between a lengthy, consensus-based, community-driven process and the government acting within traditional and restricted schemes of public consultation? This tension remained as a critical challenge to the project particularly in terms of the broader contextual environment in which such factors as the Vancouver Agreement and the implementation of the City of Vancouver drug strategy provided a series of opportunities for community input to decision-making processes. The different pace of processes within a government-sanctioned plan, community consultation and capacity-building meant frustration and absence of communication in some cases; in other cases the in-depth plans developed by the community in areas such as alcohol and drugs or housing simply did not receive full consideration.

Similar questions surrounded some of the discussions within the Community Directions process. The process of making decisions in a general assembly forum required that new participants in the open meeting had to be informed of the background to particular decisions. Repetition threatened the process and resulted in frustration for some, inefficient decision-making for others and a perception that objectives and action plans were not clearly defined. At the same time, it was precisely the integrity of this process and the determination of community organizers and community leaders to adhere to

the vision of a community-driven process that ensured transparency and community accountability. With time, the key to addressing these tensions was seen in allowing the active and informed grassroots leadership to play a central role in providing vision, direction and sustainability. The decentralization of decision-making to working committees and groups was also seen as an important element of this process.

The issue of releasing control to the community posed several challenges along the way. While the community saw the release of control of process and resources as a primary condition of engaging in the project and the most important step towards overcoming suspicion about the city's commitment to community mobilization, the city and its workers struggled with issues of boundaries of power and authority and of how to keep the project accountable to the funding bodies and to the city as sponsor (both in terms of finances and goals) while relinquishing control of the project to the community.

Effective collaboration between city governments and communities does not occur spontaneously. It requires a concerted effort and commitment on the part of all parties (Rich et al. 2001). What the project workers understood is that the historical climate of distrust and the previous lack of voice of the low-income and marginalized community in decision-making/instances of participation required that the main focus be on supporting community development of capacity-building for decision-making, visioning and action planning. The emphasis then was not on partnership-building but on supporting the capacity-building process, with the understanding that once organizational structures and processes of community participation were in place, collaboration and working partnerships would naturally evolve. The case of VCRC clearly exemplifies this.

***Community Mobilizing and
Grassroots Leadership***

Within the same project, workers were engaging with very different processes and models of community mobilizing. One of their ongoing debates pertained to whether the establishment of a cooperative model between communities and governments demonstrated a more successful process of community mobilization than did a confrontational model based on grassroots participation. The team came to understand that when the climate is characterized by conflict and mutual distrust, collaboration on an “equal footing” cannot be made a priority and that given the history of the community, its social and economic marginalization and its particular cultural dynamics, the process would evolve differently within each sub-community. The common element nevertheless was the understanding that prior negotiation of common agreements on goals and process and a release of decision-making control were crucial for facilitating trust-building and laying the groundwork for future collaboration and a successful community mobilization.

A critical point in terms of process and the goal of building capacity revolved around the question of how to recognize community contribution and participation. The decision in the Community Directions process to provide stipends for meeting attendance presented several challenges. From the perspective of the organizers, the principle was one of supporting and providing the means whereby the low-income/marginalized population could participate effectively. Some individual members of the steering committee of CD wondered, though, whether providing stipends to participants who just attended without getting more involved or taking on specific actions/tasks was not a way to further marginalize this population. There was also doubt about the allocation of funds to this purpose, and, more specifically, discussion as to whether such funds ought to be put to the overall sustainability of the process or towards leadership development processes in particular. Besides, it was clear to the project staff that the allocation of

funds for purposes such as stipends was possible because of a more flexible structure in the local government but that other provincial or federal funders would not allow such a flexibility. For the project staff, there were administrative hurdles to reporting on these expenses and questions were raised as well about mechanisms for accountability and sustainability. The issue, nevertheless, continued to be on how to address barriers to the participation of the most marginalized and how to create appropriate conditions for meaningful participation. Eventually, a decision was made by the steering committee to discontinue the stipends but by then some of the working groups were strong and cohesive and they simply continued on with their work.

In the first years of the project, the focus of CD on the grassroots participation by those traditionally most marginalized provided an avenue for democratic participation and an opportunity for those who had typically not been involved in decision-making to be heard. These factors defined the quality of the process in terms of grassroots participation. This focus on grassroots participation was possible because of the work and perseverance of the CD organizers. Sustainability of the process therefore rested with the organizers. The departure of the two full-time community organizers in the third year negatively impacted on this aspect as the project had relied on these workers for continuity and direct contact with the community. Questions then arose as to the sustainability of the project given its lack of focus on fostering grassroots leadership. Project staff then realized that leadership development should have been one of the central goals of the project, so as to provide continuity and sustainability to the community mobilization process in communities continuously affected by change in their living and working conditions. In contrast, the process in Chinatown had placed a major emphasis on developing a core leadership with the aim of achieving sustainability and supporting these leaders in their partnerships with other groups and government.

The consolidation of specific structures for community participation both in Chinatown and Community Directions (e.g., sub-committees and working groups) supported the emergence of new leaderships. In the case of Chinatown, the face of the new leadership involved a dynamic and diverse group that for the first time included youth. In the Downtown Eastside, leaderships emerged within the specific working groups, particularly the First Nations and the Latin American groups. By the end of the project, the staff had identified leadership development and the development of capacity to work with other community groups and establish partnerships as key areas of capacity-building.

