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Housing, Horizontality and Social Policy

By

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March 2005

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Housing, Horizontality and Social Policy¹

Housing is a major productive factor in the Canadian economy, generating community investment and economic development, jobs and consumer spending. Residential housing spending contributed over \$70 billion to the Canadian economy in 2002 (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2004). Building one new home creates nearly three jobs per year, while sales of existing housing account for over \$7 billion in consumer spending and contribute to the creation of around 100,000 jobs annually (Adair, 2003).

Access to adequate and affordable housing is also essential to the health and well-being of individuals. When people are well housed, their family and community life is more stable, enabling greater opportunities for good health, educational performance, job security and community safety. Internationally, adequate shelter is recognized by Canada as a basic human right.

Although a majority of Canadians are well housed, a conservative estimate suggests that more than 100,000 people in Canada have no homes at all. A further 1.7 million Canadians, or nearly 16 percent of the population, are in core housing need – that is, they are unable to afford shelter that meets accepted adequacy, suitability, and affordability norms (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2004). The incidence of core housing need is lowest in Alberta and highest in Nunavut. Among the groups with the highest incidence of core housing need are lone parents, Aboriginal peoples, seniors and newly arrived immigrants (Engeland and Lewis, 2004).

Aboriginal peoples are twice as likely as the general population to have a core housing need. Within the general population, core housing need is tied closely to low income and poverty. The problem of affordability is by far the most common cause of core housing need. Housing affordability is the principal measure used by Canada, along with the cost of food and clothing, to measure low income. A large number of low-income households with core housing need are dependent on public income security programs.

The importance of shelter and housing to the well-being of individuals, families and communities, and to Canadian society as a whole, is clear. This paper provides a brief overview of three major areas:

- the connections between housing and other areas of social policy;
- contexts for thinking about housing as a horizontal policy issue; and
- policy approaches that would strengthen housing policy.

¹ This paper was presented in January 2005 to an Expert Roundtable on “Horizontality and Linkages to the Broader Social Policy Agenda” in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The paper draws heavily on the work of Neil Bradford, Tom Carter, Jane Jenson and Judith Maxwell. I would like to express my thanks to them for their excellent ideas, critical insights and unique contributions to Canadian social policy debate and dialogue. Many thanks, too, to Beverly Boutilier for editorial support.

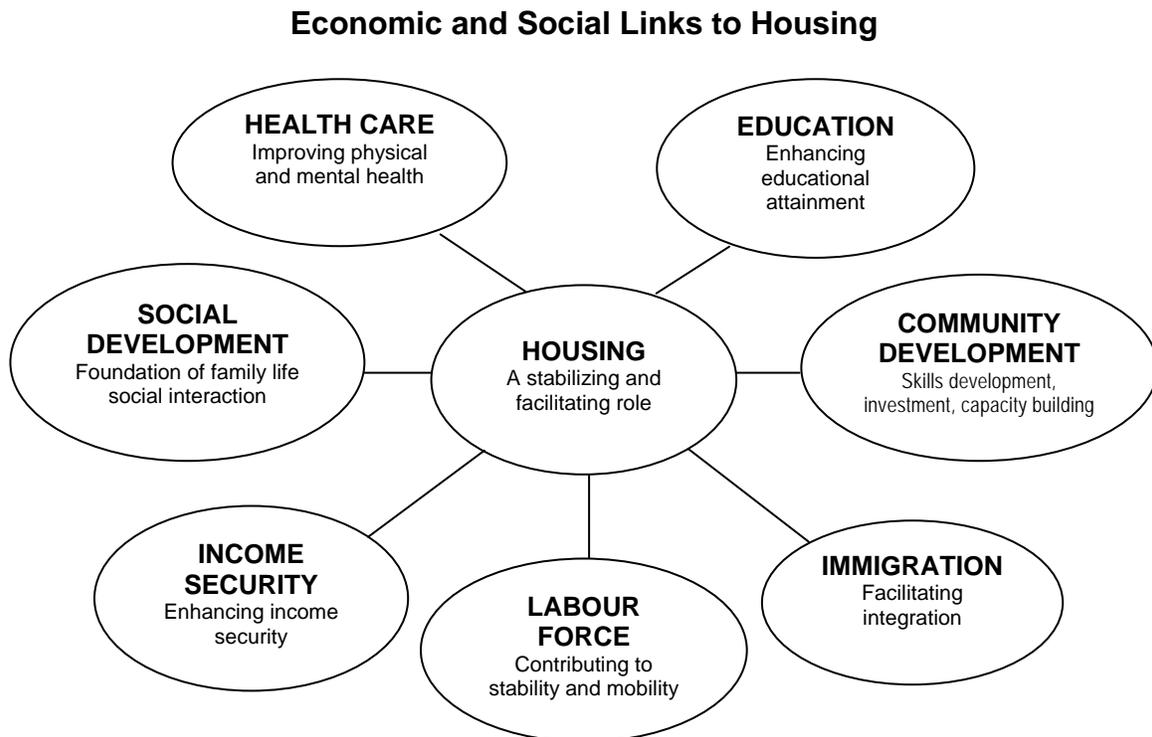
Housing and Other Areas of Social Policy

