



CASE STUDY | FOUR PHASES OF POVERTY REDUCTION IN SAINT JOHN

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Cities Reducing Poverty has identified that successful poverty reduction efforts progress through four key phases and share similar milestones. This case study details Saint John, New Brunswick's journey through each phase of progress, with the goal of providing other collaboratives with a sense of how the work can unfold, including which challenges may be encountered along the way.

OVERVIEW

Vibrant Communities' Cities Reducing Poverty network began in 2002 with 13 Trail Builder communities. In its first 10 years, multi-sectoral collaborative approaches were tested as viable methods for targeting root causes and reducing poverty. Results from this decade of work yielded poverty reduction impacts for more than 200,000 families.

Now working with a successful Collective Impact model, Vibrant Communities supports cities across Canada and the U.S. to adopt and apply this approach locally. The network is now 70 communities strong representing nearly 300 municipalities.

By monitoring the progress of a growing number of poverty reduction initiatives, four key phases of successful poverty reduction collaboratives have emerged: building the energy, establishing a community-wide common agenda, implementing the plan, and sustainability.

This case study provides an overview of how each of these phases were experienced by Living SJ, the Collective Impact poverty reduction initiative in Saint John, New Brunswick.

KEY LEARNING

About Living SJ

[Living SJ](#) is a multi-sectoral network, launched in 2014, comprised of community leaders from business, three levels of government, the non-profit sector and five low-income neighbourhoods. The network's mandate is to end generational poverty in the Greater Saint John area.

Guided by a collective impact approach, Living SJ's common agenda's four pillars are:

- Education
- Employment
- Health
- Transforming Neighbourhoods

Strategies are developed, implemented, and evaluated under each pillar, with ongoing learning driving further collaborative efforts in the community.

Point 1 – Successful poverty reduction initiatives go through four broad phases: Early development, establishing a common agenda, implementing the plan, and sustainability.

Point 2 – Living SJ progressed through all four phases before reporting significant population-level changes; their process has been evolving for over 20 years and progress has been incremental.

Point 3 –For the sake of the richness and the ownership that comes with collaboration, never do it alone. While there will always be challenges engaging all four sectors (public, private, non-profit, and the community), be persistent and flexible, and do not skip the first two steps, as each is critical.

Point 4 – Success is progressive. It comes from starting small, building and measuring models, celebrating best practices, and scaling what works.

POVERTY IN SAINT JOHN

Saint John, New Brunswick is known as a historic and industrial port city that is transitioning to a diversified economy. It is the 2nd largest Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) in the province with a population of 126,202. The community is known for its caring spirit and long history of collaboration amongst the public, non-profits and private sectors alike to achieve quality of life for all.

What is less well-known in Saint John is that its historical urban core suffers deep poverty while the surrounding suburbia enjoys significant wealth. The average poverty rate for the Saint John CMA is comparable to other cities in Canada at 16.7%, however, its stark contrast between ‘poverty’ and ‘plenty’ makes poverty reduction work important. When broken down by postal code, the data indicates that poverty in Saint John is highly concentrated in five inner-city neighbourhoods with families being most affected.

The number one challenge Saint John is facing is generational poverty, with an average child poverty rate of 70% in its inner-city neighbourhoods. The high concentration of family poverty in specific areas has created a cycle of poverty resulting from divestment, neglect and isolation for these neighbourhoods. The older housing stock, along with significant subsidized housing in these neighbourhoods makes rent affordable for low-income households, but families become entrenched. Investing in the priority neighbourhoods and helping every child and family build the assets they need to journey out of poverty is the focus of Saint John’s poverty reduction work.

STAGE A: EARLY DEVELOPMENT

The earliest phase of development in a successful poverty reduction initiative starts with some interest in the community to tackle poverty in a different way, and the energy of just a few people - holding key positions - who are willing to commit the time and resources to bring the community together and build the momentum to create a common vision.

An influential person: In Saint John, the energy to address poverty was amplified by business leader Bill Gale, a retired executive of the Royal Bank of Canada. Bill had always participated in the community and sat on the Board of various non-profits and charities. In 1997, he took a step back and rather than asking, “are we doing things the right way?”, he asked, “are we doing the right things?”.

Convening influential people: At that time, despite Saint John being in an economic boom and having a good employment rate, poverty rates remained unchanged. Bill, therefore, brought together 40 business

people – the most senior leaders or owners he knew – to talk about what they could do. Through word-of-mouth, their group, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), grew to 100 business people within a month.

Raising awareness: The awareness around poverty and the will to act evolved as these business leaders listened to people with lived experience. Their stories were powerful and shook the business community. They dispelled myths about poor people and identified serious problems that were not being addressed in the right ways. The business community realized that while the community was working hard to lessen the pain of poverty, there was very little focus on ‘reducing’ it. They also realized that they needed to be a part of the solution.

