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THE CANADIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S HOMELESSNESS PARTNERING STRATEGY

A CASE STUDY

Key Topics Discussed:

LEVERAGING THE COLLECTIVE POWER AND CO-OPERATION

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> Homelessness is not just a problem of failed public policies and programs: it is also a bone-crushing, right-to-the-core experience of loss of all of those things that we value and believe to be so near and dear to us.[3]

INTRODUCTION

This is the case of the federal government of Canada's role in addressing homelessness. The story offers an overview of how one level of government leveraged limited resources to help align and bind together the considerable and varied efforts of three levels of government, the not-for-profit sector and individuals to tackle a growing and complex public problem.

By any definition, homelessness is a wicked problem. The effort to solve one aspect may reveal or create other problems: poverty, housing, health, mental health and security of communities. The very term homelessness, itself a relatively new public policy designation, actually masks the complexity of the problem.

Solutions to homelessness are similarly contentious. With multiple causal inputs, there are also multiple interventions that can make a difference. Yet intervention choices are owned by various players, differ across communities and often demand collective action that needs intense co-ordination and common purpose. The instruments of public policy are neither public nor private but both: both governmental and voluntary sector, both collective and individual.

This case explores how states can address complex issues by applying power *through* others (via funding) and *with* others (through processes of collective governance). Indeed, in this case, the federal government's efforts involved very little direct action but a great deal of capacity building for local action. For the traditional notion of government power and authority—one that stresses direct government intervention or a single programmatic solution applied across the country—this is a challenging new approach.

The story is not all roses, however. Where the distributed governance model described here did make a difference in decision making and innovation, it failed to build a similarly shared model of accounting for money invested. Old accountability measures, designed for a different command-and-control model, became the Achilles' heel of an otherwise exciting collaborative model.

HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

Surprisingly, the very concept of homelessness is a recent one. As David Hulchanski of the University of Toronto put it:

> By the early 1980s we needed a new term for a widespread mass phenomenon, a new social problem found in many wealthy, developed nations. The response was to add yet another suffix to further qualify the word homeless, to give us that odd job word, homelessness. Adding the suffix –ness makes the simple and clear word homeless into an abstract concept. As such, it allows users, readers, and listeners to imagine whatever they want. It tosses all sorts of problems into one handy term. We thus have the ongoing problem of defining what homelessness is and isn't. There is no single correct definition, given the different mix of problems that goes into the hodgepodge of issues, and depending on who is using the term.[4]

That "hodgepodge" shows up in the debate on the definition of what it means to be homeless and in the steps deemed necessary to address it. Researchers rightly refer to homelessness as "an odd job word, pressed into service to impose order on a hodgepodge of social dislocation, extreme poverty, seasonal or itinerant work, and unconventional ways of life."[5] In 2008, the Library of Parliament published a paper titled *Defining and Enumerating Homelessness in Canada*. In it, homelessness was described along a continuum of vulnerability to losing shelter, regardless of cause:

> Homelessness is a broad term that can encompass a range of housing conditions. These can be understood on a continuum of types of shelter:

- At one end, absolute homelessness is a narrow concept that includes only those living on the street or in emergency shelters.
- Hidden or concealed homelessness is in the middle of the continuum. These include people without a place of their own who live in a car, with family or friends, or in a long-term institution.
- At the other end of the continuum, relative homelessness is a broad category that includes those who are housed but who reside in substandard shelter and/or who may be at risk of losing their homes.

Another way of understanding these categories is as levels of a pyramid, where absolute homelessness is only the "tip of the iceberg."[6] Some organizations propose that for every homeless person visible on the street, there are four whose homelessness is hidden.[7]

There are, however, no accurate national statistics in Canada to help us know the full scope of the problem. The lack of reliable data may limit the country's ability to address homelessness and has been a focus for international criticism. During a visit to Canada in October 2007, then UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, reported that he "was disappointed that the government could not provide reliable statistics on the number of homeless."[8]

FACTORS SHAPING HOMELESSNESS

There is some agreement on the range of factors that shape homelessness in Canada. The most obvious are the lack of adequate affordable housing and poverty: yet other forces are also at work. The gradual deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities in the later part of the 20th century, for instance, and the concomitant failure to grow community-based mental health capacity certainly had an impact. Criminal activity is another factor. As individuals move through the correctional systems and return to the street, they often face homelessness as one barrier among others that prevents their reintegration into society.

