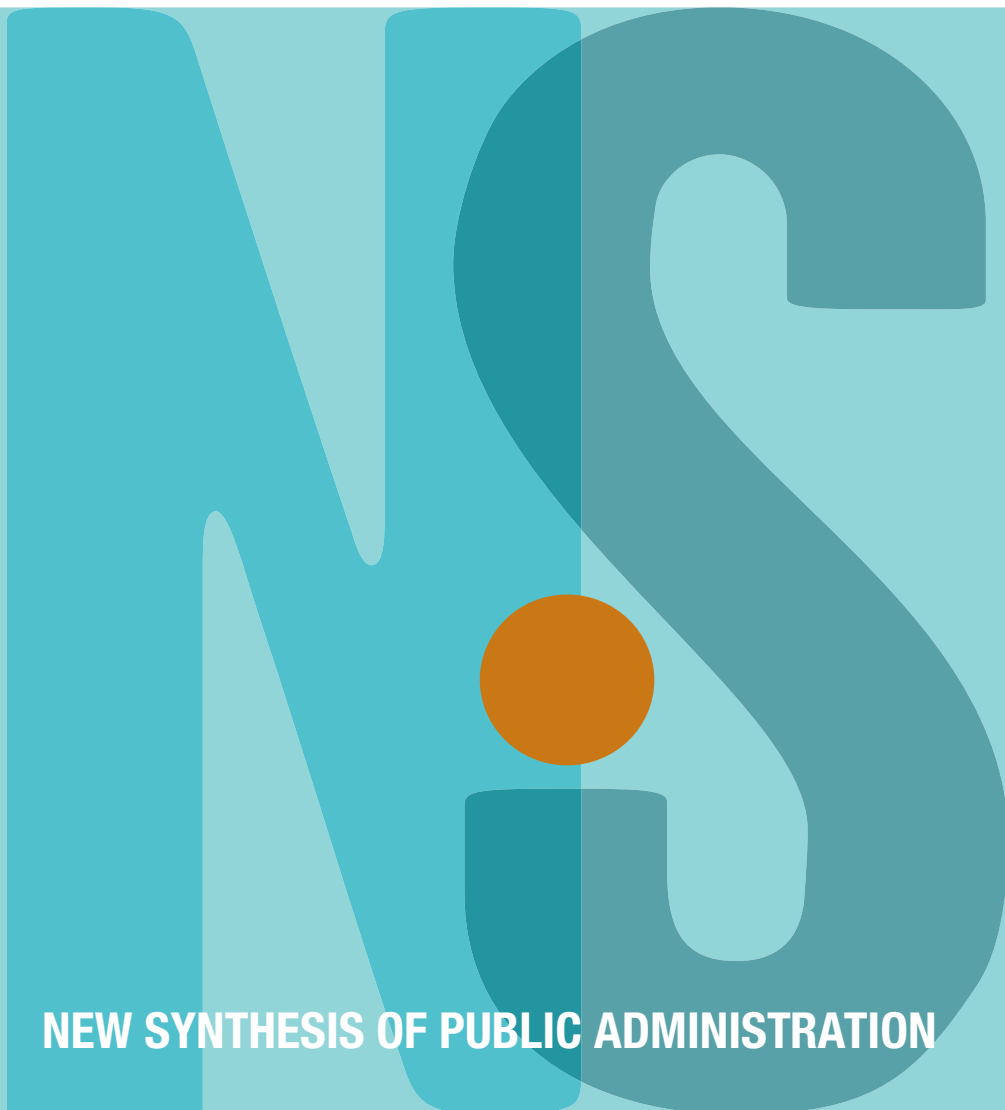


NS LIVE CASE SERIES 2017:

Overcoming Poverty Together

New Brunswick citizen-centric perspectives

Public Governance International



NEW SYNTHESIS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Context

The increasing complexity of issues sets the tone for the task of governing contemporary societies. Poverty constitutes a sound example of such an issue. Complex problems such as poverty stretch in many directions, respecting no boundaries. The challenge they pose stems from their multiple interacting elements, which translate into dynamic characteristics. Change at the level of the elements of the system reverberate throughout, producing dynamic interactions that are difficult to observe and more so to predict.¹ The case in point demonstrates the approach developed by the provincial government of New Brunswick to address the extremely complex social issue of poverty. It demonstrates how the multidimensional complexity of poverty might be overcome by the inclusion in policymaking of citizen-centric perspectives.

