Economic, Social and Civic Opportunities for All: Vibrant Abbotsford

Becoming a Vibrant Communities participant is a process that requires a concerted effort by the convening organization to develop its ideas on how it will bring about sustained poverty reduction.

Introduction

Abbotsford, BC, is now the province's fifth largest city with a population of more than 130,000. Abbotsford is also a city full of paradoxes. On the one hand, immense opportunities exist for collaboration, inclusion and innovation. On the other, many people and groups continue to work in silos, certain members of the community are ignored or excluded, and faith organizations are still learning how to coordinate their efforts effectively. It has been said that invention and creativity come from impasse and divergence. In this light, Abbotsford's challenges and opportunities can also be seen as its strengths.

Though they were familiar with the Vibrant Communities model since its inception in 2002, it took until 2006 for a group of committed Abbotsford learners to come together and discuss the possibility of establishing a multisectoral collaboration to address increasing levels of poverty in their community. Poverty combined with rapid population growth, lower than average graduation rates and more diversity made it imperative to find a way for the community to come together to address issues of concern.

Uniquely Abbotsford

Over the last five years, Abbotsford's rapid population growth rate has strained the capacity of existing social programs and networks to provide effective, comprehensive services. Vibrant

Abbotsford believes that a multisectoral approach will encourage greater community cohesion and the provision of coordinated, appropriate services.

Vibrant Abbotsford's engagement with its local faith community charts new territory for Vibrant Communities, opening avenues for learning from successes and failures in collaboration with faith organizations and secular groups. The community's makeup and history suggest the necessity of collaboration among faith leaders and the directors of secular organizations.

Poverty reduction in Abbotsford presents an opportunity to work in a setting that defines itself as rural and urban. Abbotsford calls itself the "City in the Country" and is home to the largest and most fertile agricultural land in Canada. Paradoxically, the agricultural industry employs a significant portion of Abbotsford's refugee and immigrant population as farm workers. Piecework and low wages present serious barriers to economic security.

Abbotsford is home to eight of British Columbia's nine federal prisons. Local organizers will find out how well the Vibrant Communities approach stands up to the challenges associated with reintegrating offenders. Most released offenders choose to live in Abbotsford because of the high number of support services available to them.

Community Concerns in Abbotsford

Research and conversation with a wide variety of residents helped Vibrant Abbotsford to develop a list of key community concerns which include:

- lack of affordable housing
- formal education levels lower than the provincial average
- declining median earning levels
- exclusion of marginalized groups from decision-making processes that affect them, particularly among minority groups; Abbotsford has the third-highest proportion of visible minority populations of all Census Metropolitan Areas in Canada, after Toronto and Vancouver
- reduced family capacity to raise children in a healthy environment: almost 15 percent of households are single parent families; more than 34 percent of Abbotsford's population is under age 25
- 34 percent of Abbotsford's children are entering school without the necessary skills to succeed to their full potential
- weak community capacity to address issues of property crime, drug trafficking and gang-related activity
- need for better management of the transition of inmates back into the community.

Understanding Poverty and Poverty Reduction

Adopting a social and economic perspective, Vibrant Abbotsford defines poverty as: "The condition of a person who does not have sufficient social and economic resources to achieve holistic well-being, unable to live with the dignity, choices and power that support full participation in society." This definition encapsulates participants' beliefs about the nature and complexity of poverty, their vision for a more prosperous Abbotsford and the need for comprehensive solutions.

Vibrant Abbotsford participants believe that they can reduce poverty. Further, they hold the view that reduced poverty levels can be sustained through the interplay of enlightened attitudes, recognition of commonly held values and improved social networks and social policies. Participants' observations of life in Abbotsford have taught them that poverty reduction requires citizens to adopt inclusive attitudes. Residents need to recognize where marginalized citizens experience economic, social and civic barriers to participation in the life of the community. Poverty reduction also requires the development of assets for sustainable livelihoods. Ultimately, poverty reduction *focuses on the potential* and *builds the capacity* of individuals and the community.

As part of its initial preparations, the Vibrant Abbotsford Leadership Table (VALT) identified five root causes of poverty in its *Poverty Profile for Abbotsford*:

- lack of personal or household assets – systems and programs that build these assets are Vibrant Abbotsford's first priority
- negative attitudes – of people in poverty (hopelessness), of others who have limited understanding of why people are poor
- exclusion – Abbotsford has had a long history of groups maintaining their separateness from one another along ideological, programmatic, political, cultural or social lines
- limited networks – organizations do not communicate effectively with one another
- restrictive or poorly planned government policies.