Still another contributing element is ethnicity. In Canada, homelessness strikes First Nation people disproportionately. Homelessness for them has two faces: inadequate or non-existent housing on First Nation reserves and urban homelessness. Fully 25 percent of Toronto's homeless population is of Aboriginal descent, compared to the two percent of Aboriginal people who form the ethnic makeup of Toronto.[9] These numbers are even more dramatic in the western part of the country where First Nations urban populations are larger: in a single one-day count of the homeless in Edmonton, 38 percent were identified as of First Nation origin.[10]

RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS

Just as the underlying factors are diverse, so too have been the types of response at individual, community, municipal, provincial and federal levels, and the expectations of each level for "success." As one interviewed official noted, What is the problem being solved? Is it placement in housing? And, if so, for how long? And at what level of economic, personal and social self-sustainability? From the municipal perspective, homelessness may mean getting people off the streets. From the social order perspective, it may mean the effective reduction of drug use and trafficking. From the provincial perspective, it may be the reduced reliance on social welfare. From the federal perspective, it may mean less reliance on social assistance or greater justice for minority groups.

In any case, the capacity of the federal government to act on its own is limited, as many of the instruments of policy and delivery are the responsibility of provincial and municipal governments. For instance, social welfare policy, while funded in part through federal transfers, is the shared responsibility of the provinces and municipalities. Public safety, while driven by the federal responsibility for criminal justice, is in fact a direct delivery responsibility of the provinces and municipalities. The reality is that the vast majority of first responder-type activities associated with homelessness (emergency shelters, social housing, and food, medical and drug addiction services) are provided locally, often through voluntary and not-for-profit agencies. The federal reach is constricted by jurisdiction and capacity to intervene

directly.

SHIFTING POLICY LANDSCAPE AND IMPACTS

Responsibility for homelessness policy has shifted among the various levels of government over the years. In fact, the shift of the federal government away from a direct role in social housing in the 1980s and early 1990s may well be key to understanding how a new role for the federal government was able to address an emerging crisis in the late 1990s.

Historically, the federal government provided direct support for adequate housing and supports for low-income Canadians. However, beginning in the 1980s, global and domestic changes in the economy led to a push for smaller government, lower taxes and spending cuts. The government responded through gradual spending reductions on social programs, including affordable and social housing in the 1980s, the termination of spending on new social housing in 1993 and the almost complete transfer of responsibility for social housing to the provinces in 1996.[11]

These changes in social and housing policies had a profound impact on low-income Canadians. Once considered a minor problem afflicting a small number of transient single men, homelessness began affecting a much broader spectrum of individuals and families in the early 1980s. By the late 1990s, it had become a matter of public and media concern.[12] Seen as a problem beyond their capacity and resources to resolve, the mayors of Canada's big cities began pushing for direct funding from the federal government rather than through the provinces as intermediaries.[13] From the federal perspective, this was an opportunity to establish relationships with big cities at a time when big-city issues were on the rise. By the summer of 1999, the federal government felt pressured to act. In developing a response, a new role emerged for the federal government that moved away from direct funding to *collaborative* governance and co-funding with partners at multiple levels.

