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POLICY LINK N.B.
CONCERTATION SUR LES
POLITIQUES AU N.-B.

Telling the Story of PolicyLink NB

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The John Howard Society of New Brunswick
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FOREWORD

Telling the Story of PolicyLink NB shares with the reader the history of a unique New Brunswick multisectoral partnership, its accomplishments, challenges and learnings.

PolicyLink NB has evolved from a group of people searching for a way to link to the right people in the right way - to a full-fledged organization that has moved minds and ideas to a new level in our province. We have brought together government and community organizations and created a trusting and open environment. We have engaged citizens and government in dialogue. We have supported community organizations as a catalyst. We have enhanced the research capacity and understanding in the voluntary sector. We have served as a national leader in collaboration, breaking down barriers and making links. Our work continues.

PolicyLink demonstrates the possibilities of what can be achieved for a province as well as a community. Its experience provides guidance in understanding the policy process, the need for research in validation of actions, the need for a leadership role in the development of a practical network for the voluntary sector and its partners, and lastly, the issue of language in a bilingual province.

There is great potential for the future of PolicyLink. Our broad base of partners are engaged in efforts that were not imaginable at the beginning. Leaders in government and communities continue to look to PolicyLink for insight into a different way of doing business.

We would like to thank Human Resources Development Canada for the opportunity to pilot such an exciting and beneficial initiative for New Brunswick. And finally we thank the members of PolicyLink, the many individuals with gifted vision and talent who have enabled this project to reach its promising potential.

Anthony Knight
Co-Chair

Léo-Paul Pinet
Co-Chair

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PolicyLink NB is a first for New Brunswick. It is a unique partnership, a multisectoral network of federal and provincial government departments, voluntary sector¹, business groups, and academia. It grew out of community concerns that there were few opportunities for government and the voluntary sector to work together, particularly in the policy process. Funded for two years as a pilot project by Human Resources Development Canada², its mission is to “foster a more responsive public policy process through inclusion and collaboration among partners”. PolicyLink was established to demonstrate what could be accomplished through this unique network.

PolicyLink has made a significant contribution to social development issues by being a catalyst and convener in building collaborative efforts among provincial and federal levels of government, Francophone and Anglophone members of the voluntary sector, academics, and members of the business community. Many of its activities occurred through workshops, research, and enhanced collaboration. PolicyLink applied the multisectoral model in many situations and has:

- helped groups better understand the policy process and the way governments makes decisions;
- brought the voluntary sector together, beginning the process of connecting the sector and breaking the barriers of isolation;
- linked a national initiative to New Brunswick that provided for ways to increase the number of volunteers in the province;
- partnered with others to better understand poverty and the barriers in communities; and,
- developed a provincial network to link academic researchers with government and members of the voluntary sector.

¹ There are many different terms to describe the voluntary sector including community agencies, charitable, social economy, non-government (NGO's), non-profit, not for profit and the third sector.

² Funded through the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), via Human Resources Development Canada.

Most importantly, PolicyLink provided opportunities for individuals from government and the voluntary sector to better understand each other's challenges and strengths.

PolicyLink was guided by a committed group of individuals representing different sectors and actively involved with a vast array of initiatives. PolicyLink was fortunate to have two very energetic and committed staff members, who were also able to link New Brunswick to national and provincial initiatives and networks.

There are broad key learnings in this multisectoral approach that will be useful to communities and provinces. Key learnings are in the areas of:

- inclusion - the challenge of reflecting the province as a whole;
- leadership – the visionary process of defining its role and potential;
- commitment – the need for individuals to represent different sectors, and to be prepared to commit time;
- action oriented focus – to accomplish specific activities; and,
- resources – integral to success.

PolicyLink has faced many challenges. It is the nature of this evolutionary process. It has been important to discuss, debate and learn from its experiences. Developing an environment of trust and comfort has laid a strong foundation for both challenges and successes.

PolicyLink has filled a void in New Brunswick. It has demonstrated the need for a catalyst in the province to build multisectoral partnerships, and that this responds to the interests of both governments and the voluntary sector. The future holds much promise. The challenge is to move from a project to a sustainable provincial entity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCING POLICYLINK	7
MAKING IT MULTISECTORAL	8
RESPONDING TO THE ENVIRONMENT	10
SITUATING POLICYLINK	11
UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY PROCESS	12
A. Provincial Forum	
B. Documenting the Experiences of Community Groups	
C. Discussions at the Table	
CONNECTING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR	14
A. Provincial Forum	
B. Canadian Volunteerism Initiative	
C. Knowledge Sharing	
D. The Voluntary Sector as an Employer	
E. Regional and National Networks	
LINKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE	17
PARTNERING ON THE ISSUE OF POVERTY	18
EVOLVING THE LEADERSHIP	19
PLANNING THE FUTURE	20
AND IN CONCLUSION – KEY LEARNINGS	21
APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES	23

TELLING THE STORY

INTRODUCING POLICYLINK

PolicyLink NB is a partnership, a unique multisectoral network of federal and provincial government departments, voluntary sector³, business groups, and academia. It presents an in-depth understanding of the multisectoral partnership approach, and its impact on improving the quality of life for New Brunswick's citizens.

