

Urban Poverty: Fostering Sustainable and Supportive Communities

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This paper addresses the spatial distribution of poverty and its effects, and, from the perspective of policy development, discusses issues related to the objective of fostering socially sustainable communities in Canada's major urban areas, especially in poor neighbourhoods.

The first section provides an overview of the "geography of poverty" in Canada's largest cities. Research shows that in 1996 poverty was on the rise, accompanied by an increase in the spatial concentration of poverty in several major metropolitan areas. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this revealed extreme contrasts, with some neighbourhoods experiencing multiple deprivation, while others remained free of poverty and social problems. In fact, studies show that there is still a social mix within poor areas and that not all poverty is concentrated in the inner cities of major urban centres. The paper then deals with the question of neighbourhood effects. Does living in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of poverty seriously diminish the life chances of a child or adult? A survey of studies carried out elsewhere reveals that neighbourhood effects influence the lifelines of children and adults living in poor neighbourhoods, but to a lesser degree than individual or family characteristics. The paper raises two other elements that have not been sufficiently studied: the varying abilities of communities to take responsibility at the local level, and the existence of certain obstacles (such as commercial "redlining") that accentuate poverty.

The Sgro report (2002) recognized that two trends – the increase in and concentration of poverty – are significant social issues; it called for sustained governmental intervention to halt impoverishment and to reduce the negative effects of the relative concentration of poverty in major Canadian cities. What forms of intervention will create socially sustainable neighbourhoods, regardless of the wealth of their residents? What is the appropriate "responsibility mix" among governments, municipalities and community organizations, and what areas should be given priority? The example of Montreal is somewhat helpful in this regard. This paper observes that actions directed at individuals (in their family context) are very important. Montreal, which has numerous characteristics that make it highly vulnerable (serious poverty, a fairly high concentration of poor people), attests to the importance of policy intervention by central governments (federal and provincial) in key areas such as education, health and social security. These "aspatial" policies have territorial effects, especially in poor neighbourhoods, since they provide poor populations with high quality services wherever they live, as well as encouraging a social mix in both under-privileged and other neighbourhoods. Thus, we must not underestimate the long-term spatial effects of either universal or general policies (which target all individuals) as compared to the effects of spatially focused (targeted) initiatives that are more visible (including politically) in the short term.

The second lesson is that initiatives that target poor neighbourhoods can also have positive effects; these initiatives may be undertaken by central governments (often in partnership with local organizations) or by other institutions, such as municipalities and associations (often with the financial support of the two higher levels of government). There has been a deterioration of the physical environment and the social fabric in some of Montreal's more vulnerable neighbourhoods. Where neighbourhood conditions have deteriorated significantly, certain

targeted initiatives have been developed to support general policies. This paper reviews certain examples of this type of initiative. It suggests that the positive effects of general policies aimed at individuals and families can be reinforced if they are supported by targeted actions, especially if these policies help to integrate complementary actions throughout the urban area.

The paper raises questions about inter-sectoral initiatives and methods used to structure comprehensive action, particularly methods used in inter-organizational relations (especially multi-level relations). With regard to targeted interventions, there are a number of cases involving experimentation with inter-sectoral initiatives based on partnerships. These initiatives, which must be complementary, can take several forms: from basic agreement on strategy to developing contractual agreements in which each party commits itself to a specific contribution and all the parties commit themselves to certain results; or even the integration of resources under a single stakeholder. Joint assessments of strategic options and operating methods are necessary to delineate the most appropriate strategies to combat urban poverty.

A final question remains concerning areas of concentrated poverty. Does each general policy eventually need to be adjusted at the local level, not in terms of its objectives (anticipated results), but in terms of its implementation methods? How can different policies be shaped locally in order to maximize the effect of each (taking into account the different types of poor people and neighbourhood characteristics)? Given the number of programs, the wide range of neighbourhoods and the limited number of evaluations of these types of actions (considered alone or in combination), there is no simple answer.

Key Words: Cities, poverty, neighbourhoods, social sustainability, multi-level collaboration, social exclusion, social policy.