THE HOMELESSNESS PARTNERING STRATEGY

In December 1999, the federal government announced the precursor to the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS): the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), a three-year, C$753 million demonstration initiative designed to respond to the perceived emergency situation in major cities. Although most funding went to enhance existing federal programs, it also included the new C$305 million "Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative" (SCPI) which provided flexible funding to 61 communities to plan and implement local strategies to prevent and reduce homelessness.[14] In 2003, the NHI was extended for an additional three years before being replaced in 2007 by the HPS. The HPS (as was the NHI) is funded and administered by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

The HPS builds on the existing community-based model established through the NHI to develop deeper partnerships and more permanent and longer-term solutions to help individuals out of homelessness. The strategy targets the development of transitional and supporting housing, and supporting programs, such as health and treatment programs and skills training. The HPS has seven funding streams: Designated Communities, Outreach Communities, Aboriginal Communities, Federal Horizontal Pilot Projects, Homelessness Knowledge Development, the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and the Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative (SFRPHI).

The HPS promotes the development of community plans that are required for designated communities (the 61, mostly urban communities, with significant problems with homelessness), but optional for outreach (small cities and rural areas) and Aboriginal communities. In general, the HPS is delivered using two financial administration models: a Community Entity model, whereby a Community Advisory Board (composed of homelessness stakeholders in the community) recommends projects to the community entity (normally an incorporated organization), which makes the decisions regarding project proposals (HRSDC does not make decisions: it is responsible only for managing the contribution agreement). The second method, a Shared Delivery model, involves the same Community Advisory Board in recom-

mending proposals to HRSDC, and both Service Canada and the community then work in a joint selection and decision-making process.

These models have given focus to the HPS work as a community integrator rather than a direct service provider. As Margaret Eberle, a housing policy consultant, said in testimony before a House of Commons subcommittee, "One of the things that SCPI or the Homelessness Partnering Strategy has done is to bring players to the table that were not involved before. If you look at some of the homelessness tables around the country, foundations and private sector people are involved. Local governments are definitely on board."[15]

Beyond the community-based initiatives taking place at the regional level, the HPS also includes the Federal Horizontal Pilot Projects (HPP) component. The HPP explores harmonization with programs in other federal departments and agencies, as well as with other programs delivered by HRSDC to ensure that federal ministries are working together to be part of the solution. HRSDC therefore funds a number of pilot projects to stimulate other parts of the federal government to act on homelessness or develop their own capacities through experimentation (see Box 1).

- **PRE-DISCHARGE SUPPORT FOR FEDERAL OFFENDERS**: Provided identification documents to offenders before release to reduce the risk of homelessness. Location: Kingston, Ontario. Partners: Correctional Service of Canada and Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians (OFI).
- **EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT FOR HOMELESS YOUTH**: Provided skills development to marginalized street youth to help them establish employment and long-term housing. Location: St. John's, Newfoundland. Partner: HRSDC Employment Programs.
- **NUTRITIONAL HEALTH**: Provided a life skills program focused on nutrition to improve capacity of Aboriginal women living in a family shelter to become self-sufficient. Location: Brantford, Ontario. Partner: Status of Women Canada.
- **TENDING THE FIRE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM**: Provided transitional housing, counselling and life skills training to encourage better outcomes for homeless Aboriginal men. Location: Regina, Saskatchewan. Partners: Public Safety Canada, Canadian Heritage and OFI.
- **INTEGRATED EMPLOYABILITY AND TRANSITIONAL HOUSING**: Provided transitional housing with life skills training for people involved with the criminal justice system. Location: Ottawa. Partners: Justice Canada and Health Canada.

BOX 1: Examples of Horizontal Pilot Projects

Through HPS program elements, a growing sense of trust among players has developed. Members see the day-to-day interactions through the initiative in a positive light *because* it is collaborative. The strength of that collaborative model has carried the program, but tensions have existed. Throughout the program, the federal government insisted on fairly onerous reporting that did not always match community organizations' understanding of the desired outcomes. Moreover, the reporting information collected was little used and does not seem to have played a significant role in federal decision making for the 2009 renewal process. Simplified reporting requirements put in place for the 2011 review period were expected to help somewhat in reducing the burden.