New Brunswick has benefited from the presence of PolicyLink. It has accomplished much over its short existence of three years. It promoted a better understanding of the policy process through workshops, research, and enhancing collaboration. It is well known for its work in connecting the voluntary sector, and laying the foundation for an initiative to better recruit and support volunteers. It has initiated the creation of a "Community of Inquiry" network for linking research and practice, building partnerships with academics, government and community groups. And finally, it has highlighted the challenges and opportunities for strengthening the way government and community works together.

In June 2000, a group of community organizations⁴ requested a meeting with a number of provincial and federal government departments. They wanted to explore opportunities to develop a more collaborative relationship with government, help government to better engage citizens, and enhance the capacity of the voluntary sector to input on public policy issues. Subsequent meetings determined the interest and comfort level in working together and identified common ground for collaboration. Although it was unclear what would happen, there was a commitment to continue meeting.

The impetus for bringing government and community together had its roots in existing relationships between the sectors⁵, in the determination of communities to have a place to connect and be heard by government and in the Province's Social Policy Renewal Process (1997-1999) and its Roundtable of representatives from communities throughout the province.

In addition, the New Brunswick Reference Group, a small gathering of community agencies, was organizing events around building inclusive communities, with support from Health Canada and the Maritime Centre for Excellence in Women's Health.

It is a social experiment to see if we could do things differently.

Jay Clifford,
Government

PolicyLink filled a void across the province. People are looking for conveners.

Anthony Knight,
Government

Our original purpose was to look for ways to be part of the policy process.

Sue Rickards,
Voluntary Sector

³ There are many different terms to describe the voluntary sector including community agencies, charitable, social economy, non-government (NGO's), non-profit, not-for-profit and the third sector.

⁴ A group of 15 individuals and organizations throughout the Province, who had been connected with the Province's Social Policy Renewal Process, met face-to-face and through conference calls prior to the meeting in June. The Saint John Human Development Council and the Urban Core Support Network coordinated these meetings.

⁵ "The fact that many of the participants knew each other or of each other gave the group a head start". Capturing the Experience, A Brief Reflective Examination of the Evolution of PolicyLink NB (June 2000 – April 2002).

Over the course of the next year, a representative group of federal and provincial government departments and community agencies continued to meet to develop an action plan in response to federal funding opportunities under the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI)⁶. The very fact that such busy and high-profile people continued to attend willingly and enthusiastically – some of them traveling significant distances on their own time or at their own expense - suggested that something worthwhile was beginning to happen here⁷.

The multisectoral group agreed to submit an application to a federal funding program entitled Sector Involvement in Departmental Policy Development (SIDPID) with the John Howard Society of New Brunswick as the host agency. The application was successful and \$347,000 was received in funding from the VSI, via Human Resources Development Canada. Two staff were hired in July, 2001 - an Animator, Rick Hutchins and an Administrative Assistant, Donna Richard. Funding was also available for operating costs (in both official languages), specific activities, transportation and other related costs to ensure voluntary sector participation.

The addition of staff was a major shift in the capacity for moving forward. Now the challenge was to make the multisectoral partnership work. This was new for the province and an infrastructure would need to be developed at the same time as operationalizing the workplan. Creating an environment for collaboration had just begun and provided a foundation for operating in a comfortable and non-adversarial manner.

MAKING IT MULTISECTORAL

The key component of PolicyLink is its multisectoral nature. It was vital for PolicyLink to be representative of the entire province and to make every effort to ensure that its membership was inclusive, drawn from all sectors and reflective of New Brunswick - culturally, linguistically and geographically. This takes effort and continues to be a challenge. However, PolicyLink is proud of its progress to date in recruiting and sustaining the commitment of different partners. Its membership includes representatives from:

- **Federal Government:** Human Resources Development Canada, Health Canada, Rural Secretariat, Agriculture Canada, Justice;
- **Provincial Government:** Family & Community Services, NB Library Foundation, Public Safety, Culture and Sports Secretariat;
- **Voluntary Sector:** Agence résidentielle Restigouche; Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation; Saint John Human Development Council; Burnt Church First Nations; Saint John Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative; John Howard Society of New Brunswick; John Howard Society of Moncton; Centre de Bénévolat de la Péninsule Acadienne; Moncton Volunteer Centre Bénévolat; NB Coalition for Literacy; Community Development Practitioners
- **Academia:** University of New Brunswick

⁶ The VSI is a joint undertaking by the federal government and the voluntary sector.

⁷ Capturing the Experience, A Brief Reflective Examination of the Evolution of PolicyLink

The atmosphere was very positive and even fun. All three sectors working together offered a forum for creativity for the future.

Cathy Wright,
Voluntary Sector

No one owned PolicyLink: it was equally valued by all.

Anne Marie Maloney,
Voluntary Sector

During the early stages of development, other federal and provincial government departments (with an economic and/or social focus) were involved. The more economically oriented organizations and government departments were challenged to see that their continuing involvement in social development was integral to the Province's future. Other departments asked to be kept informed and as time went on, became more active members in PolicyLink.