***Workers' Roles,
Relationships and Dynamics***

The relationships and dynamics between the project workers and the various communities, agencies and local organizations on the one hand and with the City of Vancouver and other levels of government on the other were determined by a multitude of factors, not least of which was the uniqueness of a community-driven mobilization process directly implemented by the municipal government. For workers, the “dual” nature of the roles played – as city staff and community workers – was a constant challenge. Furthermore, their roles varied according to which community they were dealing with and whichever contextual and situational factors were influencing the project at the time. This tension between shifting roles was compounded by issues of boundary-setting and control as workers had to also tread a fine line between relinquishing control of decision-making processes and making themselves available as informational resources and supporters of the community mobilization process.

The project workers struggled with how to respect the process and assist community members in identifying what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it while weighing that against the degree of intervention they should exercise. It was clear to the workers that enabling a community-driven

process meant relinquishing a certain amount of control, but at the same time, both they and the community members themselves were aware that the city's support of the process lent legitimacy to the community proposals and enhanced the working groups' or committees' hopes of influencing decision-making, negotiating their plans and visions and obtaining resources from the city or other levels of government (Donnelly and Majka 1998). This tension was further exacerbated by the absence of a clear identification of responsibilities in terms of the project's accountability. Workers continuously struggled with these issues as the responsibility to account for the project's outcomes, finances and process rested with them and there was no clear structure or mechanism in place that defined the responsibility assumed by each community in the matter of outcomes, finances and process. At the same time, the lack of clarity on the part of the funding bodies as to the expected outcomes and their changing criteria for reporting created an area of ambiguity for the workers and the project coordinators.

The other area of tension related to the actions taken by community groups that could contradict or challenge existing city policies. Within the outlined boundaries of no direct intervention, workers had to find the means of encouraging the community to consider different scenarios or of working with them to design a strategy for negotiating with government or to address changes to current policy or procedures. This continuous movement between "going to the government" and "going to the community" was another area of challenge as workers often struggled with issues of boundaries and identification. As one worker put it, "the community never forgets that you are the tip of a vast machine that touches the community." This "in between" location provided educational opportunities for all parties as workers often found themselves educating city staff about what the community was doing or explaining to the community how a particular aspect of government functioned and what the plans and policies of the city were.

The work of the city community workers evolved around building trust. They acted on developing strategies and agreements with all parties to address the distrust and suspicion that had historically informed the relationships between communities and government. That the community workers had ties to both the community and the municipal government worked in their favour – they were well positioned to negotiate agreements and, having developed a familiarity with the communities, they could relinquish control to them with confidence.

The DTESCDP had a further impact on the City of Vancouver in that the work of many of its departments was improved by the enhanced communication. The creation of mechanisms for communication, structures of participation and the knowledge gained by community members of city structures and policies provided the means for community groups to influence government planning processes.

In sum, the project workers' roles fit within a continuum:

- Representational
- Bridging: they were mandated to go out and listen to people instead of following a preset agenda. They helped communities view government as a potential resource.
- Broker: they acted as a reality check between the desires of the community and the possibilities and limitations of developing such a vision.
- Trust-builder
- Administrative and resource: they provided back-up to the project, identifying funding, policy or social resources and dealing with the various administrative aspects of the project.
- Informational and educational: they kept city departments informed about what the project was doing, acting as a community resource for City Hall.
- Accountability.

LESSONS LEARNED

The description of the work and principles underlying the DTESCDP and the examination of the tensions and challenges encountered underscore the areas of learning in a five-year community capacity-building project. Based on the discussion presented above and on a reflection on what could be changed if a project like this was to be implemented again, this section summarizes the areas of learning from the perspective of the city community workers.

Government-Community Partnerships and Capacity-Building Processes

- Shared understanding and agreement on the process and direction of the community mobilization (ideally on problem identification and goals) among the various players in the capacity-building process is the foremost condition for a successful collaborative process. In the DTESCDP, the agreement was on a vision for a healthy and safe community, on a process to follow in each project area, and on the importance of supporting the residents' definitions regarding the pace and dynamic of the process (Donnelly and Majka 1998). An important element in reaching these agreements concerns the initial stages of project development. In the DTESCDP, the lack of consultation and work with the community during the developmental stage of the funding proposal increased the gap of distrust between community and government and made the negotiation of agreements more difficult. In capacity-building processes initiated by municipal governments, a first stage of consultation and working with the community constitutes a fundamental building block for a future collaboration.
- Building trust is a necessary precursor to collaboration and effective communication, particularly when there is a history of conflict and distrust. Collaboration between governments and

communities for neighbourhood revitalization needs to be understood as a long-term goal and as a process that first focuses on developing common agreements on problem definition and goals, allocating resources and power-sharing, and supporting community capacity to control the process. The working style and relationships established by the community workers constitute a critical element in building trust. Dealing with issues of trust is paramount in creating the conditions for collaboration between communities and governments. It requires the consideration of appropriate strategies for problem identification, an ongoing educational strategy (e.g. roles and plans of government), the provision of links and resources to facilitate the implementation of community plans, and neutrality in matters of trust/distrust on the part of the project workers.