Other tensions had to do with the continual cycle of funding justification. The renewal processes were often at the last minute, requiring a scramble to renew contractual funding arrangements quickly to ensure continuity. With the renewal processes linked to policy reviews, evaluations and budget cycles, various players entered the picture, asking for information, clarification and answers. "Ten years is not temporary any more. It wears you down. Do I have to go to defend this again?" was one observation of a long-term program official.

A further cause of friction was staff turnover. While it is

clear that trust and a deep knowledge of the local scene are crucial to the success of collaborative partnerships, the federal government was plagued by staff turnover, most notably in its regional offices. Staff unfamiliar with the local culture and not adequately embedded in the local system turned into visiting bureaucrats. (By way of contrast, the national office provided some consistency: a number of senior officials within the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat in Ottawa have been involved with the program for many years).

Today, however, the future of the program looks strong. Although the HPS is not part of the base funding of its home ministry, it has been given rolling approvals: first, a two-year, then a five-year commitment with requirements for Cabinet approval for the last three-year segment. Remarkably, the HPS and its predecessor, the NHI, have been extended over the life of two governments of different political parties and have enjoyed considerable grassroots support (indeed, the federal government does not even provide the majority of funds). The lessons of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, both in addressing homelessness and thinking about the future of governance, are worthy of close examination.

PRACTICAL LEARNINGS

A recent Canadian Senate Report on poverty singled out the NHI and HPS as a success story:

> The Government of Canada's National Homelessness Initiative and Homelessness Partnering Strategy have been widely praised and held up as a model for how the federal government can work with all stakeholders to tackle a problem in its local peculiarities. Most witnesses who addressed either homelessness in particular or approaches to local issues more generally flagged these programs as examples to be sustained and replicated in other areas.[16]

What made the HPS work? Why is it considered a success worthy of replication? Here are some of those factors of strength and weakness, both in terms of practical steps in the design of the program and the larger New Synthesis issues they raise.

TRUST-BUILDING

The various initiatives that made the strategy work (such as the Community Advisory Boards) needed time and sustained support to be effective. Keeping the relationship going takes more than sound formal governance agreements: it demands that relationships of trust and common purpose be forged with people over time.

One risk to that trust in such multi-layered and cross-agency enterprises is the impact of change. Government directions and personnel turn over, and new relationships must be forged. For changes in personnel:

> Governments must pay more attention to their internal succession planning and knowledge transfer with respect to comprehensive community initiatives. The success of this work is rooted in personal relationships that are built by working collaboratively. Consequently, when public servants are transferred, the remaining partners feel a sense of loss. It is easier for new relationships to form with the incoming public servants if they are personally introduced to the partners by their predecessor and have been well briefed on the initiative. While the same principles hold true for other partners, staff turnover is much lower.[17]

A similar rule holds true for changes in government. The Secretariat has been able to weather changes in government by using its wealth of relational credits created over the past decade. As one senior official said, "The leveraging we get from these relationships goes way beyond just good will. Often it means that someone will connect the dots along the value chain of the program to find more resources, bring in a new funder and, most important of all, smooth over any threats to the total program by one change, reduction in funding or shift in emphasis."

ADAPTABILITY

Part of the success is also due to the government's adaptability to local demands. The HPS, while presenting clear requirements for eligibility, was highly flexible in the ultimate application of funding. Creating an envi-

ronment that permits local adaptation meant a leap in thinking from a traditional bureaucratic model, articulated by one program official as the reality that there is "more known outside of Ottawa than inside." As noted by Liz Weaver, the Director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction:

> Where we have seen a bit of a difference is around the national Homelessness Partnering Strategy, where there has been flexibility for local communities to help design what the community requires. There is some challenge around the shortness of that funding option, but it has allowed government, citizens, service providers and the development community in Hamilton to come together and identify strategies for that whole continuum of social housing that is effective and relevant to our community. That is the type of solution we are looking for.[18]

LEVERAGING

The value of the HPS lies in its strength as a leveraging device. The HPS is intended to address homelessness through building community capacity and bringing a multitude of resources to the table to build locally defined priority programs and processes. By finding ways to engage provincial and municipal actors, the strategy has leveraged approximately C$2.61 for every C$1 it invests. To ratchet up that investment, it avoided the common problem of distorting local priorities and overriding local and provincial decision making through its funding influence. For instance, no funding for any HPS project in Newfoundland is approved without provincial agreement. This practice ensures greater alignment of resources, increasing the likelihood of impact and building trust among partners who see their contributions valued.