It was very instrumental to have lead federal and provincial government departments - Human Resources Development Canada – NB Region and the Provincial Department of Family and Community Services. They encouraged their colleagues to become involved and promoted the concept of PolicyLink.

PolicyLink is a bilingual organization with agendas, minutes of meetings, reports and major events in both languages and operating with bilingual staff, although the meetings were predominately in English. There was a recognition that the Francophone and Anglophone communities operate differently, yet agreement that it is vital to operate together, and at times with one voice.

There were challenges for members to fit PolicyLink into their agendas, particularly so for individuals coming from significant geographic distances. Frequently it was difficult for members from francophone communities to attend. Meetings did take place in other parts of the province⁸, which provided the opportunity to become more familiar with local issues. However, there was a struggle between balancing location with easy access for most members. Fredericton was the site of most meetings.

Despite the busyness of everyone's schedule, significant commitment was evident from all sectors. Prior to the hiring of staff, ten meetings took place, and after, there were fourteen meetings with an average attendance of fifteen federal, provincial and voluntary sector representatives. In addition, there were close to fifty meetings of the different sub-committees.

PolicyLink drew different sectors together and created a synergy.

Anne Leslie,
Voluntary Sector

Balancing different perspectives of each sector is a challenge, as well as the geography and the cultures: Rural, Urban, Anglophone, Francophone, Aboriginal, Multicultural.

Alex Dedham,
Voluntary Sector

For Anglophone groups linkages are more natural. Francophone leaders feel they are always in a double role - a partnership and an advocacy role. Challenge is how to merge the two perspectives.

Léo-Paul Pinet,
Voluntary Sector

⁸ Locations included Ludlow, Moncton, Tracadie-Sheila, and Saint John

RESPONDING TO THE ENVIRONMENT

The establishment of PolicyLink corresponds to a changing environment for collaboration. Across Canada, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments are moving towards a greater emphasis on working with communities. In New Brunswick there are many social and economic strategies and initiatives that underscore the need for engaging communities. They include: Investing in People, one of the four building blocks of the Province's Prosperity Plan⁹; HRDC's Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) for homelessness; Local Governance and Regional Collaboration for New Brunswick; Les Familles et les Communautés D'abord in the Acadian Peninsula; the Community Economic Development Agencies and the Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI)¹⁰.

New Brunswick has many individuals and organizations who are committed to improving the quality of life for all its citizens, and in particular for those challenged by key social and economic issues such as poverty, low education levels, changing demographics, decreasing number of volunteers and limited financial resources. New partners such as the business community are anxious to contribute to the social infrastructure. The focus on building more inclusive communities has provided opportunities for individuals living in poverty to become players in mapping out their own future. In addition, the voluntary sector and volunteerism are being viewed as key instruments in bringing communities together.

Ironically, and perhaps because of these trends, there has **rarely been a more opportune time** for an organization like PolicyLink to help rethink the governance model between communities and government. **Communities need assistance to articulate a vision** and define priorities and how they can influence social policy. How to engage and maintain the involvement of all these partners demands leadership skills, knowledge, and opportunities to network and mentor.

It is important to stay in touch with where government is going and its priorities.

Phyllis Mockler-Caissie,
Government

⁹ Greater Opportunity: Highlights of the New Brunswick Prosperity Plan, 2002-2012

¹⁰JEDI is a partnership between federal and provincial governments and the aboriginal community.

SITUATING POLICYLINK NB

The members of PolicyLink worked through a mission and goals process and agreed upon the following way of operation. The mission of PolicyLink is to “foster a more responsive public policy process through inclusion and collaboration among partners”. Its role is to act as a catalyst in achieving the following goals in New Brunswick¹¹:

- **Capacity building/enabling:** To enable the growth, dialogue and cohesion of networks and groups interested in improving the quality of life of New Brunswickers. To strengthen relationships between government and non-government parties and contribute to the understanding of how they can work together.
- **Inclusion/Engagement:** To provide a voice and venue for a variety of sectors, communities of interests, marginalized groups and citizens to build an inclusive policy community.
- **Research, exploration and understanding of issues:** To discuss, research, explore and understand issues impacting on the voluntary sector in New Brunswick such as sector sustainability, accountability, governance etc.
- **Better public policy process:** To assist in the formulation of cohesive public policy by enhancing the understanding of public policy and improving the policy capacity of all partners.

PolicyLink was mandated to demonstrate the multi-sector engagement process of government and the voluntary sector working together and - to share its learnings. It was to develop tools and mechanisms that assisted in involving other sectors, including forums, workshops and research initiatives¹². In addition, PolicyLink was to incorporate the policy issues related to child and family poverty as part of their agenda. Part of PolicyLink’s process meant understanding the role of a catalyst - to facilitate and provide the opportunities and tools for changing the way different sectors work together.

This was an ambitious agenda. Regular meetings, plus three intensive retreats assisted the group in bringing the workplan to life with a responsiveness to what is needed and achievable. Energetic and committed staff were key to managing this opportunity, having the resources to convene meetings, connect members, and communicate the information among members and to the broader community. Developing a website was instrumental in reaching a wider audience.