It is difficult to imagine people furthering their social, cultural and economic objectives without a “home.” There is clear evidence that many social policy interventions work best when access to adequate, affordable housing with security of tenure provides a stable home base for individuals and families. The success of many social policies (and for that matter economic policy) depends on the population being adequately housed.

Housing is central to everyday living and has many dimensions (Carter and Polevychok, 2004; Moloughney, 2004). These include physical dimensions such as the design and condition of housing; financial dimensions such as investment, affordability and assets; spatial dimensions such as size, suitability and neighbourhood; and psychological and social dimensions such as status, identity, family and supports.

By extension, housing policy is more than social housing. It is an integral component of a social policy designed to secure the well-being of the population as a whole. The present tendency to conflate “affordable housing” with social housing reflects an older policy discourse in Canada that defines social policy as something that is done only for people on the margins. Figure 1 captures the potential links between housing and other policy areas (Carter and Polevychok, 2004).

Figure 1



Housing as a Determinant of Health

Understanding the role that housing plays in securing the health and well-being of individuals helps to illuminate the broader connection between housing and social policy. We know that an individual's health is determined by a complex interaction of behavioural, cultural social, economic and environmental factors, among them housing (Moloughney, 2004). Roy Romanow's "tips for health" (Canadian Population Health Initiative, 2004) nicely summarizes the more formal list of factors, or determinants, of health identified by researchers:

- Don't be poor
- Get a good start in life
- Graduate from high school
- Get a job
- Don't lose your job
- Pick your community
- Live in quality housing
- Look after yourself

The research highlights the interdependent nature of these factors. Without quality housing, for example, an individual is less likely to achieve a good income or job and thereby secure the resources to meet the other conditions for good health and well-being.

Housing and the Integration of Immigrants

Adequate and affordable housing is also critical for the successful settlement and integration of new immigrants (Jackson, 2004). Access to adequate, affordable housing establishes the circumstances and/or the opportunities to access other formal and informal supports and networks (Carter and Polevychok, 2004). The integration of recent immigrants is hampered by a comparatively higher incidence of core housing need, in part, to the persistence of low income among the post-1990 immigrant cohort. New immigrants are increasingly concentrated in Canada's three largest urban centres (Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal), and even within particular neighbourhoods within these cities. The challenge of meeting the core housing needs of recent immigrants, especially among visible minority groups, is increasingly a place-based policy problem requiring local solutions.

Housing Seniors

Seniors have multiple housing challenges – affordability, safety, isolation, maintenance, and so on. Tony Ianno, currently Canada's Minister of State (Families and Caregivers), produced a task force report on seniors in May of 2004. Of the 17 recommendations in the report, eight focused on providing supports to seniors for housing. They include income supports, program flexibility to allow seniors to earn employment income, expanding the federal role, and collaborative initiatives with community groups and the private sector (Ianno, 2004).

