

*It is now nearly ten years since Robert Putnam published Bowling Alone, his magisterial work on the decline of social capital in the United States. It marshals vast amounts of data to show how civic engagement and civil society have contracted since 1950, and how this shrinkage has reduced Americans' quality of life.*

*The last two chapters call the reader to action. American society at the turn of the 20th century is in about the same situation as at the turn of the 19th. People now should do much the same as people did then: invent any number of occasions and organizations that restore between citizens even the humblest ties of sympathy, reciprocity, and common purpose. That fellow feeling, Putnam argues, will inevitably*

# An Agenda for the Renewal of Our Communities

BY SHERRI TORJMAN

*seep beyond the bounds of club or association and lead to action into greater spaces, in terms of geography (city, region, nation) and issue (housing, economy, human rights). His 6-point Agenda for Social Capitalists challenges readers to get this riot of civic invention well underway by 2010.*

*In Shared Space: The Communities Agenda (2007), Sherri Torjman describes and collates something very like the Canadian response to the same dangers that Putnam detected. If not a "riot of invention," it comes close, and clearly much more could be accomplished, given greater self-awareness and unity of action. So, like Putnam, Torjman mixes analysis with manifesto. She urges community, public, and private sector organizations to outgrow their old notions of turf and dedicate themselves instead to discovering and developing a commons or "shared space" of action supportive of community resilience.*

*The following article is a condensation of several chapters from her book.*



**T**he communities agenda is all about shared space – about a common understanding of *what* a community can do to become a great place to live and *how* best to carry out this work despite complex challenges. The agenda does not set out a single approach to work in the shared space. There is no best approach. Nor should there be.

Rather, the agenda is concerned with facilitating structured conversations with a clear purpose. The structure is only there to ensure that the major signposts guiding community efforts – the goals, methods, and milestones – are consistent in their intent and approach, while distinctive to each community.

Resilient communities, like resilient individuals and families, are able to *survive* in the face of ongoing change or imminent threat because of internal strength and their capacity to *adapt* effectively to change. But beyond mere survival and adaptation, resilient communities typically emerge even stronger as a result of the challenge. They *engage actively* in the world around them. Optimistic about the future and convinced that there is a better way to tackle complex challenges, they *seek opportunities* to improve their well-being and the quality of their lives. They *thrive*.

Four clusters of activity are the basis of a community's resilience: sustenance, adaptation, engagement, and opportunity. There is *sustenance* of basic human needs in the face of challenge or ongoing change. There is *adaptation* to a complex and shifting environment as well as active *engagement* with that environment. There is also both a capacity and desire to thrive by seizing *opportunity*.

Each cluster comprises, in turn, a wide array of activities of one of two types. Investments in individual capacity refer to activities that enhance the skills, abilities and assets of individuals or households. Investments in community infrastructure represent an infusion of resources into the supply of amenities and supports that contribute to well-being.

Each cluster is as important as the others. There is no hierarchy among them, although a community may choose to focus more on one than the others at any given time. Resilience is the result of interventions in all four.

## The Substance of the Communities Agenda

### Sustenance

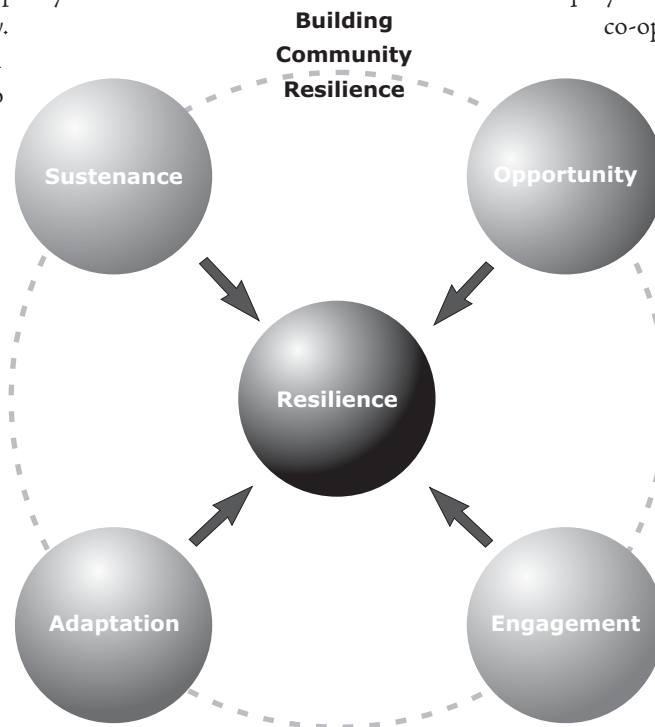
The *sustenance* cluster of activities is concerned with all the conditions fundamental to our basic physical and emotional well-being. Activities that promote adequate incomes and working conditions, and that lower the costs of such essentials as food, fuel, and rental housing are primary components in terms of