MEASUREMENT

The HPS suffered from tension between transactional reporting and a focus on outcomes. Federal players funded others to act on a larger (ill defined) goal, but then attempted to measure short-term results that focused strictly on the use of federal money. As one program official noted, "All our tools now measure what we spend. We do not measure the impact on homelessness itself or on how communities work together."

Moreover, the very idea of "a result" for the federal government's homelessness policy has changed over the years. At first, "partnership" was an intermediary result intended to bring resources together. Money was seen as a strategic leveraging tool. However, as the focus moved to "results-based initiatives:" the emphasis became what the money actually does. As one program official said, "We began to look at what our money does and taking credit for that. That means less focus on the cumulative focus, taking into account what others did and what we were all doing together." The focus on results, however, became increasingly short-term and narrow, generating a potential conflict between accountability and results.

PERMANENCE

Since 2007, the HPS has been subject to a number of reviews and extensions, requiring considerable administrative effort on a nearly full-time basis. Such impermanence, however, also destabilizes relationships with partners as the future of the program always remains in question. There is some encouragement in having had two different governments renew the HPS and its predecessor, the NHI: the impermanence of the strategy does not seem to reflect any ambiguity of political will. Perhaps such impermanence creates a temporary role for the federal government as communities mount their successful efforts. The model of building a temporary agency to address temporary challenges is seductive and can be good public policy. The question in this case is whether the model will work for wicked problems that do not easily go away.

NEW SYNTHESIS LEARNINGS

Wicked problems like homelessness are alike in many ways. They are large, complex and seemingly insolvable problems that require a different way of thinking about what governments can and should do. Here are some broader reflections from the Canadian case that speak to a New Synthesis understanding of any wicked challenge.

DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY

Homelessness is deeply rooted in complexity. Responses demand individual and localized approaches, unlike many federal programs that produce a single standard or entitlement for all Canadians. This is uncomfortable territory for federal actors who designed a far different program in the HPS—one that built in organizational adaptability to local circumstances to manage that complexity. That was its key strength.

IDENTIFYING RESULTS

Where federal officials did *not* manage complexity well, however, was in taking on a short-term view of results (and insisting on short-term financial reporting on the federal slice of those results). But what would be the larger view? When, indeed, does homelessness end? With the elimination of homelessness? With the elimination of poverty? Societal goals are by their very nature contentious, seldom well defined and subject to continual re-scoping. Navigation on this plane requires a different set of governance skills than we saw at play in Canada.

BUILDING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC RESULTS

The HPS is built on the model of civic engagement. In fact, it enabled many of the 61 designated communities engaged in the strategy to build stronger working arrangements, leverage resources in a more effective way, distribute risk and focus action. According to a 2009 report on homelessness by the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, the impact was palpable. "The 20 agencies visited by the committee and the dozens of agencies that submitted briefs, participated in roundtables and appeared as witnesses, all inspired the committee with their innovations, passion and effective programs."[19] Engagement engendered results at the civic level far above what government could have achieved independently.

FLUIDITY IN GOVERNANCE MODELS

The shift to *collaborative* governance and co-funding with partners at multiple levels was a genuine innovation. A veteran official who worked with both programs noted that "Homelessness is one of those areas that demands an asymmetrical response, one that is probably counter-intuitive to the bureaucratic mindset of program and compliance." Addressing homelessness from the federal perspective meant accepting a level of local variance uncommon to federal programming. Little was going to happen on homelessness unless communities were able to coalesce around the issue and marshal resources to address the specific problems each community faced.