Housing and Aboriginal Peoples

Many Aboriginal peoples in Canada face appalling living and housing conditions (Canadian Population Health Initiative, 2004; Jackson, 2004). Rates of core housing need among First Nation, Inuit and Métis households are nearly double the rates found in the general population. Nearly three times as many Aboriginal peoples live in crowded conditions than Canadians as a whole (Canadian Population Health Initiative, 2004). Crowding, combined with inadequate water and sewage systems, are associated with infectious diseases for on-reserve First Nations peoples, while crowding is directly associated with tuberculosis incidence (Canadian Population Health Initiative, 2004). A recent study of the consequences of poor housing conditions in Regina's Aboriginal community revealed that poor housing conditions are "a strong underlying cause of the generally poor socio-economic circumstances" among the city's Aboriginal population (Stokes, 2004).

Housing and Crime Prevention

Researchers are beginning to explore the relationship between quality housing and crime prevention. Evidence shows that children who are exposed to persistent low income and poor housing conditions are at a greater risk of criminal behaviour as adults. Early interventions, focused on improving those conditions, make a substantial difference both immediately and, by reducing risks later in life, over the longer term (Anderson, 2003). In another case, community projects focused on providing supported housing for women and young mothers have successfully reduced criminal activity among participants.

Housing and Income Security

Housing affordability is the main cause of housing need. A major determinant of affordability is the adequacy of family income. Average family incomes have been rising in Canada, although families in the lowest income groups have seen the smallest increases, contributing to a rise in income inequality (Frenette, Green and Picot, 2004). As a result, economic marginalization of Canada's lowest income families is growing (Jenson, 2004; Maxwell, 2004b). Housing markets respond to consumer demand and the opportunity for profit, but there is no market among those unable to pay. There is a structural mismatch between the supply of affordable housing and the housing needs of low-income families (Maxwell, 2004a).

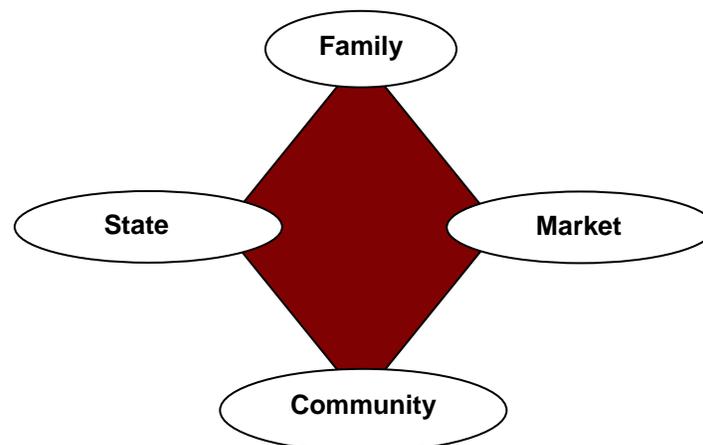
Housing Is a Horizontal Policy Issue

To solve issues of affordability and other housing-related problems, institutional supports are required for all actors to work together to address the problem. Given the complexity and the interdependence of these issues, there is a clear need to work across societal sectors and between societal levels. Because of the complexity of the problem, and because housing intersects with so many areas of social and economic policy, there is also a need for governments to work horizontally within and across established jurisdictions.

The challenge of achieving adequate and affordable housing for all Canadians is a good example of what some researchers have termed a “wicked problem” – that is, a problem of such complexity that it cannot be addressed in isolation by any one of the sectors that make up the “well-being diamond” illustrated in figure 2 (Bradford, 2005; Jenson, 2004; Hay, 2004).

Figure 2

The Well-Being Diamond



Smith and Torjman characterize wicked problems for governments as “complex files” that address “many layered programs involving a variety of players who need to create links between issues” (Smith and Torjman, 2004). The scope of the problem crosses the bounds of departmental mandates and may require the involvement of one or more levels of government.

A defining characteristic of a wicked problem is an insufficiency of information about what to do, and a lack of coordination mechanisms that can channel “the appropriate resources to the right target” (Bradford, 2005). Traditional, “top-down” solutions directed through an isolated policy “silo” are no longer appropriate. Increasingly, policy development processes rooted in shared expertise and experience that is both multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral is needed to successfully address social, economic and environmental problems.