(page previous) In Saint John, teenagers and Bill Gale, founder and co-chair of the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI - see p. 8), celebrate new, larger premises for the Resource Centre for Youth. BCAPI has mobilized cross-sectoral support for the Centre, that provides youth with opportunities in health, recreation, career development, and community engagement. Photo courtesy of *Telegraph Journal*.

individual capacity. Investment in community capacity can take the form of new housing units, the retrofitting of housing and measures related to population health, such as immunization against communicable disease, and actions that ensure clean air and water.

Both the private sector and government play a major role in this cluster. But communities add significant value by supplementing and complementing these actions.

The World Vision Canada Aboriginal Council is a case in point. It worked with First Nations in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and northwest Ontario to help community members construct their own straw-bale housing that is both affordable and energy efficient. Using donated cash, labour, materials, and land, the Council also built two homes that served as the initial equity for the establishment of a housing co-operative.



### Adaptation

The *adaptation* cluster comprises activities concerned with basic coping skills and capacities. Separation and divorce, unexpected job loss, economic recession, and illness cannot be avoided entirely. The challenge is to find ways to help individuals and households cope with these eventualities.

On the individual side of the equation, skills related to empathy, problem-solving, literacy, numeracy, and basic communications comprise the essence of adaptive capacity.

Fundamental to this cluster are services related to early childhood development. The literature on child

development is rich with evidence on the importance of nurturing resilience – self-esteem, empathy, and positive coping mechanisms – at the very earliest stages of life.

In terms of community infrastructure, support for childcare and settlement assistance for newcomers are essential to adaptation. Newcomers and persons with disabilities require assistance to address needs related to language; to access to legal, health, and social services; to education, training, and employment; and to the recognition of skills acquired offshore.

The B.C.-based Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN) puts into practice the meaning of adaptation on a daily basis. PLAN builds circles of supports around person with disabilities to ensure that they have loving people who care about

them and can provide assistance, if required. But support networks, while crucial, are not sufficient. For the first time in history, persons with disabilities are outliving their parents. To assure economic security after the death of parents, PLAN championed the development of a tax-deferred savings vehicle so people could contribute to the future independence of disabled relatives. As a result of PLAN's efforts, the 2007 federal budget introduced a new Registered Disability Savings Plan along with a Canada Disability Savings Grant and a Canada Disability Savings Bond.