Organizing the work

The *Poverty Profile for Abbotsford* was supplemented with the views on poverty of 100 residents interviewed by a Vibrant Abbotsford researcher. In January 2009, VALT organizers invited 60 local business and nonprofit organization representatives to a breakfast event at the Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce to talk about their possible involvement in poverty reduction. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Work continues to include the voices and participation of residents, business people and people with lived experience of poverty.

Leadership Table

The Vibrant Abbotsford Leadership Table (VALT) is Vibrant Abbotsford's primary operational group. Members bring high levels of commitment to the initiative's community-based

planning and development process. Members come from business, local government, community development, social enterprise, health, social services, funding organizations, entrepreneurial programming and the Abbotsford School District. Vibrant Abbotsford's convening organization, United Way of the Fraser Valley, lends credibility and stability to the initiative.

Executive committee

A four-member executive committee provides guidance to the staff team. Vibrant Abbotsford's Chair, Vice-Chair, a Finance Committee member and one other VALT member are the first point of contact whenever immediate action is needed. Membership in the executive is determined by consensus.

Action teams

Vibrant Abbotsford currently has four, two-member action teams. The *finance committee* establishes the overall operational budget and designs supplementary budgets for priority local activities conducted under the auspices of Vibrant Abbotsford. VALT also established a Funders' Council to select and target potential financial partners, approaching funders for support when appropriate. The *evaluation committee* designed the Vibrant Abbotsford evaluation framework, which is directly linked to work currently evolving in evaluation through the Tamarack Institute. The *public relations committee* develops and implements the public face of Vibrant Abbotsford. It has created links with local media, assisted with the editing of various project documents and heads up the development of several Vibrant Abbotsford promotional efforts. The *learning committee* spearheads and develops learning outcomes and plans for the Leadership Table. The goal is for members to continuously reflect on their work and make adjustments to their activities, as required.

Friends of the initiative

To date, more then 40 Abbotsford residents and organizations have indicated a commitment to the initiative's mandate. As projects unfold, this group will become more actively involved.

Staff members

Vibrant Abbotsford community-based poverty reduction activities will be initiated by member organizations. Vibrant Abbotsford staff will provide support for education, community outreach, information provision, evaluation and the coordination of Vibrant Abbotsford operations. At the current time, a researcher and project manager are working part time for the initiative as contracted employees; interviews for a full-time coordinator are under way.

Staff will keep the wider community informed of the current state of poverty in Abbotsford and the activities, programs, individuals and organizations that are making a collective impact on poverty reduction. These communication and coordination tasks are considered the central and defining work of Vibrant Abbotsford.
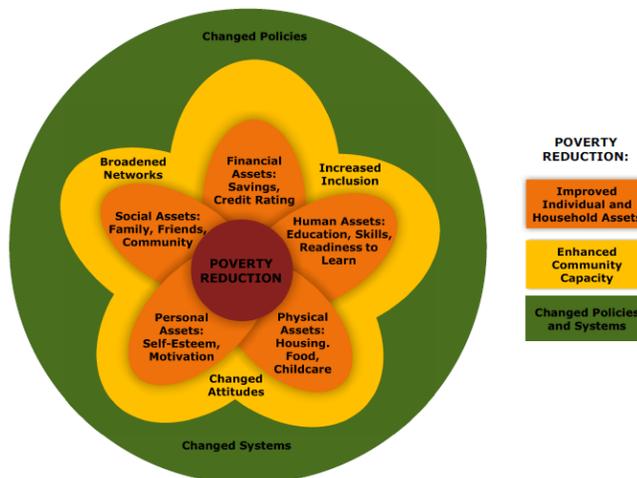
Goals and Strategies

Vibrant Abbotsford participants describe the organization as a coordinating body. Between 2006 and 2008, members developed a plan of action and are currently making the fundamental shift from thinking and talking about the initiative to engaging in it.

