

### The Challenge

At their best, neighbourhoods can be inclusive places full of opportunity, activity, and enterprise that respond to the needs of residents. Healthy neighbourhoods are both the source and inspiration for resilient individuals and communities. They are mixed use and have residents from across the income spectrum. Strong neighbourhoods create cohesive and supportive places to live, work, learn and play, serving as building blocks for a strong region, province and country.

The challenge is to create a Toronto region where integrated, accessible neighbourhoods meet individual needs and aspirations, and realize shared community visions. All members of civil society – community groups, businesses, service agencies and residents – can work together to put in place the key ingredients for strong neighbourhoods including equitable access to an appropriate mix of jobs and appropriate social and physical infrastructure, such as affordable housing, transportation, schools, social services, recreation and open spaces. Responding to this challenge requires, among other things, better leveraging the capacity of civil society to plan, build and participate in communities. Given that engagement often occurs within local communities, a place-based lens<sup>1</sup> – examining issues at the neighbourhood level – offers a powerful way of understanding and addressing this particular challenge.

### Current Situation

#### *Resident Disengagement*

Residents have become disengaged from neighbourhood planning due to the complex and often confusing nature of the process.<sup>2</sup> Yet, empowering local constituents is critical to ensuring that programs and policies meet local needs, while engaging all parts of civil society. When residents, business people and service providers do express an interest in getting involved in decision making at the neighbourhood level, they often lack the understanding and capacity to engage in the process.<sup>3</sup> Research has highlighted that engaging the public in decision making about their communities produces better results by helping to set priorities, establish partnerships and facilitate implementation.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Impact of Income Inequality*

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has become increasingly geographically segregated along socio-economic and ethno-cultural lines.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, more than one in every four families in the City of Toronto was living in low-income conditions,<sup>6</sup> and the percentage of low income families living in higher poverty neighbourhoods in Toronto soared to 46% in 2006, as compared to 18% two decades earlier.<sup>7</sup> The polarization of income between neighbourhoods has triggered neighbourhood decline.<sup>8</sup> This has been both the cause and result of unequal investment.<sup>9</sup> Some of the signs of decline include business flight and disinvestment, declining housing conditions, a lack of adequate and appropriate services and increases in crime and social disorder.<sup>10</sup> Evidence suggests that the GTA is currently at a tipping point with respect to the health and vitality of many neighbourhoods. The failure to address these issues could lead the city region to a point of no return. While this challenge is less acute outside of the City of Toronto, research has shown that similar trends are emerging in other parts of the region.<sup>11</sup>

### Promising New Developments

To build stronger neighbourhoods, there has been a marked rise of cross-sectoral collaboration on initiatives by residents, landlords, developers, business people and community service providers.

**People Plan Toronto:** This committee of representatives from a number of residents' associations across the City of Toronto has been a strong advocate for the democratization of the planning process. People Plan Toronto has petitioned for reforms, recognizing the limitations of the City's urban planning and development process for engaging citizens. It has also introduced educational campaigns to engage citizens in city building efforts.

**Civic Engagement across the Toronto Region:** United Ways across the Toronto region are engaging local residents, business, and community organizations in partnerships to create stronger neighbourhoods. Engaging these players in different ways, these diverse initiatives have demonstrated the power of collaboration to measurably improve community opportunities.

**Toronto:** The creation of United Way Toronto and the City of Toronto's Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force in 2005 was born of a previous Toronto Summit and laid the foundation for a number of engagement-focused projects including: Toronto's Neighbourhood Action Plan,<sup>12</sup> Mayor's Community Safety Secretariat; Ontario's Youth Challenge Fund; the Community Hubs Initiative and Action for Neighbourhood Change. These initiatives demonstrate the potential for local collaboration and supporting communities to build on their own research and understanding of local assets, needs and priorities.

**York:** The United Way of York Region has developed a Strength Investment Fund to strengthen civic muscle. This fund helps improve partnerships between different groups by providing financial support and new opportunities for involvement in community decision making and giving local actors the chance to tackle community issues.<sup>13</sup>

**Peel:** The United Way and the Region of Peel are collaborating to engage residents, community agencies and other key stakeholders in developing community-based solutions that address local needs. Both the creation of the Neighbourhood Development Grants program and Community Advisory Councils illustrate how Peel is working to foster inclusive opportunities which build the capacity of all members of civil society to contribute to the growth and success of the region.<sup>14</sup>

**Regent Park Revitalization:** This partnership between Toronto Community Housing and the Daniels Corporation, with the involvement of private sector organizations such as RBC, Tim Horton's and Sobeys, demonstrates the positive economic and social impact of focused redevelopment and private sector investment in lower income neighbourhoods. It also shows the importance of innovative private sector leadership in promoting targeted social investments and commitments to social hiring. Its successful first phase completion has generated new economic and social opportunities in the neighbourhood, becoming an exemplar for other redevelopment projects such as the City of Toronto's Lawrence Heights, which will be soon underway.