¹¹ PolicyLink’s website, www.policylink.nb.ca

¹² The next sections provide specific examples.

The following is a description of how PolicyLink fulfilled its mandate

UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY PROCESS

One of the key focuses of PolicyLink was to establish multisectoral relationships centered on strengthening the joint capacity to effect positive and cohesive policy development¹³. PolicyLink focused internally and externally on understanding the policy-making and planning processes of government:

- who makes the decisions and what is the role of the bureaucracy and politicians; and
- who influences the decisions and what is the role for communities.

A provincial forum, research on best practices, the resource centre on the website and discussions at regular meetings all contributed to achieving this goal.

A. Provincial Forum

In April 2002, PolicyLink NB successfully organized one of the first provincial bilingual forums bringing community and government together to better understand the policy process and to network around social development issues, approaches and opportunities. It was entitled **Forging Links: Community, People, Policy**.

Over 100 participants attended, representing government, business, academia, voluntary sector and individuals living in poverty. The forum was intended as a first step in bringing the voluntary sector into the public policy process in a meaningful way.

The forum was well received. Presenters from New Brunswick and across Canada had significant experience working on the policy process, from both government and community perspectives. It was the first time that David McLaughlin, deputy minister of Policy and Planning¹⁴, publicly outlined the current government's decision-making process and the critical importance/link of the New Brunswick Prosperity Plan to the formulation of policy. For many individuals and organizations, the presentation highlighted the importance of government's strategic planning documents, as well as the frustrations with the lack of opportunities for input.

Another presentation of great interest to participants highlighted the involvement of the business community in social issues. The Saint John Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative was featured and, similar to other workshops, offered an experience that could be applicable to other parts of the province.

The forum was great - because we were coming from a multisectoral approach.

René Pelletier,
Government

Knowing that many don't understand the policy process encourages me to explain the different roles of politicians and staff.

Janet Thomas,
Government

¹³ Proposal to HRDC, Amended Workplan: November 2001.

¹⁴ David McLaughlin was the Deputy Minister of Policy and Planning and the Secretary to the Cabinet Committee on Policy and Priorities with the Province of New Brunswick

Many hoped to be more connected to discussions on policy development.

Anthony Knight,
Government

The forum generated much interest in PolicyLink and its agenda. A number of key considerations (nineteen) were developed from the forum as possible followup activities for PolicyLink. Participants looked to PolicyLink to keep them connected. Members of the voluntary sector wanted opportunities to contribute to the policy process and the capacity to do so. Increasing the research capabilities of the voluntary sector, making connections with universities and the need to further involve the business community were also highlighted by participants.

The forum illustrated PolicyLink's ability to bring government and voluntary sector groups together. It was a catalyst for a number of followup activities. The forum on the voluntary sector, the workshops on the importance of social research (connecting government, community groups and universities), and partnership efforts on the issue of poverty were all influenced by the provincial forum.

B. Documenting the Experiences of Community Groups

PolicyLink engaged a researcher to document and analyze the process by which voluntary sector organizations effect changes in policies through engagement with policy makers and others. The report, **PolicyLinkNB Research Initiative: Understanding and Influencing the Policy Development Process** provides information on the experiences of specific organizations - their successes, barriers and learnings. The researcher also interviewed politicians regarding their relationship to the policy process.

The more we learn about policy development the better.

Anne Leslie,
Voluntary Sector

The most predominant theme throughout the experiences was the need for collaboration and cooperation among voluntary sector organizations; for example, a number of voices expressing a common concern exerts a much stronger influence. Also recognized as key elements in influencing the policy process was the need for perseverance, being informed of government's priorities, and communicating with politicians. This report was widely circulated and formed the basis for future presentations on the policy process.

C. Discussions At The Table

Regular meetings of PolicyLink members provided for open and honest discussion and the policy processes of government were frequently discussed. It is no secret that it is often challenging for community groups to provide input into the policy process. Some members had hoped that PolicyLink could contribute to changing specific policies, rather than serving as a neutral agent and catalyst.

The meetings helped to better understand the barriers and opportunities to influencing the policy process. There were discussions on the different roles of the bureaucracy and the politician and the importance of connecting a community's concern to the priorities of governments. Through the networking opportunities in and around the meetings, it was possible for members to exchange perspectives about issues that were helpful to both government and the voluntary sector.

CONNECTING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

In the absence of a provincial organization that supports the voluntary sector, particularly in the area of social development, PolicyLink has a key role to play. One of its goals was to discuss, research, explore and understand issues impacting on the voluntary sector. PolicyLink addressed this goal in a number of ways: bringing together the voluntary sector, facilitating efforts to promote volunteerism, developing opportunities for knowledge sharing, encouraging interest in researching the needs of the sector, and linking its involvement at the regional and national level back to the interests and concerns in New Brunswick.