The number of players and issues that affect homelessness make greater flexibility in governance inevitable. In the context of the New Synthesis, responsibility is actually distributed according to circumstance. The potential for confusion about accountability is real, however, and part of an ongoing debate among partners. The file is so complex and has so many dimensions that "It doesn't settle down," as one of those interviewed noted. There is the constant potential for debate in which nobody owns it or everybody owns it. As one public official added, "We are constantly rehashing those ideas. These questions are unresolved and unclear."

However, such fluidity is not necessarily negative. Bureaucracies like certainty and predictability: homelessness does not offer such comfort. The problem does, however, require that those driving the policy spend more time on process and take a longer-term perspective. Policy leaders saw that many communities were fragmented, NGOs were competing for resources and there was no co-operation. Therefore, in building capacity and sustainable governance, community plans proved to be the most important tool for addressing homelessness at the community level and giving the federal government some kind of hook upon which to hang its role and resources. As one program official explained, "It created a focus on priorities. We made communities do policy exercises."

Program leaders also noted that as communities developed their initial plans and created Community Advisory Boards, they grew in sophistication and capacity. In some cases, boards were able to leverage municipal and

provincial funding through a relatively small amount of federal funding. In another example, faced with conflicting provincial and federal concerns, one board developed a decisionmaking protocol that ensured all parties *signed off* on new program development. This increasing governance capacity at the local level is yet another positive result.

ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE

The HPS was built on a concept of shared and adaptive governance. The small case in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, points to two elements that stood out in the fact-gathering stage (see Box 2): the deliberate pursuit of a community-based governance strategy, combined with the integration of existing community arrangements.

> The City of Prince Albert is a good example of a community coming together to address homelessness and how the HPS made that co-operation possible. The city evolved its former Housing Committee into a Community Advisory Board to pursue the funding available from the federal government. It then used the CAB community planning and analysis model to identify real needs and brought together groups to discuss how to measure the outcomes (as well as comply with contribution funding regulations). The city's 2007 report states:
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> "Not only does [HPS support] mean that meagre resources will be used more efficiently, but it also means that collective wisdom can be brought to bear on this overall plan as it emerges. When a community works together in a strategic fashion, they will not only use their resources better, they will also be able to leverage other funds because of their collective action and capacity."[20]

Adopting such a strategy meant both encouraging the creation of community boards and providing enough flexibility to support variation to meet local circumstances. The approach also meant creating information and knowledge-sharing tools that enable effective governance and reporting.

MULTI-PARTY AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL RISK

The issue of homelessness is rife with risk: strategic risks (the investments do not work or produce unintended consequences), political risks (something terrible happens to an individual directly linked to a government-funded activity, political conflict among the various levels of government calls for greater political action by opposition parties or activist NGOs), compliance risks (in a complex chain of delivery, the potential of something going wrong rises quickly) and performance risks (one party does not play its role or deliver on its promises). Despite the potential for disaster, the risk did not deter many of the actors from moving ahead. The risk is, however, in constant flux among the various parties, most notably among the Community Advisory Boards, the bureaucrats and the politicians. While the risk environment is complex, there seem to have been few systemic failures. Why is this so?

It appears that risk management took place at various stages of the process, despite an apparent lack of a systematic and singular approach. This case might best be described as multi-dimensional risk-gridding. Traditional concepts of risk management involve the application of risk analysis and the definition of mitigation strategies in a linear fashion for a single organization. However, in this case, the initiative crosses all levels of government, the civic sector and the non-for-profit sector. Elements inherent in multi-dimensional risk-gridding include spreading risk throughout the system, avoiding single risk targets and decentralizing response. There is evidence of sustained efforts to ensure that risk in this case *was* distributed in a multi-dimensional way.