Changing the narrative: The business community committed to being as informed as possible about poverty in order to be as useful as possible. They sought out experts in the community – many of whom were working on related issues, but lacked a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction – and invested in commissioning a poverty study for Saint John. This study described the local profile of poverty and identified potential solutions from around the world. Findings were eye-opening for the entire community and revealed that the majority of people living in poverty were families – single parents and their children living in hidden poverty. These families lived away from the public eye with no easy way out.

Multi-Sector engagement: Discussions between residents, the non-profit sector, the business community and people with lived experience unpacked what ‘poverty’ really meant, what needed to change, and where efforts should be focused. People at the table with lived experience helped them connect previously un-related issues so they could see the interrelations and complex nature of the problem; child poverty could not be addressed without supporting the parents and employment could not be addressed without education. As a result, they shifted their focus to a comprehensive, multi-sector approach focused on breaking the cycle of poverty.

Snowballing momentum: Acting on this new knowledge, the group started a small pilot program that provided support to homeless single mothers to become confident and economically independent parents. They listened and learned from the pilot all along the way. The program, *First Steps*, created housing, alternative schooling and a child care centre; provided access to health and mental health supports; and brought various service providers and volunteers into the fold to help the women build the assets they needed to break the cycle of poverty. This successful model clarified the kinds of comprehensive supports needed by low-income families, defined the community’s approach in helping parents in the five neighbourhoods, and then evolved to help children achieve education success from cradle to career.

At the same time, Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) was being established to build a comprehensive strategy to break the cycle of poverty in the city. Core to this work was building resident leadership and bringing community partners from all sectors to the table. As part of their engagement strategy and research on housing, they hired low-income leaders from a neighbourhood to interview residents on what changes they felt were needed. This was transformational as leaders from all sectors listened – including the province – and some recommendations were implemented right away. This created even more interest.

Resourcing: In 2002, Vibrant Communities Canada was just getting off the ground with the opportunity for Saint John to become one of the first Trail Builders. Being part of this cohort was groundbreaking to be able to learn from others about the multi-sectoral community approach. The national network brought credibility, expertise, and focus to the local work, along with financial resources to innovate and figure out what needed to happen.

Lessons during Stage A:

- Sector and organizational *leaders* must be at the initial table. They drive the ownership.
- Focusing on individual pieces of poverty, rather than the whole, is not enough to solve poverty. Zeroing-in on *breaking the cycle of poverty* helped take the work of organizations to another level of strategic actions and impacts.
- The mindframe the business community brings is essential – they came to *learn* and were willing to take bold actions to achieve better results.
- Place no blame. All sectors are part of the problem and it takes all sectors to learn from one another and build good solutions.
- People who have the lived experience of poverty are essential experts at the poverty reduction table and must be fully supported in their leadership role.

Having multiple people and organizations reporting back to the community was important to prevent just a small organization or a few staff solely speaking to the progress.

STAGE B: ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY-WIDE COMMON AGENDA

The second significant phase of development for successful poverty reduction initiatives is establishing a community-wide common agenda. During this phase, the momentum to act on poverty moves beyond the initial group or roundtable and engages the entire community – including all four sectors – in establishing a common goal and complementary ways of working.

Adopting Collective Impact: VCSJ was naturally using a collaborative, multi-sector approach to reducing poverty with a common agenda and had ten years of experience behind them before they were introduced to the Collective Impact model. VCSJ leaders from United Way, the Business Community, University of New Brunswick in Saint John, the Human Development Council, The Community Foundation, City of Saint John and local leaders from senior governments were already heavily invested in the work. After reading the [Stanford Social Innovation Review article on Collective Impact](#), they felt the model could be a good catalyst to gain a higher level of influence for the poverty reduction work and guide their actions more strategically for greater impact.

All of the pre-conditions of Collective Impact were not in place before they began, but they strengthened their approach as they went. What helped immensely, was that they were not starting from scratch. They already had poverty reduction initiatives on the go, had reduced the overall poverty rate (though the child poverty rate remained stubbornly high), and convened a trusted multi-sectoral leadership team. When the decision was made to shift to a Collective Impact approach, there was strong community support to get involved in doing something *better*.

Establishing a Leadership Team: Beginning in 2013, a core group of VCSJ leaders became the Collective Impact Transition Team. They engaged a higher-level of leadership from key organizations and involved funders from the beginning. Bringing them to the table was not hard because of all of the work that had happened in the first stage; everyone was eager to take Saint John's work to the next level. With new energy sparked by the Collective Impact model, leaders from all sectors signed on to co-lead a renewed

poverty reduction strategy. The level of their commitment sent a signal to the rest of the community and to governments that this would be an important strategy. VCSJ was then re-branded – Living SJ.