The Importance of Place

More recent research is also highlighting the importance of a place-based understanding of social policy as one solution to these kinds of “wicked problems.” A place-based policy approach entails developing mechanisms that enable policy-makers to access local knowledge held by community residents and their networks (Bradford, 2002). It is the local setting where many problems originate. It is also the place where innovative solutions are to be found.

A place-based approach to housing policy involves attention to scale and the variations of local experience. The nature of social risk varies from community to community and often from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Attention to place is a means of harnessing both local capacity and local knowledge in a way that recognizes the role that communities play in securing well-being. Without attention to place, there is a danger of developing a one-size-fits-all approach to housing that risks meeting nobody’s needs.

In the case of housing policy, some models are already in place that can move us toward a place-based methodology. At a recent CPRN roundtable on housing and social policy, members of the housing policy community identified the National Homelessness Initiative’s Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) as a good model for engaging communities. These and similar programs reveal that communities are often better able than higher orders of government to integrate policy lessons emerging from housing initiatives and make connections between them and other policy areas on the ground.

The Implications for Governing

Governance is the way that the four actors of the well-being diamond contribute to solving problems and ensure coherence in policy and programs. Canada is weak in the area of cross-sectoral policy learning and public participation, as well as goal setting, coordination and problem-solving. Our tradition is that each actor works alone.

A place-based understanding of complex policy problems recognizes that “one-size-fits-all policy delivered from above” does not support solutions based on participation of community actors in the process of defining problems and meeting needs. Accordingly, centralized government is not a solution, but neither is decentralized government. Instead, as Bradford observes, “the goal is collaborative governance” (Bradford, 2005).

The recent history of the governance of housing policy suggests there is room for improvement. In recent decades, with the backing away of the federal government, housing policy has become an area of shared responsibility. As Carter and Polevychok argue, shared responsibility “can bring with it the benefits of effective partnerships but without strong leadership it can also be an impediment to development and implementation of new policies and programs” (Carter and Polevychok, 2004). Possible prescriptions for effective collaborative governance in the housing domain include re-engaging the federal government in a leadership role, promoting the integration of policy at the provincial level, actively engaging the municipal level of government, and building capacity at the community level.

More generally, both horizontal and vertical collaboration between and among these various actors is needed. Horizontal collaboration needs to be across government departments to help create “seamless” service delivery; between governments and the other actors to ensure joint investment and sharing of risks; and region-wide to encompass the “geography of opportunity” (Bradford, 2005). Vertical collaboration ensures that place does not become the sole focus, that is, that the right mix between targeted local solutions and national goals is found. And vertical collaboration is also important to support and promote flows – of resources, policy learning, and technical and legal supports – between levels.

Canada can learn from the European experience, where the Open Method of Coordination used by member states in the European Union (EU) creates a cohesive approach to social policy while respecting the sovereignty of member countries (Saint-Martin, 2004). The architecture developed by the EU looks much like Canada’s Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA). It emphasizes consensus building around the need for and direction of change based on: updated social knowledge; broad involvement and coordination; multilateral monitoring and reporting to citizens; meeting for regular reviews of progress; a rotating leadership; and effective use of third-party thinkers (Hay, 2004).

To move towards better problem-solving in Canada, there needs to be a focus on developing the same capacity for consensus building – across government, business, community and the public, and from the bottom-up. Once goals and priorities are established, coordinating mechanisms can be created that channel energy but do not constrain creativity. The focus of these investments should be to build self-reliance that enables local actors to solve their own problems, while still reflecting broader values of equity and democracy. This is one way to reduce both the cost of social policy and the role of government.

Policy Approaches That Would Strengthen Housing Policy

Over the last few decades, as Carter and Polevychok observe, the emphasis placed on market responsiveness and efficiency, on privatization and decentralization of government functions, and on funding cuts to social housing have made housing a weak link in the social safety net system (Carter and Polevychok, 2004). How can the role of housing be strengthened?