SYSTEMS OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The very concepts of performance management and accountability are built on the ability of organizations to learn and share information. Learning and sharing has been a challenge for the HPS for a variety of reasons: an over-emphasis on microlevel reporting requirements prevented people from focusing on the important issues; a constant churn of those involved meant that knowledge is not easily retained; and achieving results

on an issue such as homelessness is a long-term process; however, performance was often judged and managed in the short term. As one program official noted, "We are not good at learning from all this information we gather. People move on, memories are lost. You have to know how to handle the ingredients of success, but have to put it together within the context."

The metrics of accountability have changed over time. These are some of the contributing factors:

- **SHIFTING GOALS**. The exact goals of homelessness programs can shift over time, making the successful measurement of performance more difficult. This shift is certainly valid as needs change. However, it takes place among players in the whole process so that short-term goals, often quite intractable in themselves, begin to be the only concern. In this way, the longer-term goals are ignored.

- **MULTI-LEVEL MEASUREMENT**. Engaging three levels of government, an array of NGOs and local groups will always be a formula for confusion when it comes to defining what gets measured and how. In a time of increasingly prescribed accountability arrangements, each government will have its own view on what needs to be measured, by whom and when. In the longer term, it means placing a greater focus on coming to a mutual understanding of the measurements needed to satisfy these requirements, not obviate them.

- **ACTION LEARNING**. This is a case in which performance and accountability have to keep pace with increasing knowledge about the phenomenon itself. An example of both successful action learning and confusion about what needed to be measured is the "housing first" strategy, an approach that recognized shelter as a precondition to self-sufficiency and full participation in society. The adoption of "housing first" illustrates successful action learning in that this policy arose from the experience of those involved in the issue. Confusion regarding performance measures occurred because the immediate goal of "shelter," often temporary and transitory, was difficult to measure. Further, this goal clouded the longer-term concern that housing, as important as it might be, was only one component of a homelessness strategy.

SYSTEMS OF COMPLIANCE AND CONTROL

The HPS represents an environment in which issues of centralization and decentralization compete. Issues of compliance with rules and control over inputs, processes and outcomes were sometimes set in *competition* with steps deemed necessary by some to reach the ultimate desired outcome. As one program official stated, "There is a blind spot on performance management and control. They drive you to the pursuit of the measurable. This distorts you towards standardization of approach in a public policy area that begs for specialization." While policies evolved based on partnerships and collective leadership allowing for a range of generally predicable alternatives, this variation was hard for governments to manage.

From a New Synthesis perspective, the very definition of compliance could be taken apart. Is it compliance with the rules of the various players or of the chief funder? Is it compliance with the intended program outcomes? Within a wider Canadian context of tightened financial accountability, the tension is real; many actors within the HPS clearly identified a narrow version of accountability as a major impediment to sustaining the focus on reducing homelessness. As one interviewee pointed out, "We have had to act with some considerable stealth to avoid flooding the various communities with compliance requirements."

The HPS, like most federal government programs, has seen an increase in annual reporting requirements and short-term audits even though neither the overall objective nor individual interventions are limited to a single year. Such reporting requirements distort organizational behaviour and encourage short-term actions that can be measured within an audit cycle. These timelines are incompatible with what might be called the appropriate policy/implementation cycle of a complex set of responses and strategies. "We would just like to get one thing done before we start reporting on our compliance," said one interviewee.

Several of those interviewed helped summarize the main issues affecting compliance and control in the HPS environment with distributed responsibilities, powers and governance.

- Difficulties in harmonizing multiple accountabilities, rules and systems of compliance created by the multiple actors.
- Lack of consensus on intermediate goals, final outcomes (aside from "elimination of homelessness") and shared metrics of success.
- A profound mismatch between the long-term view and the immediate short-term, audit-driven reporting effort.
- A focus on short-term surrogates for long-term results meant a poor allocation of resources on actual outcomes.