A. Provincial Forum

In the fall of 2002, PolicyLink organized a provincial forum¹⁵, engaging fifty-eight participants reflecting the Province's geographic and linguistic nature and representing different areas of service delivery. It was to explore the potential for forming provincial, regional and local coalitions. This dialogue was the first of its kind, and the beginning of a longer term process of collaboration and consultation. The event was highly energized with a wide range of discussion and debate. In general there was a desire to proceed with the opportunity to build supports for the voluntary sector in New Brunswick. Participants were very clear in discouraging the development of a new organization, and were very wary of how their time would be used. Francophone participants were concerned about being "drowned in a sea of southern NB/ Anglophone issues and agenda". However, all participants did indicate considerable interest in "connection", being able to share resources; promote collaboration and partnerships; disseminate information; and mobilize and consult.¹⁶

B. Canadian Volunteerism Initiative

The voluntary sector consists of both paid staff and volunteers. A recent national survey indicated a decreasing number of volunteers¹⁷ in New Brunswick. The Voluntary Sector Initiative of the federal government was developing a long-term approach to assist the sector in building its capacity to engage more Canadians in formal volunteering. PolicyLink took advantage of this opportunity and developed a momentum in New Brunswick to ensure that the provincial voluntary sector would be a player in the delivery of the National strategy. It facilitated efforts of voluntary sector organizations to develop a New Brunswick committee for the Canadian Volunteerism Initiative (CVI), now operating under the leadership of its host, the Moncton Volunteer Centre Bénévolat. Some of PolicyLink's members continue to work with the provincial committee and others have been added to ensure that its membership reflects the sector in New Brunswick. The New Brunswick CVI initiative is just embarking on its strategy. A key objective is to develop innovative strategies to assist organizations in their recruitment and support of volunteers. The initiative has training and research resources that are being accessed by community groups through a "request for proposals" (RFP) process.

It was exciting to consider the possibility of a provincial voluntary sector group.

Cynthia Kirkby,
Voluntary Sector

The voluntary sector wants connectivity, not organization.

Rick Hutchins,
Animator, PolicyLink

PolicyLink built the enthusiasm and engagement for this project.

Annette Vautour MacKay,
Voluntary Sector

¹⁵ Entitled, *Forging Links – A Voluntary Sector*, PolicyLink NB, October, 2002

¹⁶ Proceedings from the provincial forum entitled, *Forging Links – A Voluntary Sector*, PolicyLink NB, October 2002.

¹⁷ Number of people volunteering has decreased by 34,000 in New Brunswick between 1997 and 2000, according to the results of the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians, 2001.

C. Knowledge Sharing

As previously mentioned, members of the voluntary sector wanted opportunities to connect and share resources and information. PolicyLink developed a bilingual website and resource centre to connect community groups, government departments and universities to relevant reports, activities, and information as well as to PolicyLink itself. An average number of 1500 hits per month illustrates the interest in this site. It provides links to many local, regional and national organizations, and under the Toolkit section, groups can access a number of resources, including all of PolicyLink's reports and most recently, its newsletter in both official languages.

PolicyLink has gathered over 400 resources and reports that are in its resource library (not yet on the website). One of PolicyLink's sub-committees compiled an inventory of directories of services, detailing local and provincial voluntary sector and government resources. Both the website and resource library are tools for future development, emphasizing the need to connect individuals and organizations with each other and with resources.

Through its networks with other provinces, PolicyLinkNB was encouraged to plan a forum that would strengthen the commitment of these sectors. It established a multisectoral committee which is proposing a two day conference, entitled **Forging Links: Investing in New Brunswick's Communities**. This is scheduled for June, 2004 in Fredericton. It will bring together leaders from these different sectors to learn and share strategies to improve the standard of living for New Brunswickers. The proposed conference will cover many timely topics such as strategic planning, understanding the policy process, linking research and practice, ongoing support for volunteers, mobilizing communities, and working relationships between government and the voluntary sector.

D. The Voluntary Sector As An Employer

There is surprisingly little information available about the voluntary sector and the vital role it plays in Canada and in the Province of New Brunswick¹⁸. Through its national network, PolicyLink shared information on the voluntary sector research experience of the Niagara Centre for Community Leadership in Welland, Ontario. This assisted in the establishment of a partnership of representatives from the provincial and federal governments and the voluntary sector to oversee the first phase of research in New Brunswick on the voluntary sector as an employer of paid staff. Funding was provided by the provincial department of Training and Employment Development. Six focus groups of federal

¹⁸ Excerpt from **Employment in the Voluntary Sector, the New Brunswick Context**, prepared for the Steering Committee for Labour Market Research on the Voluntary Sector in New Brunswick, Sept. 2003, by Kathleen Howard & Associates, Canadian Council on Social Development and PolicyLink NB (This report is currently in the process of being finalized).

Opportunities to bring players together are essential to the development process.

Yvon LeBlanc,
Government

PolicyLink is about providing learning opportunities.

Bob Stranach,
Government

and provincial governments and the voluntary sector, both francophone and anglophone, together with an extensive literature review are providing a framework for a possible next phase of research on the voluntary sector as an employer in New Brunswick¹⁹. PolicyLink assisted in organizing the focus groups for the voluntary sector, using its network throughout the province.