Housing policy alone cannot guarantee access to adequate and affordable housing. Other fields of social policy – including immigration, health, education, and social assistance – must also take into account how access to quality housing can help individuals further their social, cultural and economic objectives and, in this way, contribute to the health and well-being of the communities in which they live. Moreover, because quality housing contributes so fundamentally to well-being, investments in adequate and affordable housing may yield savings in other areas of social policy – for example, health, education, immigration and income security.

A better integration of housing initiatives with other social, economic and community development programs will require governments to adopt collaborative principles, both within their own structures and within the intergovernmental system.

At the federal level, efforts must be made to engage federal departments in making the necessary changes to integrate housing with other areas of social and economic policy. The immigration file provides a prime illustration of the need for a coordinated federal strategy on housing. Although federal policy supports an intake of 250,000 immigrants per year, the housing needs of these new Canadians – many of whom have difficulty accessing adequate and affordable housing – have not been addressed. There is a similar need at the provincial level for the horizontal integration of housing into social policy fields (Carter and Polevychok, 2004).

Progress on intergovernmental collaboration has already begun in a number of policy areas, including housing (Policy Research Initiative, 2004; Smith and Torjman, 2004). The federal government and the provinces are seen as equal policy partners. To date, SUFA has been the most comprehensive venture into institutionalizing collaboration – among governments as well as with the other three actors in the well-being diamond (Saint-Martin, 2004). But cities and their governments, community organizations and citizens are still largely excluded from SUFA and from other partnership opportunities.

The tri-level partnership agreements among the federal, provincial and municipal governments initiated to address priority urban issues in selected Canadian cities may hold lessons for strengthening housing policy. These Urban Development Agreements (UDAs) have contributed to leveraging public and private investment to rebuild physical and social infrastructure in Winnipeg and to creating a Healthy Cities-inspired urban economic development model in Vancouver. From the UDA experiences some overarching themes have been identified (Bradford, 2005). Many of these themes reflect long-standing community development principles, such as building on existing community knowledge and networks; linking goals to achievable outcomes; commitment to management and administrative principles and structures; participatory learning processes; and an emphasis on community capacity building.

In this context, two federal policy initiatives stand out as offering useful precedents for future programming, as they meet many of the criteria set out above. They are the Urban Development Agreements and the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative. The UDAs include both the vertical collaboration among governments and local actors and the horizontal collaboration within governments and within the communities. SCPI has harnessed local knowledge and mobilized local resources while bringing a powerful financial intermediary to the table.

Experts attending the January 18 roundtable in Vancouver (itself the site of many good housing projects) are probably best placed to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the UDA and SCPI and thus provide the Government of Canada with guidance on the best way forward.

Summary and Conclusion

This brief overview of housing, horizontality and social policy has presented a number of key messages:

- Adequate and affordable housing is critically important to the health, well-being and prosperity of individuals, communities and Canadian society as a whole.
- Not all Canadians are adequately housed, and many thousands are not housed at all.
- Housing need is particularly acute for certain population groups in Canada, including lone parents, new immigrants, Aboriginal peoples and seniors.
- New governance arrangements are required to support the collaborative solving of housing problems amongst the key actors, both horizontally and vertically.
- Understanding the place-based nature of housing problems is important to create the right solutions at the right time.
- Enhancing governance is necessary to foster policy dialogue and build mutual trust.
- Housing policy alone cannot guarantee access to adequate and affordable housing.
- Better integrating housing initiatives with other social, economic and community development programs will require governments to adopt collaborative principles, both within their own structures and within the intergovernmental system.
- Among existing and recent federal initiatives, the UDAs and SCPI are likely to provide the most useful precedents, as long as they are adapted to take account of learnings to date.

Changing ways of doing things is not without challenges. Challenges will best be met through a combination of effective leadership, the development and implementation of meaningful accountability systems, and a solid foundation of trust in all working relationships (Bradford, 2005; Maxwell, 2004c). These are key ingredients for ensuring the horizontal integration of housing policy into social policy in Canada.

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