Persistent poverty is an issue that long concerned the Government of New Brunswick. The census of 2006 showed that 14% of residents lived in poverty, and almost 39,000 residents received social assistance. Specific groups suffered even more, for instance, 45% of single mothers were living in poverty as well as 16.4% of children (under the age of 18) and 10.9% of seniors.²

Poverty in New Brunswick was spread across society, with different communities suffering in different ways. The complex nature of poverty meant that one-size-fits-all policies were unlikely to cover the range of issues preventing people from breaking out of poverty. Several different branches of government were responsible for policies mitigating social aspects that contribute to poverty, such as education, housing, employment and social assistance. In addition, other social aspects that contributed to the problem stretched beyond governmental action and resulted from interactions within the community and their economies. Poverty constitutes a vast and complex issue that crosscuts different social spheres, dynamically interacting with different social elements and affecting the system as a whole. As such the issue calls for a different approach in order to achieve different and broader public results.

In 2008 the government of New Brunswick announced an initiative to reduce poverty in the province. The arduous goal of tackling poverty was paired with an ambitious method of implementation that relied heavily on civic engagement. The government recognised that poverty represented a far too complex issue for government to address alone. Furthermore, it was recognised that possible solutions and measures to address it necessarily counted on the participation of citizens and enterprises, not only in the processes of co-creating policies but also in sharing responsibilities for implementation.

1 Frances Westley, Michael Quinn Patton, and Brenda Zimmerman, *Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007).

2 "Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice: Empower the Community - New Brunswick's Approach to Overcoming Poverty" (Antigonish, NS: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health - St. Francis Xavier University, 2012).

Positioning the citizen as the agent for change

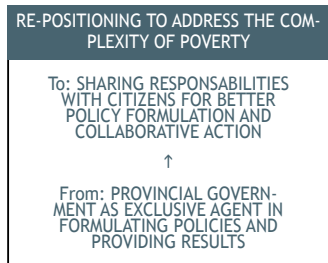
The first and perhaps most fundamental challenge tackled by the government was to raise awareness to its own limitation in addressing the long-standing issue of poverty. It openly stated that the provincial government would no longer reserve solely to itself the responsibility of addressing the problem, and that new policies related to poverty would be built through the sum of the efforts of the government, citizens, communities and the private sector.

Re-positioning the issue as a societal challenge that could not be addressed without the full commitment of government and society represented a bold and risky step. On one hand, it redirected public efforts from strictly alleviatory policies, towards the search for truly collaborative and transformative action. On the other hand, it carried a series of political risks, such as the public not absorbing its responsibility, the possible lack of skills outside of government to process complex policymaking, the dialogue process becoming unfruitful, the government settling for bad policies, the weakening of leadership in the deliberative process, and the possible polarisation of public opinion.³ Despite such risks, the provincial government proceeded in launching the initiative, entitled Bringing the Pieces Together. It was the first endeavour to involve New Brunswickers collaboratively in attempting to overcome poverty.⁴

An Engagement-oriented Process

In order to positively engage participants from “government, (the) official opposition, business(es), the community non-profit sector and persons living in or who have experienced poverty”⁵, the government had to rethink the traditional consultation methods. The solution was to promote decentralised facilitated dialogue sessions and meetings, guided by background papers and workbooks.

Emphasis was given in engaging groups that are often excluded. In particular, orientation programs aimed to empower representatives of people living in poverty, so they would feel more comfortable in discussion forums. In that sense, the process of (civic) capacity-building closely followed the process of expanding participation.⁶ It aimed at balancing discussion environments, by updating participants’ knowledge on debate and deliberation methods, as well as informing them with available data.



The policy formulation process was divided into three phases, each of which was designed to ensure public participation. The process accounted for an unprecedented participation rate during its 13 month from announcement to the final forum defining strategic goals and priority actions.

3 Donald G Lenihan, Rescuing Policy: The Case for Public Engagement (Ottawa, ON: Public Policy Forum, 2012).

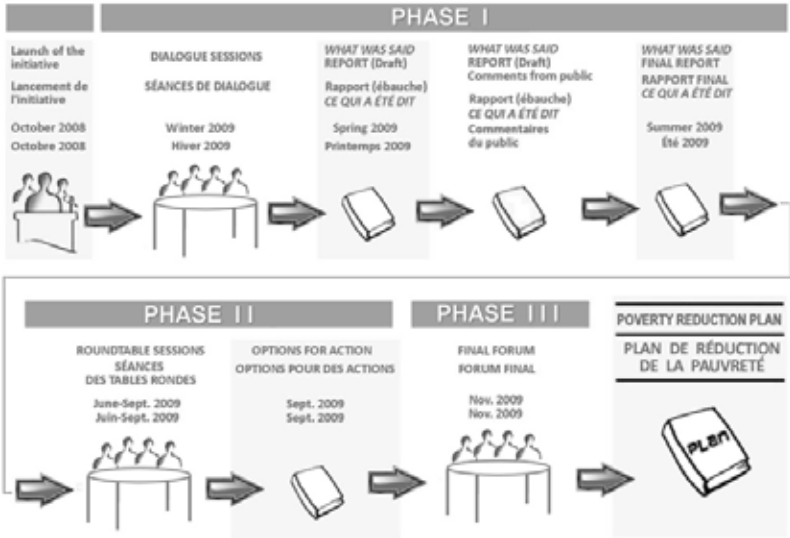
4 The New Brunswick Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, “Overcoming Poverty Together,” 2009, <http://www.gnb.ca/0017/Promos/0001/pdf/Plan-e.pdf>.