The senior staff from the organizations that formed the Living SJ Leadership team (backbone). They invested significant time researching and engaging the broader community in describing the key issues and solutions, and streamlining the vast amounts of information that was collected into a short list of priorities that would achieve the greatest impact.

The planning team knew one another, had collaborated in VCSJ's work and were comfortable and open to sharing and overcoming challenges. All were strong leaders with skills in community planning, development and evaluation, and project management. They supported one another and learned together. They committed to keep things moving at a brisk pace, had a long history of trust, and enough influence to bring the right people to the table to help build the new strategy.

They held many meetings with multiple organizations and sometimes one-on-one to get partners thinking about their role in poverty reduction. Together, they built more commitment and leadership from community members bit-by-bit.

Identifying priorities: A big challenge during this phase was establishing priorities. The community consultations were robust, and people were pleased they had been listened to, but how could they narrow hundreds of recommended priorities down to just a few?

[Background information](#) was developed on 12 issue areas. They hosted several discussion groups on each issue area to identify and weigh against each other the critical needs, priorities and potential measures. They slimmed the recommended priorities down to 60, then 20, then 10 and finally to the 4. This process was helpful to separate the overriding issues from issues that are a component of a bigger factor, highlighted more statistics that they needed to make decisions, and reduced redundancies. Their main questions guiding this phase were:

What desired results are most achievable in five years?

What are most measurable?

Where is the momentum already?

What will achieve the greatest impact?

Once they had identified Education, Employment, Health and Neighbourhoods as their four “pillars”, they went back to the community for feedback and gained consensus that they had gotten it right.

Governance structure: With 4 pillars for action ready to-go, they established a governance structure including implementation teams to carry out the work. This included a Collective Impact team for each of the priority areas and a Leadership Team comprised of representatives from each of the Collective Impact Teams, along with influential leaders from all sectors. The Collective Impact teams then looked at who was missing and engaged people they had relationships within each sector. [The Strategy](#) was launched to the community by the Living SJ Co-Chairs and the entire team in December 2014.

3 Pre-Conditions of Collective Impact

1. Influential champions that can bring together cross-sector leaders
2. Adequate resources (financial, human capital) to support the planning process and backbone infrastructure
3. A sense of urgency to address the issue in new and different ways

Lessons during Stage B:

- Do not wait until you have all your T's crossed and I's dotted to get started, or you will never get anywhere!
- Work hard to meet all of the conditions of Collective Impact. It is the 'process' that drives effective actions to achieve impact.
- Recognize that Collective Impact progress is slow but achieves better lasting results. It strengthens the community, organizations, and public policy and practices.
- Persistence is key. You need influencers at the table from all sectors – business people, deputy ministers, single mothers, etc. – but you are not their top priority. Keep going back to them and be flexible. Things will not happen your way just because they make sense to you.
- Keep things simple and doable. You can be overwhelmed by data and ideas at this stage.



STAGE C: IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

The third phase of a successful poverty reduction effort is moving from planning to implementation. At this phase, the work shifts from planning to action, people take on new roles with the collaborative, and organizations work differently to achieve the community priorities.

Keep momentum: Living SJ moved at a brisk pace so as to keep riding the wave of momentum generated during the previous phase and to respond to expectations of a renewed strategy. With the overall goal of ending generational poverty for families and children living in five priority neighbourhoods, the Collective Impact teams were challenged to be bold and collectively reinvest human and financial resources. Five-year targets and strategies were set for each of the pillars.

The Collective Impact Teams were encouraged to take ownership; recruit members; and develop their own Theory of Change, key strategies, actions and evaluation measures. The teams sought out more community input and research, organized the work, established priorities, and experienced different challenges. The Collective Impact approach revealed that while every partner was committed to 'change', making it happen could be difficult. As a result, some teams moved forward more quickly than others.

Backbone support: Living SJ staff and Leadership Team provided overall guidance, coordination, communication and evaluation. However, it became clear that each of the Collective Impact Teams also required backbone support. BCAPI stepped up as the backbone for the Education Team, while Living SJ staff took on the backbone support for the other three teams until one of their organizations could take on the role.

Start small. Learn. Scale: Many areas of work moved forward all at once. Local funders, such as United Way, incorporated the Living SJ strategy to guide their granting process; neighbourhood organizations worked together with one voice; and meetings took place with senior levels of government to discuss actions, learnings, and changes needed.

After a year of work, an external evaluator was hired to take stock of Living SJ's progress and provide recommendations on areas for improvement. The report revealed that while a solid foundation for change had been created, the implementation was still just emerging and required substantial attention to: mutually reinforcing activities across the teams, integration of the neighbourhood voice, and evaluating for strategic learning purposes.