E. Regional and National Networks

PolicyLink has built relationships with regional and national initiatives and networks across the country, which have benefited its work and provided opportunities for future collaboration. PolicyLink, through its animator, quickly became involved at the national level. Rick Hutchins was a key player in chartering the development of the Canadian Federation of Voluntary Sector Networks under the leadership of the Centre for Voluntary Sector Development at Carleton University. This has served to strengthen the voice of our provincial voluntary sector movement on the national stage, while building strong relationships with other provincial counterparts.

As mentioned previously, there is no provincial umbrella organization to engage the voluntary sector in New Brunswick. PolicyLink frequently served as a consultative entity, working with national groups such as the Canadian Council on Social Development and National Childrens Alliance. In its early stages of development, PolicyLink was funded under the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), to have a communication officer for six months, to connect the voluntary sector to the national initiatives. It was a recognition that there needed to be a mechanism to distribute the VSI message, which included consultation meetings and the sharing of information and tools.

On a regional level, PolicyLink developed connections with the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University in Halifax, particularly with regard to the role of social research and most recently in the area of quality of life indicators.

PolicyLink is a founding member of the Canadian Federation of Voluntary Sector Networks, established in July 2002.

Paula Speevak Sladowski,
University

¹⁹ IBID, In New Brunswick, there are 8,461 incorporated organizations.

LINKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

PolicyLink recognizes the importance of linking research to practice and the need for one to inform the other. It also acknowledges a disconnect between government, community practitioners and universities, with little opportunity for collaboration and connection around information sharing, developing common agendas, and utilizing each other's expertise. PolicyLink's own understanding of its role in research has changed. It initially viewed research as a way of capturing experiences of others, as evident in its work interviewing groups on their experiences with the policy process. Research took on a more prominent role with building the capacity for strengthening partnerships among academics, government and practitioners. This was a natural extension of PolicyLink's multisectoral engagement model but applied directly to the fields of research and knowledge building.

It organized a skill- building workshop on understanding the role of research, and then focused more on building the network. PolicyLink's efforts as the secretariat and convener have been well received. A number of meetings have taken place, bringing together academics, community practitioners, and government to build a "Community of Inquiry" network. This emerging network has provided opportunities to better understand each sector, identify areas of interest, and lay the foundation for increased collaboration.

The challenge is to identify specific projects for collaboration. Quite possibly there may be opportunities to connect community practitioners, researchers and government with what they want and need. A new partnership with the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre to focus on quality of life indicators is gathering momentum and could provide a model for identifying a specific area of focus. Another area of interest is literacy. PolicyLink is also able to draw upon its involvement with the National Community of Inquiry initiative with similar goals and which initially inspired PolicyLink to establish a provincial Community of Inquiry network.

Many academics don't realize the experience and information that is available through the voluntary sector.

Roger Cole,
University

First, academics, government and community groups need to be in the room talking frankly and beginning to understand each other.

Joanne Murray,
Voluntary Sector

Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre is looking for ways to work collaboratively with researchers in communities, universities, and government policy makers in New Brunswick.

Malcolm Shookner,
University

PARTNERING ON THE ISSUE OF POVERTY

Poverty is a serious issue in New Brunswick, affecting many individuals and families. It is not an issue that can be resolved quickly or simply. PolicyLink viewed its role as a connector in this issue, building on the efforts of organizations and governments throughout the province. It integrated the focus on poverty in its policy, research and community engagement efforts, all of which involved partnerships with others.

A. A View From the Front Door

The provincial forum, held in April 2002, profiled a number of innovative initiatives on poverty, including the Urban Core Support Network (UCSN), which is a broad based coalition of individuals living in poverty, community agencies, government departments and business based in Saint John. PolicyLink collaborated on two specific initiatives with UCSN. The first, was entitled “**A View from the Front Door**”, a series of four **community consultations** held in the communities of St. Stephen, Sussex, Miramichi and Fredericton. PolicyLink wanted to gather information on the realities of poverty in each community, their understanding of the issue, and their actions. UCSN’s goals were very complimentary - to learn about the impact of specific policy issues and other barriers. Both groups wanted to provide a context for helping communities move onto the next steps.

“**A View from the Front Door**” provided an opportunity for individuals living in poverty, community agencies and government staff to meet together. There were common areas of concern identified, including the need for a better understanding of poverty from the community as a whole, the lack of broad based leadership, the concern with specific policies, and the need for collaborative approaches involving all sectors, including individuals living in poverty.

B. Provincial Forum on Poverty

The second partnership with UCSN was organizing a provincial forum, **TOGETHER, CHANGING POLICY FROM THE OUTSIDE IN**, in April 2003, in Saint John. Sixty-three individuals representing those living in poverty, community agencies and government departments, met to learn mutually acceptable ways for people in both the community and government to develop public policy²⁰. Workshops covered a range of topics from a presentation of the Province’s policy process, to examples of groups working to encourage specific policy changes. PolicyLink and its members presented workshops on quality of life indicators, the multisectoral model of engagement, and ways to increase the understanding and involvement of citizens, community agencies and government in addressing the issue of poverty.

The challenge is to fit the discussion into the bigger picture of the policy process.