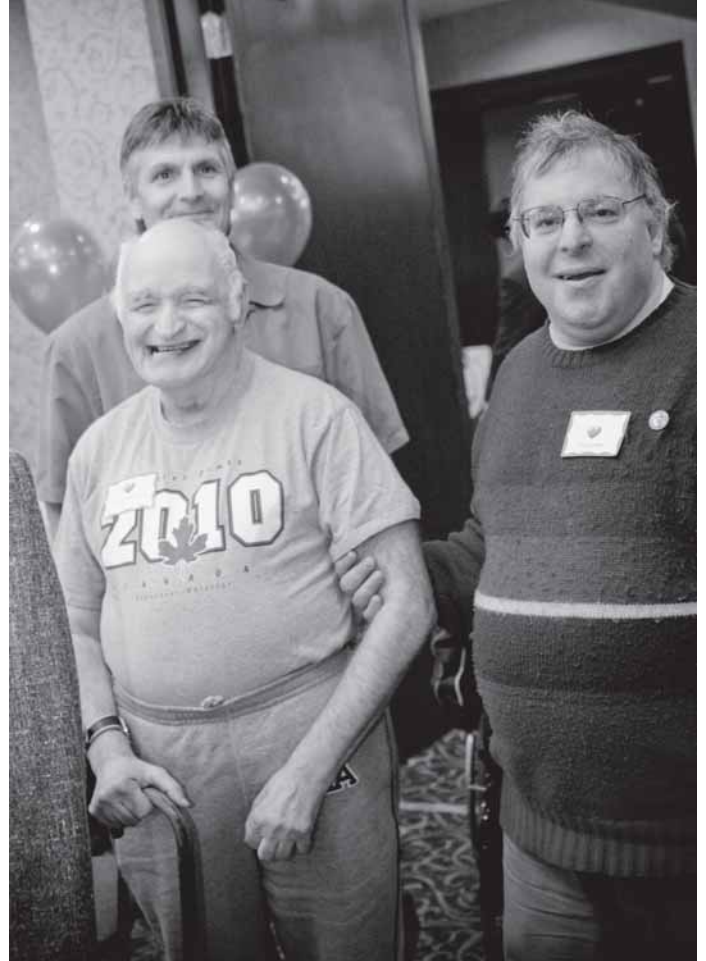
*Resilient communities are able to survive because of internal strength & their capacity to adapt effectively to change. They engage actively in the world around them. They seek opportunities to improve their well-being & the quality of their lives. They thrive.*

### Engagement

The resilience cluster related to *engagement* is concerned with active participation in society. Rather than simply adapting to social and economic pressures, engagement reflects a sense that individuals and communities can take control of circumstances that affect them. The voices and views of citizens actually count for something. Involvement in public discourse, community decision-making processes, volunteering, and recreation are all expressions of this sense of "agency."

Engagement also involves the provision of public spaces or the removal of barriers so people can take part in physical activity and dialogue. Participation in recreational activities or sports is made possible by paths, hiking trails, parks, and pools; community centres provide a venue for diverse cultural groups to exchange views around common concerns.

SKETCH uses engagement activities to tackle sustenance issues. This nonprofit charitable organization in Toronto provides arts programming, and job and life skills training for youth who are street-involved or homeless, or at risk of those experiences. As an alternative to traditional therapy, participation in the disciplines of visual art, drama, music, and new media enhance the young people's self-esteem, resilience, and desire to learn. Collaboration with local artists and organizations, job placements, internships, and mentoring also increase their employability. In this way, SKETCH also interconnects the engagement cluster with the opportunity cluster.



### Opportunity

*Opportunity* is the fourth resilience cluster. One stream of work in this cluster involves direct investment in work-related skills, including efforts to make training more relevant to the needs and demands of the labour market. Customized training is an example of this trend. It creates bridges among voluntary organizations, the private sector, educational institutions, and governments in order to find employment for marginalized workers.

The opportunities cluster is also concerned with the creation of assets through such measures as individual development accounts, learning bonds, and homeownership. This building of financial assets not only affects the sustenance and engagement of individuals, it fosters their independence and again creates a sense of agency and hope for a better future.

In terms of community capacity, many actions in this cluster entail the creation of economic opportunities by means of collective entrepreneurship, guided by principles of democratic engagement and shared profit. But the private sector may also contribute time, energy, and leadership as well. In Saint John, a network of more than 100 businesses came together in 1997 to spearhead the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI). Based on an analysis of poverty trends, current

(photo) Ed (with cane) and two of his friends, Lyle (r) and Rob (l). PLAN assists people with disabilities in building lifetime networks of care and friendship to reduce isolation and loneliness. Lyle and Rob are part of Ed's network. Photo courtesy of PLAN ([www.plan.ca](http://www.plan.ca)).



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initiatives, and feedback from people living in poverty, BCAPI launched a program to help single young parents complete their high school education, move off social assistance, and find employment. BCAPI has since encouraged the provincial government to adjust policies that act to hinder social assistance recipients who are trying to move into the labour market. It is also urging businesses to examine how they could create economic opportunities for disadvantaged residents.