- Flexibility in goal-setting, respect for process, willingness to take risks and a tolerance for ambiguity by government, funders and community workers ensure transparency of process and community-based accountability. The DTESCDP demonstrated that models of community mobilization and community capacity-building need to be adapted and re-created to respond to the specific contextual and situational factors of each community and its specific history. The important element is to have a clearly identified set of principles (e.g., accountability, transparency of process) to guide the adaptation while maintaining flexibility in its implementation.

Decision-Making and Accountability

- The allocation of government resources (time/money/staff) for community organizing, combined with a commitment to relegate control of the process to the community, foster democratic processes of participation and provide the basis for collaboration and solidarity across communities and with the government. The role of the civic government in fostering community participation is linked to the targeting of resources for creating those

situational and structural conditions that facilitate collaboration and democratic participation (Donnelly and Majka 1998; Joseph and Ogletree 1998).

- The release of control of process and resources by governments to communities requires a commitment on all parts to the development of structures and mechanisms for accountability in matters of decision-making, project management and administration. These forms of accountability need to be matched with a clear and consistent formulation of what is expected by the funding bodies. The lack of clarity in aspects of accountability and responsibility directly impacted on the sustainability of the DTESCDP and created misunderstandings about, for example, the responsibilities for the management of funds and the ways community participation could be recognized. As well, the changing criteria and lack of clarity on expected outcomes on the part of the funding bodies created confusion on reporting and in defining project boundaries.

Community Mobilization

- The effectiveness of the community mobilization process is influenced by the above-mentioned factors and by the acceptance that the quality of social relationships with the community is mediated by a process of trust-building that requires different strategies and processes according to the specific context/community. Accordingly, the quality of trust and communication among the different actors in the community mobilization process determines the achievement of goals in the project. It is ultimately possible to work through barriers of distrust and suspicion but this requires resources and clear communication (Rich et al. 2001).
- If each community approaches community mobilization and capacity-building differently, there needs first to be a community vision that allows groups to sustain their own efforts yet work together. In the DTES project, the goal of community cohesion

provided the linking principle and vision to guide the work in very different processes.

Sustainability and Leadership

- Absence of clear goals and process for the development of grassroots leadership adversely impacts the sustainability of a community mobilization project. Leadership-building is crucial to guarantee the sustainability of the process, the continuity of community groups and their partnerships with other groups and government in revitalization plans. Leadership development and support constitute key goals of community mobilization and social development and are one of the areas where resources should definitely be allocated. The allocation of resources and a focus on leadership development in the early stages of the project guarantee the sustainability of the project and increase the potential for an effective capacity-building process that has a direct impact on the broader goals of neighbourhood revitalization or crime reduction (Joseph and Ogletree 1998).
- Large-scale mobilization processes with communities who traditionally have not been heard and have been marginalized from decision-making processes demand a careful consideration of the appropriate steps to take to ensure sustainability beyond the duration of the project or funding. The setting up of structures for community participation, the development of grassroots leadership and the mechanisms by which plans are going to be implemented need to be considered at the initial stages of process. The large-scale grassroots mobilization promoted by the DTESCDP in, for example, the Community Directions process struggled to maintain a balance between the commitment to process, the ongoing support to resident participation and the achievement of concrete results on the identified issues. A focus on creating solid community organization structures and leadership at the outset may address these issues of sustainability but may also require a smaller-scale mobilization that can focus

on parallel processes of grassroots participation and achieving concrete results.

- Continuity and sustainability of community participation is determined by the interplay of the following factors:
 - Cohesion and common bonds beyond issues or set goals. In this project the shared history of marginalization, the cultural bonds and the identification of common goals were determinant factors in providing continuity to groups such as the First Nations and Latin American groups, or the youth or arts and culture sub-committees in the Chinatown process. These factors provided elements of cohesiveness for these groups and seem to have triggered the growth and continuity of participation through personal contacts and networks and the groups' ability to engage in plan implementation, community actions and collaboration with other groups. A critical consideration for community mobilization is the recognition of the cultural factors shaping the responses and expectations of each community. The DTESCDP project underlined the need to use a cultural community-centred process.
 - Continuity of the process by the presence and ongoing participation of an organizer, a community leader or community worker.
 - A core group of community members who participate on an ongoing basis, assume leadership and receive leadership skills training.
 - The development of realistic and achievable plans and the identification of strategies and instances where these plans can be implemented.
 - The support of senior management – in particular the city manager – and municipal politicians to enable project staff and community members to implement the community development vision and its action plan.

The DTESCDP provided a unique opportunity to explore community involvement in decision-making and mechanisms to establish collaboration between communities and governments. It was a demonstration project that made significant advances in the areas of support to community mobilization and trust-building between government and communities. The challenges and lessons outlined in this report highlight that issues of building trust, sustainability beyond funding, leadership development, accountability and scale of mobilization need to be carefully considered in the visioning, planning and implementation of community capacity-building projects.

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