Vibrant Abbotsford's first major task will be to draw together a minimum of 14 local collaborative tables into one 'meta-table' – a metaphor that describes the need for communicating for change between local roundtables and moving towards the development of an overall community plan. Part of this work will include analyzing existing service strengths and gaps and allowing strategies to emerge that can answer unmet needs.
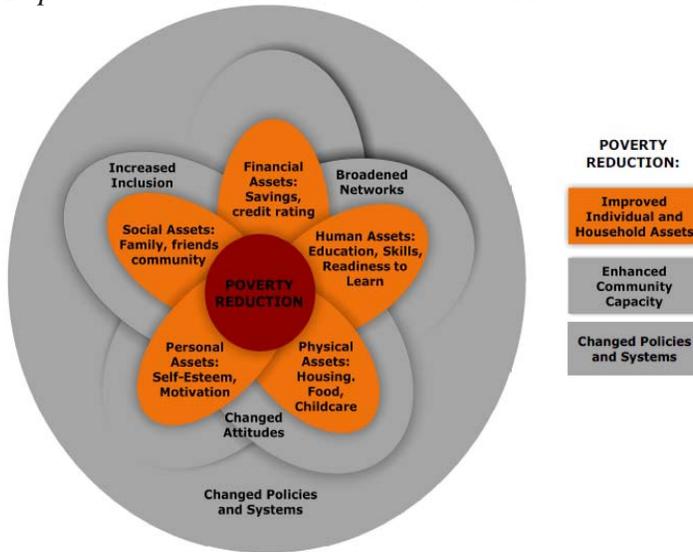
Says VALT Chair Deirdre Goudriaan: "Our approach has been to find a good balance between our process and the products or strategies we select for action. We have not wanted to jump too quickly to action and this has created a space for people to learn and challenge their own thinking. We have established several issues-driven committees – including a policy working group and a neighbourhood development group that is looking at rural/urban differences."

Using the five root causes of poverty as a starting point, Vibrant Abbotsford is preparing to address three of them – improved individual and household assets, enhanced community capacity and changed policies and systems. The remaining two – countering negative attitudes and encouraging inclusion – form the underpinning of all Vibrant Abbotsford's activities.

Vibrant Abbotsford organizers have adopted a flower graphic which uses layers of flower petals to represent the simultaneous, multi-level and comprehensive approach they are taking to poverty reduction. Each layer of effort supports and enriches the others.

Improved individual and household assets

Vibrant Abbotsford will consolidate existing efforts and develop new community interventions to increase the assets of low-income households by:
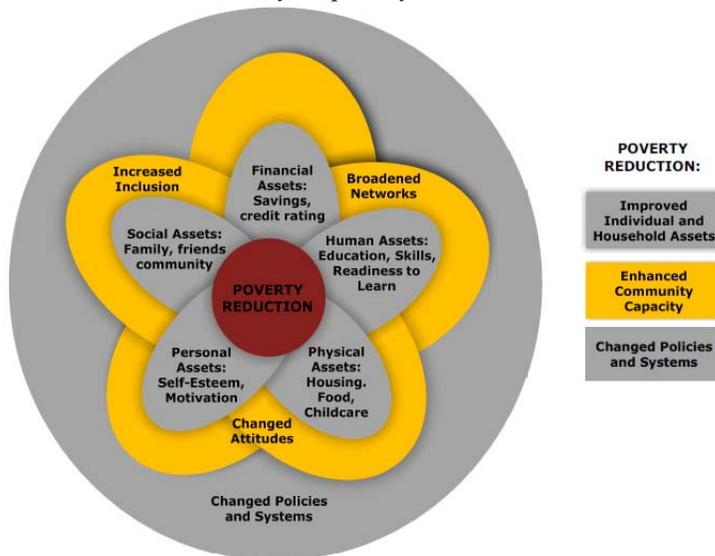
- expanding the VALT and Vibrant Abbotsford collaborative in general, with respect to asset-building
- hosting a forum for asset-building organizations
- hosting a forum for consumers of asset-building programs
- operating asset-building programs and activities (including workshops).

In March 2009, Vibrant Abbotsford initiated a six-month asset-mapping pilot project with funding from Service Canada. The Vibrant Abbotsford project manager and three assistants are working to engage residents from two low-income neighbourhoods – one rural and the other urban. The four project leads will develop relationships with as large a number of residents as possible, involving them in discussions about neighbourhood assets. It is hoped that these early steps will lead to residents participating in further planning and action aimed at revitalizing their neighbourhoods. The three project assistants are themselves receiving topped-up Employment Insurance benefits. All three live in Abbotsford and share their lived experience of poverty with the rest of the Vibrant Abbotsford initiative.