Nadia Hanna,
Government

PolicyLink went into communities and gave a different group of people a voice.

Brenda Murphy,
Voluntary Sector

²⁰ **TOGETHER, CHANGING POLICY FROM THE “OUTSIDE-IN”**, Report of the New Brunswick Conference on Poverty and Policy, Urban Core Support Network, April 22-24, 2003

C. Discussions at the Table

The issue of child and family poverty was a frequent topic at regular meetings of PolicyLink. Many members felt that the discussions, as well as reports such as the “View from the Front Door”, helped to better define the issue of poverty and the challenges in changing specific policies. Again, there was an initial expectation that PolicyLink would specifically impact on the issue of poverty, rather than serve as a catalyst. Many members of PolicyLink, including government and community groups, also participated in meetings with UCSN to strategize on ways to encourage the Province of New Brunswick to establish a “Working Group on Poverty”. The Province expressed an initial interest in this concept, but progress has been slow, with changes in staff and politicians.

EVOLVING THE LEADERSHIP

To guide its efforts, PolicyLink operates with a committee structure that continued to be refined. It is an effective way of strengthening partnerships among the different sectors with opportunities to discuss, debate and achieve specific accomplishments. Members were encouraged to participate on a sub-committee, and an invitation was extended to others outside of PolicyLink to become involved. Each event and activity operated with a sub-committee or advisory committee, all having government and voluntary sector representation.

As the process moved forward new members joined. For some there needed to be specific actions that they could focus on. An excellent example was the Community of Inquiry network, which brought new multisectoral representation from both government and the sector. PolicyLink was learning that there are different ways for individuals to be involved - through advisory roles, sub-committees and specific events.

While the John Howard Society of New Brunswick was the host agency and part of the PolicyLink network, PolicyLink operated separately with its own structure overseeing its operation. One of the key committees is the Coordinating Committee, which functions like an Executive Committee of a Board. It is multisectoral, with individuals from the voluntary sector, both Francophone and Anglophone, and federal and provincial levels of government. This committee meets frequently, between meetings of the full committee and provided an advisory and support role, guiding the development of PolicyLink.

HRDC-NB Region, the lead federal department and Family and Community Services, the lead provincial department both committed significant staff time to the initiative, at the Coordinating Committee level and in other sub-committees and initiatives. Their commitment was invaluable to the multisectoral process. As previously mentioned, both lead departments were instrumental in involving their sectors and promoting the work of PolicyLink.

It requires a great deal of time and energy to do things collaboratively and this is often underestimated. The more you do it, the easier collaboration becomes.

Cheryl O'Toole,
Government

PLANNING THE FUTURE

The future of PolicyLinkNB is uncertain, coming to the end of the two year funding from HRDC. Its membership is committed to continuing and is exploring funding options through its links nationally, regionally and provincially. It has responded to many RFP's, including HRDC's Social Development Partnerships Program. There are concerns that moving to a more "project focus" will lessen its impact on building the capacity of multisectoral partnerships in New Brunswick.

PolicyLink is uniquely positioned through its networks and understandings to provide a venue for promoting dialogue and consultation with community agencies, organizations, federal, provincial and municipal departments. Many members of PolicyLink have identified the need to focus its efforts in very specific directions, building on the learnings to date. There are two key messages from members and partners.

The first is to **connect more with communities**, to assist in developing and supporting the role of multisectoral partnerships and in the building of more inclusive communities. A number of PolicyLink members identified the importance of increasing the involvement of their sector or community in PolicyLink. More members from the aboriginal community; government staff from rural francophone communities; other provincial government and federal departments and members of the business community are some of the areas for focus in continuing to build multisectoral collaboration.

The second is to **move toward more specifics** for this next stage of development. For example, with the Community of Inquiry Network, identify a specific research focus that exemplifies linking research and practice. In the policy process PolicyLink members recommended demonstrating how the multisectoral partnership can work on a specific policy issue.

It is encouraging to note that PolicyLink has recently received short term project funding from Health Canada (post project) for an initiative that incorporates community engagement and policies related to the determinants of health. PolicyLink has also been asked to spear head piloting the promotion of the Accord, an agreement on strengthening the ability of the federal government and the voluntary sector to work together for the benefit of Canadians. Although it is a short-term project it demonstrates the **value of a provincial entity** and the reputation of collaborative efforts in New Brunswick.

There is so much more to do to strengthen government and community efforts.

Cathy Wright,
Voluntary Sector

Part of the evolution is to keep working on the multisectoral model, keeping people engaged and seeing the value of their participation.

Angela Carr,
Government

As the first Federation network to carry out the Accord Training Pilot, we are looking forward to learning from PolicyLink's experiences.

Paula Speevak Sladowski,
University

AND IN CONCLUSION – KEY LEARNINGS

There is no textbook description that guides the path for PolicyLink; it learns by doing. PolicyLink has produced many initiatives and tangible products, but there are also key learnings that are more qualitative in nature. There are five key areas of learning that will be useful to individuals and communities wanting to build multisectoral partnerships around social development issues. They are:

- Inclusion
- Leadership
- Commitment
- Action Oriented Focus
- Resources

It is really important to reflect on this experience because it is new ground.