## **Organizing for Complexity**

It is the task of the communities agenda to ensure that there is effective action in and between all four of these clusters. Effective action entails establishing a clear knowledge base (knowing), creating collaborative relationships (doing), and monitoring progress against identified outcomes (reviewing). These multiple linkages are what sparks innovation – meaning not just the generation of new ideas, but their application in novel ways.

How then to infuse such a range of activity with coherence and direction? Unfortunately, there is a significant mismatch between the complexity of local challenges and the problem-solving capacity of local governments. Their mandates vary from

province to province. To seek changes in areas beyond their political jurisdiction, such a health policy or transportation policy, they need a broader set of community voices. Electoral representation may not reflect the richness of the community's racial, age, and sectoral profile. Municipal governments are also inherently limited in their actions by electoral clocks.

Unlike municipal governments, *local governance bodies* are not elected structures. They seek explicitly to identify and harness the range of assets embedded in communities, no matter how impoverished or “distressed” they are. Local governance bodies make a deliberate and conscious effort to capture the diversity of community both in terms of demography and economic sector. They can develop plans which are longer term in vision and scope than a municipal strategy.

Local governance bodies play a pivotal role in the communities agenda. They provide the focal point for its unique expression and act as its champion. They help set a guiding vision for the local effort and its associated strategic plan. They determine the resilience clusters upon which to focus. They identify and bring together diverse players to make these decisions. They also link resilience activities with other organizations, projects, and resources in the greater community. They provide opportunities for learning and the monitoring of results.

Local governance structures in many communities across Canada are spearheading a promising new form of community practice called “comprehensive community initiatives.” Whereas

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(photo) A dynamic musician and visual artist, Bones poses in front of a multi-media painting he made at SKETCH ([www.sketch.ca](http://www.sketch.ca)), a community arts space for homeless and street-involved youth in Toronto. Photo courtesy of Sonya Reynolds.

government practice usually identifies the goals of a project, the activities it may undertake, and the time in which to achieve them, comprehensive community initiatives place local actors and citizens at the heart of this process of definition. Still more important, complexity is embedded in the substance and process of these initiatives. They are a positive response to the fact that traditional methods of dealing with complex issues – single programs to tackle identified problems – are inappropriate.

## Vibrant Communities

The Vibrant Communities initiative embodies this comprehensive approach. At its core are 15 cities seeking local solutions to reduce poverty. Six of the 15 receive extensive funding to develop multi-year comprehensive strategies to reduce poverty. These Trail Builders all share an important feature: a local governance body assumes responsibility for the initiative and presides over its activity.

The governance body formulates, implements, and evaluates all aspects of the local poverty reduction strategy. Its work is guided by the principle of inclusion. Representatives of business, government, voluntary organizations, and people living in poverty must all be engaged in the formulation and application of the strategy.

Not surprisingly, this engagement is easier said than done. It is impossible for any group – let alone a local project with modest funding – to be entirely representative of the community. All it can do is try to move toward greater inclusion and monitor continually how well it is doing in this regard.

As a first step, each community must understand its face. Some of the collaborating cities have developed a formal poverty profile to identify more precisely their marginalized members, such as racialized youth, persons with disabilities, or Aboriginal Canadians living off-reserve. In other cases, entire neighbourhoods have been designated as high risk or “vulnerable.”

One Trail Builder is the Saint-Michel neighbourhood of Montréal. It has developed an ambitious plan to reduce poverty and social exclusion and to revitalize the area.

In the past, after the closure of huge local quarries, Saint-Michel’s identity had been built largely around its role as a garbage dump. A core feature of its revitalization effort is to foster a positive identity with citizens actively engaged in the process of neighbourhood change. The renewed vision of the neighbourhood emerged from a long participatory process:

“Saint-Michel is a pleasant neighbourhood within which to live, supportive of family life and multicultural exchanges, an active and unified community, which takes charge of its affairs and also contributes to the vigour of Montréal.”