At a later stage, residents from the two neighbourhoods will be brought together to compare notes on the challenges and assets of living in a low-income setting. It is hoped that both groups will have a chance to identify projects of mutual benefit which they can work on together.

The rural/urban initiative will allow Vibrant Abbotsford to better hear the voices of people with lived experience of poverty. The neighbourhood group is connecting with a previously-established organization called the Citizens Action Coalition. Vibrant Abbotsford hopes to strengthen its existing ties with the coalition and that its members will become more closely involved with the rural/urban research.
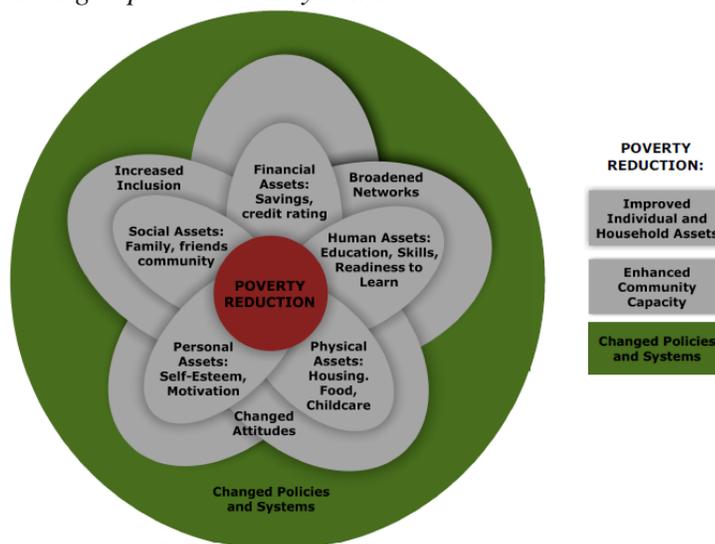
Enhanced community capacity

Vibrant Abbotsford will seek to:

- improve the depth and breadth of community engagement and capacity by increasing levels of inclusion of low-income families and individuals across social and cultural boundaries
- change attitudes and build community awareness of poverty issues
- promote the development and test innovative, risk-taking solutions to poverty
- continually evaluate progress.

VALT members have invited business people and community leaders to information sessions, in the hope that some would join the initiative. Five people have joined the leadership table and the remaining now are better informed about Vibrant Abbotsford's mandate and goals. Says Deirdre: "We want to operate multi-sectorally and know how important a player business can be. We're building relationships and understanding so that over time, they'll warm up to the work we're doing."

A representative from a funding organization had described the low quality of applications they were receiving from Abbotsford organizations. In response, Vibrant Abbotsford will shortly host a session for local agencies and provide them the training they need to submit an effective funding proposal; a granting agency representative will also be in attendance. Organizers will also use the session as a chance to talk about poverty reduction. They further hope that the presentations will trigger ideas on which participants can collaborate in the future.

Changed policies and systems

Vibrant Abbotsford will seek to influence policies that affect poverty in the Abbotsford community by:

- identifying targets for specific poverty reduction strategies
- working with local groups on municipal policy change
- collaborating with the BC Vibrant Communities on policy changes
- collaborating with six provincial groups in identifying and advocating for change in federal policy
- supporting national policy change efforts.

Vibrant Abbotsford will focus on two target populations. Single mothers report the lowest incomes for lone parent families in Abbotsford. In Abbotsford, the median income for female-headed lone-parent families in 2006 was $31,502 compared to the median income for all families of $52,097 [Statistics Canada 2006]. Immigrant families are the initiative's second population of interest. Of all 33 large Census Metropolitan Areas in Canada, Abbotsford had the third-highest proportion of foreign-born population in 2006. Vibrant Abbotsford organizers are concerned that this group brings several challenges, including low literacy skills in both their home languages and English. Many are employed in the agricultural industry, are poorly paid and live in substandard housing.

Vibrant Abbotsford – besides concentrating on single mothers and immigrant families – hopes to build a better community understanding of poverty issues and more fully examine the differences between rural and urban poverty. Its recently begun pilot brings together all four of these poverty elements.