SUMMARY

The case study of the HPS illustrates how, in the face of homelessness, the federal government used state authority and resources to leverage collective power. It shows how people and resources from multiple government departments, several levels of government and community organizations came together at local levels under the auspices of the HPS to tackle homelessness. It reveals how this entails government and actors from other sectors drawing on an expanded repertoire of roles and relationships. It emphasizes how the federal government attempted to align resources across various departments and to play effective roles as a funding partner, convener and enabler of unique approaches and actors at the community level.

The case also reveals difficulties in establishing workable systems of shared commitment and responsibility for results, largely as a by-product of issues such as short-term funding arrangements, the heavy burden of reporting requirements and controls, and a performance measurement system that looks mainly at the micro level rather than at higher level outcomes.

Despite these difficulties, the future of the program looks strong. Not only will it carry on addressing the issues of homelessness, but from a research and learning perspective, it will continue providing valuable lessons for ongoing and future practice—both in addressing homelessness and thinking about the future of governance.

SOURCES

INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted in March 2010 with program staff from the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

ENDNOTES

1. "It will take common vision, collaboration, persistence and hard work over several years to resolve the long-standing problems that have led to the homelessness, untreated mental health, problematic substance use and crime that Victoria, and other communities across the country, are seeing in our downtowns" (Mayor's Task Force on Breaking the Cycle of Mental Illness, Addictions and Homelessness, "Executive Summary," 13).

2. Interviews were conducted in March 2010 with program staff from the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. The author would like to thank the program staff at the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and the Canada School of Public Service for their assistance with this case study.

3. Crooks, "Evidence."

4. Hulchanski, "Homelessness in Canada," 5.

5. Hopper and Baumohl, "Redefining the Cursed Word," 3, quoted in Hulchanski, op cit.

6. Echenberg and Jensen, *Defining and Enumerating Homelessness in Canada*, 2.

7. Ibid., 1-2.

8. United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing*.

9. Wente, "Urban Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada."

10. Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, *Out in the Cold*.

11. Gaetz, "The Struggle", 1-2.

12. Ibid, 2.

13. Smith, "Lessons from the Homelessness Initiative," 9.

14. Ibid., 6.

15. Eberle, "Evidence."

16. Hopper and Baumohl, "Redefining the Cursed Word," 3.

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FROM NS6 TO NS WORLD

THE NEW SYNTHESIS PROJECT

The New Synthesis Project is an international partnership of institutions and individuals who are dedicated to advancing the study and practice of public administration. While they hail from different countries, different political systems and different historical, economic and cultural contexts, all share the view that public administration as a practice and discipline is not yet aligned with the challenges of serving in the 21st century.

THE NEW SYNTHESIS 6 NETWORK

In 2009, Madame Jocelyne Bourgon invited six countries to join the New Synthesis Network (NS6), composed of officials, scholars and experts from Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Committed to supporting practitioners whose work is becoming increasingly difficult, this network has engaged close to 200 people from more than 24 organizations. Their efforts have resulted in five international roundtables, five post-roundtable reports, and 17 case studies. Collectively, this work has generated significant insights into preparing governments to serve in the 21st century.

The Network's findings have been captured in the publication of a new book entitled *A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century*, and is available in print and electronic formats from McGill-Queen's University Press. Its signature contribution is the presentation of an enabling governance framework that brings together the role of government, society and people to address some of the most complex and intractable problems of our time.

TOWARDS NS WORLD

So where to from here? Reconfiguring and building the capacities of government for the future cannot be accomplished through the publication of a single book. It is a continuous journey which requires the ongoing sharing and synthesis of ideas, as well as the feedback, learning and course adjustments that can only be derived by testing ideas in action.

And so the journey continues and the conversation expands. Our goal is to build upon the rich partnership of the original six participating countries by opening up this exchange with others—wherever they may be located. We seek to create an international community that connects all leaders—from government, the private sector and civil society—committed to helping prepare governments for the challenges ahead.

Next stages of this work will include virtual exchanges supported by web 2.0 technologies, as well as possible thematic and regionally-based networks and events. But no matter the vehicles, success can only be achieved through the active participation and collaboration of those passionate about making a difference.

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