About 800 people – at least 500 of them local residents – helped formulate a strategic plan of action through polls, focus groups and large community meetings. The plan rests on four major areas of concern selected by the residents: low individual and family incomes; poor quality of housing; lack of local cultural, sports, recreational, and commercial facilities; and the fear of living in an unsafe environment.

To address incomes, the plan focusses on training linked to employment opportunities, attracting and retaining businesses, and reducing household expenses. Housing targets include renovating designated areas of the neighbourhood, creating mixed housing, and supporting access to homeownership – especially co-operative arrangements.

At the heart of the plan is access to culture, recreation, and sports facilities. Perhaps more than any other Trail Builder, Saint-Michel is developing a dynamic weave of facilities and practices in order to stimulate citizen engagement. It has opened a new community centre and is working with the City of Montréal to ensure the availability of active cultural and recreational programs. In the view of community leaders, a physical centre with no programming actually can create problems rather than produce solutions.

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## Résumé : Un échéancier pour le renouveau de nos communautés

Les initiatives communautaires se sont rapidement multipliées au cours des 10 - 15 dernières années, avec très peu de coordination et même de communication entre elles. Dans *Shared Space : The Communities Agenda* (2007) [Espace partagé : l'échéancier des communautés] Sherri Torjman de l'Institut Caledon explique comment la plupart de ces innovations portent essentiellement sur un ou plusieurs aspects de la résilience communautaire. Elles visent à accroître la capacité des communautés à survivre ou s'adapter, certaines visent l'engagement dans notre monde changeant, et certaines

à saisir les opportunités qui se présentent pour la prospérité.

Certaines initiatives ciblent ces quatre domaines d'activité. Certaines créent de la capacité pour des personnes ou des ménages, et d'autres, en termes d'infrastructure publique. Aucun domaine est plus important que les autres, et il n'y a aucune seule et unique « bonne façon » de les approcher. Toutefois, ensemble, ils sont une prescription pour des communautés en santé et fortes.

Comme Robert Putnam l'a fait dans son livre sur le déclin du capital social, *Bowling Alone* [Jouer aux quilles seul]

(1999), Torjman intègre un manifeste à son analyse. Elle encourage les organisations des secteurs communautaire, public et privé à dépasser leurs notions de territoire. Elles devraient plutôt se dédier au développement d'une commune ou d'un « espace partagé » d'actions qui accroissent la résilience communautaire. Ici, le rôle du gouvernement est crucial. Tout en continuant à investir dans les biens et services publics, il doit permettre (et même imiter) les initiatives qui saisissent la complexité, la diversité et l'émergence graduelle de solutions. ■

The neighbourhood is also home to the international headquarters of Cirque du Soleil. At a local community centre, the company trains young people in circus performance to help keep them off the streets and to find employment in theatre. These forms of engagement have become the basis for broader economic and social renewal in Saint-Michel.

## Creating an Enabling Environment

The wide-ranging interventions that comprise the communities agenda in no way minimize the need for a strong core of public goods and services. *Community-based actions supplement and complement – but do not replace – public policies focussed upon economic and social well-being.*

Governments must act like governments if the communities agenda is to succeed. They must carry out more effectively their traditional roles in strategic investment and in setting the parameters for all manner of household and business transactions within their respective jurisdictions.

*Work in the shared space requires an appropriate context. Governments can act as enablers of the communities agenda by supporting its major functions – how it organizes for complexity & the knowing, doing, & reviewing that comprise this work.*

But the communities agenda also needs another form of support. Work in the shared space requires an appropriate context. Governments (and other funders, as well as the private sector) can act as *enablers* of the communities agenda by supporting its major functions – how it organizes for complexity and the knowing, doing, and reviewing that comprise this work.

### Knowing – Establishing a clear knowledge base

Governments have substantial expertise in the gathering of evidence and development of knowledge. The information they continually collect, store, and analyze is crucial not only for understanding the current context, but for tracking trends and determining whether progress has been made over time.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has created a mechanism to supply relevant data at no charge to local communities. Based on this example, governments and other funders could consider the development of local information systems that the entire community can use and manage. There

could be provision for technical assistance around information technology and data collection. Ideally, this information system would be linked to the tracking of community-wide outcomes – an essential component of work in the shared space.