There are three Vibrant Communities initiatives operating in British Columbia – one each in BC Capital Region, Surrey and Abbotsford. Over the last year, members of each organization have 'met' by telephone to identify common issues and policy directions. "BCVC" discussions in February 2009 resulted in a list of policy concerns that Vibrant Abbotsford researcher Sarah Campbell used as a basis for detailing local and provincial policies. In preparation for the May 12 provincial election, Vibrant Abbotsford hosted an all candidates meeting on May 5 to provide local candidates an opportunity to express their views on issues relevant to poverty reduction. The meeting format featured a "conversation café" style of questioning.

The candidate information will also feed into a province-wide push to encourage the provincial government to develop and adopt a poverty reduction strategy. A collaborative of faith, health, business, academic, community organization representatives and individuals has come together to promote the idea. It is led by a committee and convened by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' BC branch. BCVC, with Vibrant Abbotsford representatives, hopes to contribute to a regional consortium event this fall and will look for opportunities to add to the discussion and build stronger ties with the initiative.

Signs of Progress

Abbotsford organizers have devised an integrated evaluation strategy that assigns value to programs and collaboration in order to more consistently gauge impact. Using an "Evaluation Information Umbrella," they hope to demonstrate the accuracy of their approach. If successful, they believe that the strategy will advance Vibrant Communities' efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. The process would have local organizations and initiatives using a standard evaluation framework to track and assess their work. Vibrant Abbotsford would monitor overall progress. Findings would be used to identify weaknesses, challenges and any underlying policy and systems changes that stood as barriers to individual and community prosperity.

In its first year of operations (2008-09), Vibrant Abbotsford will focus on laying a strong, flexible groundwork for its activities. Year two will be spent establishing strategies and year three (2010-11) will be a consolidation year that will work at making impacts on larger political and social systems.

By late 2011, Vibrant Abbotsford will have assisted 1,500 households (4,500 individuals, assuming an average of three people per household) in moving along the pathway out of poverty. This figure represents approximately 26 percent of Abbotsford citizens living under the low income cut-off level.

Movement out of poverty will be measured by evaluating changes in income levels and assessing the ability to build assets, as defined by the "Sustainable Livelihoods" framework. The Sustainable Livelihoods framework was adapted from a model developed by the UK's Department for International Development, and adjusted for use in Canada. It is a holistic, asset-based framework for understanding poverty and the work of poverty reduction. It operates along three key dimensions – asset building (with five categories and numerous sub-categories), contextual and systemic factors that keep people in poverty, and techniques and interventions that communities can pursue in their poverty reduction work. Vibrant Abbotsford will use the acquisition of Sustainable Livelihoods-described assets and progress on systemic factors as indicating fundamental movement out of poverty.

Vibrant Abbotsford's integrated evaluation strategy provides a unique approach for attributing value to programs and collaboration. By demonstrating the value of work done and ensuring that information is consistent (through the Evaluation Information Umbrella), Vibrant Abbotsford offers a new tool for accurately gauging impacts. Several BC communities have begun to develop a well-being report card for their citizens. The exercise provides a mechanism for evaluating how well the community is meeting the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. Vibrant Abbotsford has begun to consider its own version of the report card, based on current research conducted through the Vancouver Foundation's Vital Signs project, part of a national Vital Signs initiative supported by Community Foundations of Canada (*www.vancouverfoundationvitalsigns.ca/*).

Vibrant Abbotsford envisions social and economic asset-building taking root in the community, a civic groundswell of support for its work and aspiration, and accountability for continuous improvement scoring top marks in the well-being report card of Abbotsford.

Underlying approach

Vibrant Abbotsford participants aspire to no less than re-forming Abbotsford: they hope to reform the environment in which poverty has taken root – the attitudinal, organizational, policy, civic and social structures which created barriers to prosperity. Members will create a place where partners can share resources and ideas in order to build a unified, thriving community. Their hope is that by strengthening the social fabric – improving attitudes, clarifying core values, building up social

networks and influencing the development of supportive social policies – poverty reduction efforts will become a standard way of thinking and operating.

Between 2009 and 2013, Vibrant Abbotsford will work under the banner "Economic, Social, and Civic Opportunities for all." Members aspire to create deep and durable change in the lives of low-income Abbotsford residents, moving them away from poverty in measurable and effective ways.

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