5 Ibid., 5.

6 The New Brunswick Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, “Overcoming Poverty Together.”

The first phase involved a multi-channel input collection that used Internet surveys, different forms of correspondence and dialogue sessions throughout 16 different communities. It aimed to gather key information on the causes and drivers forms of poverty. Close to 2,500 people were engaged in this first stage. These inputs were published under the report *Choir of Voices*, which established and framed content for further discussions.⁷

Figure 1: The 3 phases of the Public Engagement Initiative in New Brunswick.⁸



The second phase involved roundtable sessions with 30 selected participants, chosen based on their experience and expertise. These discussions built on the original findings of the Choir of Voices in order to propose a selection of possible policy actions, or *Summary of Options*, from which the Final Forum could select the most appropriate.⁹

The Final Forum represented the last deliberative phase in the process. In this phase, the Premier gathered and personally coordinated the forum with 47 leaders of all sectors involved in the plan. These sectors were namely, government, opposition, economic leaders, third sector activists, and community members affected by poverty. The two-day discussions once again utilised contributions from previous phases to define a plan with priority actions for the next five-year horizon. The discussions were convergent towards the need for both economic and social integration of communities.¹⁰ In addition to being recognised as a unique opportunity in which leaders engaged in a common spirit and collaborative environment in search of an agenda for overcoming poverty.

The results of the Final Phase were consolidated into the document *Overcoming Poverty Together*. The plan represented a substantial

7 Ibid., 5-6.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 5.

10 Ibid., 6.

transformation of concepts, approaches, and methods to address poverty in the province. The main objectives of the plan were based on a commitment from all stakeholders involved to reduce income poverty in the province by 25% and deep income poverty by 50%, by 2015.¹¹ In addition, the plan had specific actions to transform service delivery. The plan transformed



the view of social expenditures as assistance to a view of them as investments in people. It also relied on innovative mechanisms to promote growth and sense of belonging in the community. Moreover, it decentralised services to enhance community steering, and shared responsibilities with

the community towards the achievements of goals and investment.¹²

An important step towards the implementation of the plan was the creation of a specific body, the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) that became responsible for leading the implementation of the new policy. Following the same structure of the public planning phase, the corporation has a shared board of chairs representing each societal sector involved.

Leveraging partnerships in implementation

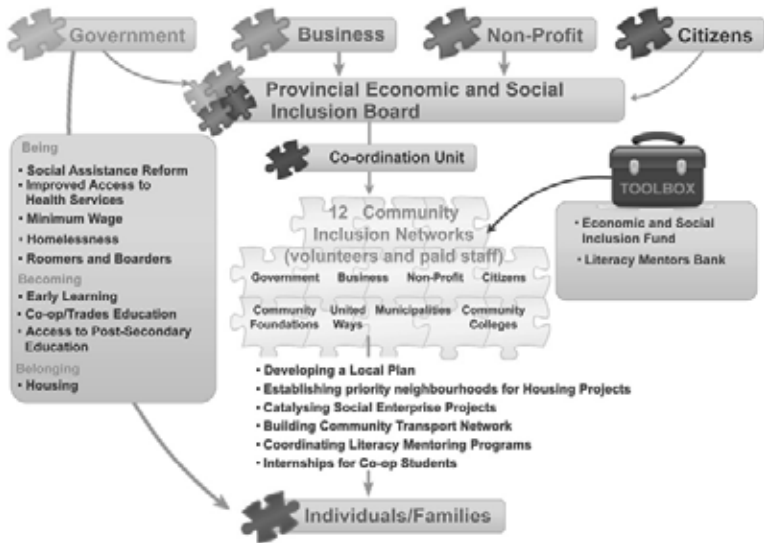
The provincial government of New Brunswick still had its fair share of actions to put forward. The government approved several reforms targeting low-income families and individuals, including reforms of social assistance, health service access, homelessness and housing policies. It also provided a minimum wage increase, enhanced access to education and installed incentives to post-secondary education. These reforms provided the structural transformations needed for the partners to participate in developing local plans.