The teams established a culture of evaluation, driven by the Leadership Team, which had a strong inclination to see that everything they do is based in evidence. They hired an evaluation consultant to support the work. This person supports all teams to prioritize outcomes and indicators and works with partners to gather and present data. Their evaluation framework monitors impact at three levels: programmatic, targeted population, and community-wide. Anything being done is worth evaluating and determining whether it is working and worth it.

At times it felt like they were taking two steps forward and one step back, but Living SJ kept the momentum growing. They learned to start small with new models, evaluate their impact, communicate success, and scale up what works.

Lessons during Stage C

- A paid backbone staff (even part-time) for each priority team is helpful to provide the level of detail and coordination required. The backbone support should ideally come from players with substantial knowledge in the specific area, skills and time.
- Be flexible with the structure and nature of the priority teams to allow the work to be iterative.
- Different communication vehicles help build ownership within the priority areas - reporting to the Leadership Team, meetings with senior government, public presentations and regular updates to the network.
- Senior governments hold the bulk of resources for poverty reduction work, have hierarchies and are risk-averse, which makes it very challenging for community and senior governments to work hand-in-hand to bring needed changes forward.
- Strike a balance. Priority teams cannot force major improvements – they have to go where the energy is and take the time to develop a culture of change. At the same time, it is important that they take action and produce results to maintain momentum.

STAGE D: SUSTAINABILITY

The final stage of a successful poverty reduction effort is ensuring the initiative is sustainable enough to meet its long-term goals and is contributing to sustainable change. This requires continuing momentum; financial and leadership commitments; continually learning, improving and scaling efforts; and working towards policy and systems change.

Scaling up, out and deep: There are signals that Saint John's local work is influencing provincial policy and practice. In 2017, Living SJ became the recipient of a [\\$10M Social Innovation Fund](#), now stewarding a large investment in local poverty reduction initiatives, with the goal of testing and determining best practices. Their goal is to co-create new policies, services and programs with the government that would support children and families across the province – beyond residents of Saint John.

Systems changes are also taking place at a local scale. For instance, a BAPI business leader and the local School District led a pilot project in one inner-city school. They hired an additional three staff for the school and added 100 volunteers to enrich the children's learning opportunities. Seeing success in the first school, the School District, BAPI and Living SJ are now replicating it in seven priority schools and are working with the New Brunswick government to shift provincial education policy from a traditional cookie cutter approach, to a differential funding model that funds each school based on the learning needs of the students. The goal is to ensure equitable opportunity for every child to succeed.

Another sign of sustainable change is the shift the City of Saint John has made in its urban planning, making it a priority to revitalize the inner city neighbourhoods as a key growth strategy. Neighbourhood planning has engaged the entire community and sparked new development activity, diverse housing options, neighbourhood hubs for community programs, and services and plans for new schools. Vibrant mixed-income neighbourhoods in the inner-city are in the making.

Sustaining momentum: Remaining focused and responsive is what sustains the work of Living SJ. This has included restructuring the Collective Impacts Teams, the addition of a multi-sectoral executive, broadening the Leadership Team, and expanding the inclusion of residents. As well, the executive committee has created a space for difficult discussions, and at Collective Impact Team meetings, updates are reflected against targets and statistics, rather than just providing a sense of how things are going.

Members of Living SJ and community members know that what they are doing is important and successful because of the impact data they monitor and regularly share back. In readying for their spring annual report, they shared some of their early results:

- The education achievement gap is closing for the children who live in the five inner city neighbourhoods, thanks to significant investments in the children, from cradle to career. Over 20 years, the high school graduation rate for the children in these neighbourhoods has increased from less than 50% to 75%. Living SJ's goal is 90%. Some of the education strategies are highlighted in this [infographic](#).
- The Saint John Learning Exchange is in the midst of conducting an extensive five-year Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis, which to date is indicating there has been more than a \$7.50 social and economic return on every \$1 invested in WorkLinks. Worklinks is a best-practice program that prepares adults, who lack education and/or work experience, for sustained employment at a living wage. The Government of New Brunswick is paying attention to the success of this model and how it can be replicated.

Lessons during Stage D

- The community speaking with one voice to government (or any major funder/decision maker) is more likely to succeed because of the many competing asks. But more importantly, because of the confidence that a collaborative community instills.
- Major changes cannot be forced. They take time, persistence and strategic partnerships.
- As communities, we need to accept and be humbled by the fact that we do not know everything there is to know about poverty. We all need to keep learning.

LEARN MORE

- [Living SJ Website](#)
- [Living SJ's Social Renewal Strategy](#)
- [Living SJ infographic 2016](#)
- [Living SJ 'Education' infographic 2018](#)
- [Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative](#)
- [Living SJ Spring report](#)
- [From Within: A City Changes its story of poverty](#)
- [Poverty 101: Looking for Answers](#)

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