

World Forum on Democracy
Warsaw, Poland - 25-27 June 2000

FEDERALISM AND DEMOCRACY

**The Vancouver Agreement
Multi-level Governance and Community Partnerships
The Challenge**

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British Columbia, Canada
June 2000

INTRODUCTION:

In March 2000, the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia and the City of Vancouver signed the five-year “Vancouver Agreement”. The Agreement lays out a framework and principles for the three governments to work together, within their jurisdictions and mandates, and with communities in Vancouver to develop and implement a coordinated strategy to promote and support sustainable economic, social and community development. Initially, the geographic area covered by the Agreement is the “downtown eastside” (DTES) of Vancouver.

This case study will explore the challenges experienced by the three governments in reaching the Agreement as well as note the challenges in engaging the community in the process. In a review of literature, there appears to be no consensus upon a definition of civil society. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the term “community” which includes the charitable and non-profit sectors (in Canada, these sectors are referred to as the “voluntary” sector). As well, within the community there are a number of interests that need to be addressed – aboriginal people (indigenous), residents and business.

CANADIAN FEDERALISM:

Canada is a constitutional monarchy comprised of a federation of ten provinces and three territories. The parliamentary system of government is based on the British model. The Constitution Act, 1867, provides the constitutional framework for the federal system by defining broad areas of federal and provincial responsibility. Such national and international matters as defence, immigration, trade and commerce, criminal law and banking are under federal authority. Education, health and natural resources are among the provinces’ responsibilities.

Municipal legislation enacted in each province provides a legal framework and foundation for the establishment and continuation of local governments to represent the interests and

respond to the needs of their communities. Local governments exercise delegated responsibility on behalf of the provinces for many areas including land zoning, local taxes, policing, public works, garbage removal and street cleaning.

What is interesting in part about the division of powers is that one would expect that it would contribute to the clarity in roles and responsibilities. In fact, the divisions add complexity in handling the problems associated with the DTES in Vancouver. The divisions create silos or boundaries of jurisdiction that have gaps among them and gray areas within them, as the law, policies and programs are not always well coordinated and integrated. For example, the federal government is responsible for criminal law, the provincial government for the administration of justice and the local government for policing. The opportunity to identify how current approaches foster continuing problems is complicated by the multiplicity of jurisdictional interests and by the broader impact of any variation from established national policy.

BRITISH COLUMBIA:

British Columbia with its population of 4 million people is the westernmost of Canada's 10 provinces. It is Canada's gateway to the Asia-Pacific and is economically and geographically part of the northwest region of North America. British Columbians have a high standard of living from a competitive, export-driven economy. Forestry and mining are still the leading earners of export income, but most new jobs in the export sector are being created in knowledge-intensive secondary manufacturing and services.

Vancouver, British Columbia

Vancouver is the largest city in the Province of British Columbia and the third largest in Canada. It is situated in the southwestern corner of Canada approximately 40 kilometers north of the Washington State, USA border. It is surrounded by water on three sides. Vancouver's strategic location has helped it to take a leading position in trade and commerce in Canada. It is equidistant by air from London and Tokyo. It has a population of approximately 1.9 million people with a diverse population of people with English, Asian, Southeast Asian, European ancestry and aboriginal people.

Vancouver Downtown Eastside (DTES)

The DTES is the historical heart of Vancouver and contains within its boundaries 17 of Vancouver's heritage sites. It is located beside Vancouver's central business and tourist district. It has a well-developed tradition and network of support for low income and less advantaged people. However, in recent years the DTES has struggled with many of the complex challenges facing other urban neighbourhoods in big cities. In fact, it is the poorest urban area in Canada.

It has a population of about 17,000 residents in a geographic area of 30 square blocks. The typical resident is a middle aged, English-speaking male. The male-female ratio is 63 percent to 37 percent. Sixty-eight percent of the residents are low-income, compared to 31 percent for the rest of the city. There is an open-air drug scene with crack-cocaine and heroin being the drugs of choice. In 1998, the DTES accounted for 74 percent of all drug

arrests in the city and a significant number of overdose deaths. Combined with an active sex-trade market, the open-air drug scene is a permanent source for anxiety and nuisance among citizens and a permanent threat for tourists. It is like a magnet that draws transitory people into the area.

The DTES is also home to 18 percent of the city's mentally challenged. There are between 1,800 and 3,000 HIV positive people of whom 85-90 percent are not receiving treatment. Hepatitis A infection is more than four times the national average. Over 90 percent of the injection drug users are thought to be infected with Hepatitis C.

Once a vibrant economic area, legitimate businesses are leaving. In 1998, 27 percent of the stores along one major thoroughfare in this area were vacant. More and more storefronts are boarded up, providing an environment conducive to drug use and trafficking as well as other criminal activities. Merchants are frustrated with the apparent inability of governments to resolve their crime and safety concerns.

Program Services and Delivery in the DTES

It is estimated that about one million dollars a day is spent in services between the three governments in this area to address health, safety, crime, social services and housing needs. In spite of this, the citizens' needs are not being met; there is abject poverty in the midst of plenty. A different approach is required.

A few hundred primarily government funded community organizations as well as volunteers and workers from all three levels of government deliver programs or provide services in the DTES. There are alcohol and substance abuse services, employment services, counseling services, immigrant and refugee services, family services, childcare services, welfare services as well as advocacy and economic development services. The community organizations each have their own staff, boards of directors and administrative overheads. This poses a dilemma for the three governments – who do governments work with? Who represents the community? If over 100 organizations alone provide alcohol and substance abuse program services are there competing vested interests in maintaining the status quo?