The government, businesses, non-profits and citizens came together in organising the 12 Community Inclusion Networks (CINs), which also included several respective local actors. These networks were assisted by the newly inaugurated Economic and Social Inclusion Fund (ESIC), a fund designed to promote local interventions. The CINs helped the development of local plans, such as housing projects, transportation infrastructure, even social enterprise projects.

¹¹ Lenihan, *Rescuing Policy*, 105.

¹² The New Brunswick Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, "Overcoming Poverty Together," 7-9.

Figure 2: Delivery Structure of the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation.¹³



The CINs played a fundamental role in mediating and promoting community engagement. Between 2009 and 2014, 212 projects were approved through these networks, involving close to 45,000 participants. The projects were funded in cooperation with private and third sector partners. ESIC invested almost C\$2.5 million in the network projects, which combined with the other partners’ investment of almost C\$8.3 million. This boost promoted by partnerships represented a leveraging of approximately C\$3.40 of private investment per one dollar of public funds.¹⁴

The work of the CINs was fundamental to creating synergy and empowering communities in the pursuit of their self-crafted objectives. Furthermore, they were important in raising awareness among the partners about the dynamic roles that social actors can play. Each has unique capabilities and resources to contribute towards the achievement of higher value results with lower social costs.¹⁵ The CINs developed methods to foster cooperation, maintain motivation, promote sustainability, and quickly produce results-oriented actions that improved engagement.¹⁶ The CINs were grounds for learning-by-doing and exchanging experiences among communities, which increasingly forged institutional capacity and civic capacity for orchestrated action.

The government of New Brunswick managed the transformation of social policies through reforms associated with their role as the guardians of the levers of state power. However, leveraging the local reach of CINs to integrate

13 Ibid., 35.

14 New Brunswick, The Impact of New Brunswick’s 2009-2014 Economic and Social Inclusion Plan., 2015, 6, <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/247459>.

15 Jocelyne Bourgon, The New Synthesis of Public Administration Fieldbook (Copenhagen: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag, 2017).

16 “Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice: Empower the Community - New Brunswick’s Approach to Overcoming Poverty,” 9.

policy action with local communities represented the actual implementation of co-created policies. Citizen engagement helped to shape policies to particular local circumstances and needs. In addition, the synergic common purpose created momentum to leverage local private partnerships in order to maximise policy impact.

Synthesising a new policy structure

The experience of calling upon society to address the poverty challenges in New Brunswick overhauled the provincial social assistance framework. Furthermore, it enabled the emergence of shared governance structures, based on the interactive and collaborative action from the province and its communities.

The province did not eradicate poverty in the first five years of the program. Moreover, the results obtained varied significantly in different areas and regions. Nonetheless, both the government and the participants continue to believe that the inaugurated dynamics of civic engagement in the policy planning for poverty reduction and community engagement in local projects are essential to addressing the challenges.

In 2014, the provincial government launched Overcoming Poverty Together 2 (OPT2), calling for a second round of civic engagement in planning the actions for the next five years (2014-2019). The new plan places special emphasis in community (or civic) capacity-building.¹⁷ It restates the belief that individuals and communities have a central role to play in eradicating poverty, and must be increasingly empowered with the capacities to face these challenges and engage in producing societal results. The OPT2 represents the continuity and re-assessment of previous experiences. The plan is organised along 28 priority actions that are divided into four main pillars: Community empowerment, Learning, Economic Inclusion and Social Inclusion.¹⁸

New Brunswick took on the challenge to address the complex subject of poverty, recognising it could not be solved with government action alone. The province managed to include significant contributions from citizens and other community agents. Bringing in different inputs for policy, and further transforming the local inclusion networks for implementation of particular actions, the province generated a new synthesis (or new whole) to the particular policy narrative.¹⁹ It represented a deep transformation in approach, responsibilities, and methods, transforming citizens and communities into active agents in contributing to the pursuit of public results.

The OPT2 reflects what has been learned from the original program. During the first five-year cycle, the province walked the journey through re-positioning the challenge of poverty in societal terms, engaging citizens

17 Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (N.B.) and New Brunswick, Overcoming poverty together: the New Brunswick economic and social inclusion plan 2014-2019 (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Province of New Brunswick, 2014).

18 Ibid.

19 Bourgon, The New Synthesis of Public Administration Fieldbook.

in defining plans of action, and leveraging from local opportunities and partnerships to maximise public results. Rethinking poverty alleviation from a burden to an investment in people was key to this process of learning. In the second cycle, the province's position reflects an understanding that the amplification of public results rests on civic capacity building and the pursuit of civic results. The OPT2 places a strong emphasis on building civic capacity in support of empowering society's policy formulation and implementation skills, and ultimately amplifying its autonomy to generate civic results and contribute to public results.

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