In addition to data, governments and other funders can support research and the strategic collection of information related to the core resilience clusters. When BCIPI turned its attention to affordable housing in Saint John, for example, they asked the federal Housing Minister to assign a Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation employee to help them develop a strategic plan. This technical assistance has been invaluable to their evidence base and strategic decisions.

### Doing – Creating collaborative relationships

Community governance does not simply emerge on its own. The processes and their conveners need help to sustain their efforts over time. They need opportunities to develop skills and expertise. Leaders and stakeholders need to be guided through the process of thinking strategically about change, drawing connections among problems and proposed interventions, and identifying the possible effects of their actions.

But funds are not generally available for these purposes. Public and private funders tend to require near-immediate, clearly identified, and quantifiable outcomes. It is also difficult for funders to work with “emergence,” or processes that unfold over time. They prefer a clear pathway in which the actions are clearly spelled out and in which fluctuations and deviations from the stated plan are minimized. All these expectations run counter to the time and flexible support that communities require to build their capacity to solve problems.

Patient capital is part of the answer. But governments and other funders can do more than that. They can be part of the doing. In fact, they can start in their own backyards. They can pool resources in support of infrastructure – like community access to information. Government departments and agencies themselves need to collaborate – horizontally across mandates rather than vertically within their own jurisdiction – in order to work effectively on complex files.

One of the most comprehensive examples of “joined-up” work on the part of government is the Integrated Service Strategy. Developed by the Community Services Department of the City of Edmonton, the Strategy is organized around six major themes: citizens first, community building, focused efforts, urban wellness, ribbons of green and blue (its environmental focus), and community places.

Perhaps the Strategy’s most important achievement is its identification of the roles of local government in this strategic vision. Government must ensure that information is accurate, readily available, and publicly accessible. It must put together the right people at the right time in order to mobilize and enhance community efforts. It must create partnerships to maximize its

financial resources and fund community access to arts, culture, recreation, and sport. In the role of a coach, the City must share its experience and expertise to foster community leadership. As a steward, it must see to the preservation and protection of urban parks, open spaces, natural areas, and built assets.

### Reviewing – Monitoring progress against identified outcomes

While governments and other funders recognize the value of learning, they usually express this interest by investing in traditional educational institutions. These investments are necessary but not sufficient. They should support learning within and between communities, so that together we raise the bar of practice.

Comprehensive community initiatives are demanding and complex. Participants are continually challenged to innovate in response to a changing environment. Funders can help support reflective practice among social innovators. A community of practice allows members to assist each other as they struggle to create effective methods to apply to tough problems.

Vibrant Communities has demonstrated the value of a national system of supports. It couples intensive local coaching with a structured learning circle for all 15 participating communities, the Pan-Canadian Learning Community. More recently, a community of practice called the Federal Family-Collaborative Community Initiatives has arisen. Officials from no less than 25 departments and agencies meet regularly to expand their knowledge and skills on various aspects of the communities agenda.

So it goes – a virtuous circle of knowing, doing, and reviewing. The end does not end. It simply becomes the starting point for improved local practice.

### All this to say ...

When all is said and done, the communities agenda is basically about hope and renewal – of self, of place, and of interventions to improve the quality of life. The new approaches to community inventions, through work in the shared space within and between clusters and around policy, require an environment that enables this form of complex work.

But it also needs a culture that embraces continual change rather than absolute certainty. It is a culture in which ongoing adaptation rather than definitive endpoints is the desired goal. It is a culture in which hope for a better future is deeply valued, especially for those who have lived for too long on the margins of community.



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(photo) A public dance at the 2008 Falla, a Carnival-like celebration of art and culture held annually since 2004 in Saint-Michel at La TOHU, a venue and training centre for the circus and visual arts. La TOHU also designs and hosts ecology programs in the nearby St-Michel Environmental Complex. Photocredit: Jérôme Dubé @ [www.jeromedube.com](http://www.jeromedube.com)