In addition, the governments themselves operate three separate bureaucracies with over 25 departments dealing with programs in the DTES. Each one has different corporate cultures, philosophies and funding guidelines. In most cases, if the different levels of government work together, they do so as a result of the motivation of individual public servants.

Approach: Laying the Foundation

May - November, 1999

In Spring, 1999, political direction was given to officials to prepare a draft agreement that would demonstrate the commitment of the three governments to work together, within their jurisdictions and mandates. By mid-July 1999, the governments signed this draft version of what was called the "Vancouver Agreement" (Agreement). The Agreement outlined the three governments' commitment in three areas: Community Health and

Safety, Economic and Social Development and Community Capacity Building. There was no input from the community at this stage.

Public meetings and community representative meetings were held in the Fall, 1999 to solicit input on the draft Agreement. Officials from the three governments were present at all meetings.

Throughout the review, people emphasized that the DTES is a unique neighbourhood and that there is a strong desire in creating a healthy and viable community. However, there was a high level of frustration that they were not getting action from the various levels of government but rather more consultation. They also felt that this Agreement was more about coordinating government efforts than addressing community concerns. Underlining the criticism from community organizations was concern that their current funding could be jeopardized or that the governments may question the viability of sustaining the multiplicity of organizations providing services or that new funding would be absorbed into administering the Agreement.

The three governments did not commit new funding for the Agreement. The expectation was that by working together the governments could maximize resources in existing areas. For the most part, however, the community was unanimous in saying that without additional funding, the problems could not be fixed.

There were significant disagreements about the orientation that should be given to economic and social development. Some community members believed that the focus should be on improving the standard of living for existing low-income residents so they can participate in the labour force. They recommended welfare payments, social housing and job training be increased so residents can afford better housing and nutrition and be prepared to fill emerging employment opportunities. Additional increases in program funding were suggested for single parents, aboriginal people and individuals with alcohol and substance abuse addictions.

Others argued that the concentration of low-income housing and services attracted people from throughout the province that led to the deteriorating conditions on the street. They believed that governments should refocus the resources to other parts of the city. They also called for zero tolerance of crime and drugs, an emphasis on public investments, and incentives to conserve the area's heritage resources. These measures were seen as necessary to create a long-term vision for a stronger economic base to create a more mixed-income community.

November, 1999 – March, 2000

After the consultation, it was necessary for the three governments to analyze their current programming and funding in each of the components, identify programming gaps, assess the requests of the community based upon previous consultations and determine how the next round of discussions would take place.

Six inter-governmental sub-committees were established: Primary Health Care; Comprehensive Substance Misuse Strategy; Safety and Justice; Housing; Training, Skills

Development and Employment; and, Social and Economic Development. The purposes of the subcommittees were to undertake the work noted above. In addition, each government had its own separate committees undertaking similar work before it met for inter-governmental discussions.

Challenges Facing the Three Governments:

The horizontal integration of programs and funding:

- The need to engage in cross-government and cross-department strategies.
- The need to examine the programming and funding responsibilities both cross-government and cross-department.
- The need to address the constitutional division of powers in such a way that meets citizens' needs.
- The need for transparency in the process to gain trust with the public servants that administer programs or provide funding for contracted services.

March – July, 2000

During this period, a schedule of activities, programs and initiatives are to be developed and agreed upon by the community and the three governments. It is expected that a hybrid of program delivery and partnerships will occur through local health boards, non-profit agencies, local business, economic development agencies as well as direct government delivery.

During the consultations in the Fall, 1999, many questions were raised regarding reaching agreement on defining the schedule of activities, programs and initiatives. Some suggested that direct involvement by citizens in the decision-making process was key. Some organizations suggested that they be at the table as legitimate groups in the community that represented a larger constituency. The notion that the community should be the fourth partner under the Agreement was raised in reaction to the perception that in the Agreement there is little acknowledgement of community as a participant in decisions affecting their neighbourhood. As well, organizations representing aboriginal people insisted that their concerns should be dealt with on a government-to-government basis.

Challenges Facing the Three Governments:

The governance model:

- The confidence that governments have had input from citizens representative of residents in the community.
- The ability to balance the competing interests and philosophies of the charitable, non-profit and business sectors. As well, the multiplicity of interests needs to be taken into consideration.
- The ability to form partnerships so that all sectors of society have responsibility in addressing the complex social and economic problems in the DTES.

At the conference, I will provide an update of the outcome of this stage.

CONCLUSION:

The Vancouver Agreement is an initiative to coordinate and target the resources of multiple jurisdictions with multiple programs and services in conjunction with multiple community organizations. It demonstrates the need for governments to have an understanding of and a trust level with each other in order to be able to engage in partnerships with the community. In this approach, governments could be enablers for supporting sustainable communities. Time will only tell if this is successful.

Issues for Discussion:

- Is there enough flexibility in multi-level governance for partnerships to flourish? How are partnerships defined? How could issues of policy development, accountability and resource distribution be handled? Would this diminish/change the role of the state as exercised by the three governments?
- Who speaks for citizens who are poor and don't speak for themselves? How do governments ensure that residents are engaged in defining and identifying initiatives required for building a sustainable community?
- Is the Vancouver Agreement a suitable model for multi-level governance and community partnerships to be more socially responsible while meeting fiduciary responsibilities and obligations? Or, is it only as viable as those committed to making it work?

Notes:

1. The Vancouver Agreement and Community Review, November 1999
<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/dtehome.htm>
2. Statistical information on British Columbia, City of Vancouver and Downtown Eastside gleaned from the website noted above as well as BC Vital Statistics, Province of British Columbia.

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