Margie MacDonald,
Government

Inclusion

New Brunswick is a bilingual province; its citizens live in rural as well as urban areas; and it has a strong aboriginal community. PolicyLink needed to be a provincial entity where none existed before. This meant being able to: function bilingually with services in both official languages; understand the differences in cultures; move meetings around the province; and continually strive to broaden the multisectoral involvement. While not every group could be around the table, there were different ways for people to be involved, through sub-committee work and at specific events. In addition, the emphasis on a specific area of concern, that of child and family poverty, helped to focus the representation from both the voluntary and government sectors.

It was a challenge to participate as traveling was very time consuming.

Martin Bélanger,
Voluntary Sector

Leadership

An initiative this unique needs leaders, individuals who believe in the value of multisectoral partnerships, can envision its future, can understand the catalyst/convener role, and will contribute to guiding the process. It is vital to have leaders from each sector as their contributions are significant in recruiting and sustaining the involvement of their sector, as well as reflecting their needs, strengths and challenges. Leadership also meant guiding the process of strategic planning which was integral to PolicyLink's success and took place frequently. It is a way to include a wide range of inputs and build greater capacity, among the membership and partners, to accomplish key goals and objectives.

Commitment

PolicyLink was a **working** group and it was not just important to have representations from the different sectors but to have individuals committed to ownership of the initiative and being involved. Commitment also means understanding relationships and what it takes to build the comfort level of trust, evident among the different members and partners of PolicyLink. Whether it is voluntary sector to government or government to government or any other combination, these relationships need to be nurtured and built upon to be successful. It is an environment of trust that brings sustainable collaboration. However, it also means understanding the limitations of people's time and resources to engage in the process.

Every partner had a responsibility.

Therese Murray,
Voluntary Sector

Action Oriented Focus

PolicyLink learned that there is a need to have vitality and an action-based approach, to move towards specifics, which increases understanding and participation in the process. This means connecting people, which is a key principle of operation for PolicyLink. Connecting key stakeholders in a number of areas, and at the national, regional and local levels is probably the single biggest outcome of PolicyLink. This connecting role evolved over time and contributed to the quality of PolicyLink's work.

Connecting people, areas of concern and different cultural and geographic settings is the single biggest outcome of PolicyLink.

Rick Hutchins, Animator
PolicyLink NB

Resources

An obvious learning regarding resources is that volunteers and good will are necessary, but **dedicated resources** for staff and operating costs are integral to building, engaging and demonstrating the multisectoral partnership. It is a privilege to work on an initiative without the worry of resources. As the initial project funding has ended, it becomes challenging to continue the momentum. This brings an awkwardness and level of discouragement for provincial and federal levels of government and the voluntary sector in acknowledging limited funding opportunities. However, as stated earlier, perseverance is a key characteristic of the voluntary sector and there is certainly a recognition that PolicyLink has a role to play in the future for New Brunswick.

CONCLUSION

PolicyLink has learned a great deal over its short existence. Many of the learnings have been documented in this report, but perhaps the most important learning of all still needs to be mentioned. There is a real commitment among governments, voluntary sector, academics and business to work collaboratively in New Brunswick, and equally important is the need for an organization such as PolicyLink. It is vital that there is an organization that provides **opportunities for collaboration** and serves the role of a catalyst, connector, and initiator. A significant investment of people, time, and resources has been made to the development of PolicyLink. The momentum is only just beginning and it needs to continue.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

PolicyLink Members:

Martin Bélanger, Agence résidentielle Restigouche
Angela Carr, Family and Community Services, Province of New Brunswick
Jay Clifford, Public Safety, Province of New Brunswick
Alex Dedham, Burnt Church First Nations
Nadia Hanna, Human Resources Development Canada, New Brunswick Region
Cynthia Kirkby, John Howard Society of New Brunswick
Anthony Knight, New Brunswick Library Foundation
Yvon LeBlanc, Rural Secretariat, Agriculture Canada
Anne Leslie, New Brunswick Coalition for Literacy
Margie MacDonald, Population and Public Health Branch, Atlantic Region, Health Canada
Anne Marie Maloney, Saint John Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative
Phyllis Mockler-Caissie, Family and Community Services, Province of New Brunswick
Joanne Murray, John Howard Society of Moncton
Therese Murray, Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation
Cheryl O'Toole, Human Resources Development Canada, New Brunswick Region
René Pelletier, Culture and Sports Secretariat, Province of New Brunswick
Léo-Paul Pinet, Centre de Bénévolat de la Péninsule Acadienne
Sue Rickards, Selby Associates
Bob Stranach, Department of Justice Canada
Janet Thomas, Family and Community Services, Province of New Brunswick
Annette Vautour Mackay, Moncton Volunteer Centre Bénévolat
Cathy Wright, Saint John Human Development Council.

Staff:

Rick Hutchins, Animator

Partners:

Roger Cole, University of New Brunswick
Brenda Murphy, Urban Core Support Network
Malcolm Shookner, Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre, Dalhousie University
Paula Speevak-Sladowski, Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, Carleton University