**Tower Renewal:** This collaboration between ERA Architects and the City of Toronto uses holistic place-based strategies aimed at turning under-served and aging concrete high-rise towers into equitable, vibrant, complete, compact, transit-supported and low-carbon communities throughout the Toronto region. These strategies include:

- "promoting more mixed land uses to provide access to fresh food, services and amenities within tower neighbourhoods;
- encouraging local service delivery and economic development;
- supporting local entrepreneurs and social enterprises;
- expanding housing options and tenure models while maintaining current affordability;
- motivating and supporting tower owners to reinvest in buildings to improve amenity and energy efficiency; and
- engaging in 'place making' to transform currently fragmented tower clusters into cohesive and liveable environments."<sup>15</sup>

## Chief Barriers to Progress

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- Given the multitude of stakeholders, and the various levels of understanding of and interest in place-based work, it is challenging to create appropriate opportunities to bring people together for sharing information, learning, and collaborating.
- There has been a lack of coordination on housing, neighbourhood planning and poverty reduction issues between different orders of government and relevant ministries and departments.
- Municipal zoning provisions limit the potential to develop mixed land use and housing tenures in neighbourhoods across the Toronto region.
- There are currently few financial incentives to encourage private sector investment in neighbourhoods with significant need. While there have been investments from all levels of government in place-based strategies, it is imperative that such investments are sustained or increased and diversified to address local priorities.
- The limited availability of appropriate neighbourhood-level data has made it difficult to determine where gaps exist and to help create an appropriate framework to assess and plan for neighbourhood change.

## Opportunities for Action

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There are significant opportunities to develop collective actions that will better engage residents, encourage investment and promote stronger, mixed-use and mixed-income neighbourhoods. Some of these opportunities are outlined below.<sup>16</sup>

### 1. Build Capacity for Strong, Healthy Neighbourhoods

#### a. Provide opportunities for civil society to shape municipal planning

There is an opportunity to develop a model for convening a mix of neighbourhood constituents – including residents, businesses, municipal service providers and community organizations – to develop a shared vision and toolbox for addressing issues and opportunities for investment. In order to have a lasting impact, governments must also partner with constituents to create a policy and decision-making environment that aligns with local planning efforts. Several

prominent civic leaders have called for reforms to the planning process<sup>17</sup> to ensure that, once equipped with the tools, local citizens, business leaders and service providers have appropriate opportunities to work with locally elected officials to shape neighbourhood planning in a meaningful way. Providing avenues for civil society to shape decision making is critical to ensuring that neighbourhoods are stronger, vibrant and more sustainable.

*b. Build community through partnerships*

There is an opportunity to strengthen community life by improving the living circumstances of residents of high-rise buildings in low-income neighbourhoods. While the challenges facing these residents are significant, there is also a strong desire for change – both in terms of restoring social order and in creating more and better on-site spaces and facilities for cultural and recreational use. New United Way Toronto research suggests building on the positive relationships that exist between tenants, and between tenants and landlords, and helping these groups to work with governments, agencies and business to improve community life. United Way Toronto has already initiated this kind of collaborative work in tower communities through its Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative. Similar partnerships can be launched in other high-rise buildings where social and recreational spaces no longer exist, are inadequate, or in disrepair, and where problems of social disorder are high. Partnerships that focus on buildings in some of the region's high-poverty clusters, where conditions are the worst, would be an ideal place to start revitalizing neighbourhoods.

## **2. Enhance opportunities for greater private sector leadership and investment:**

*a. Develop a strong business case for investment*

Private sector investors generally assess the potential of any area in which they are considering investing. In the case of low- and medium-income areas, investors often underestimate potential returns on investment because they fail to recognize the scope of the areas' informal economy. By drawing on best practices and the successes of recent commercial ventures, such as RBC's investment in Regent Park, there is the opportunity to research and build a stronger business case for greater private sector investment. This would involve:

- measuring the value of the informal economy to demonstrate the significant commercial benefit of greater investment in low income neighbourhoods;
- demonstrating the real buying power of residents;
- exploring possible incentives to promote social hiring and other social objectives amongst private sector businesses;
- utilizing existing tools such as section 37 of the Provincial Planning Act to direct and encourage investment into particular areas or projects; and
- coordinating and enabling public-private partnerships.

*b. Create innovation hubs in low-income communities*

Small and medium enterprises often suffer from limited capacity and access to capital. Through formalized partnerships, larger businesses can mentor and invest in small entrepreneurial businesses in lower income neighbourhoods. As small businesses expand, larger organizations will receive returns on their investments, while having supported the desirability of the neighbourhood. This may require amendments to municipal zoning regulations to permit diversification of land uses in residential areas and, specifically, small-scale economic development and commercial activities.<sup>18</sup>

## **Questions for Discussion**

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1. How do we enable, empower and support a mix of players within neighbourhoods to work together to build strong communities?
2. What is the best way to replicate successful private sector business practices that lead to investments and innovative partnerships in communities?
  - a. Through research (i.e. documenting the successful ways in which private sector organizations are investing in low income communities)?
  - b. Better using existing planning tools to direct investment into particular areas? If so, which tools should we focus on?
  - c. Designing and implementing incentives for innovative partnerships that can direct investments into low income communities?
3. There was strong consensus in CivicAction's Neighbourhoods and Affordable Housing Working Group that there is latent entrepreneurialism in low income communities and also a belief that stronger, more established businesses could realize returns by assisting those entrepreneurs. How could this be accomplished? What kind of business to business mentorship model would be appropriate?

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- <sup>1</sup> Bradford suggests that a place-based approach entails taking a collaborative, multi-level and multi-partner perspective on the challenges faced by a particular geographic area and the potential solutions to these; as opposed to 'traditional' approaches that are more segmented and a-spatial. See Bradford, N. (March 2005). Place-based Public Policy: Towards a New Urban and Community Agenda for Canada. Research Report 51.
- <sup>2</sup> People Plan Toronto. (May 2009). Planning Resource Centres: Models from Other Cities. Toronto: Canadian Urban Institute. Accessed 17 January 2011 from: [http://peopleplantoronto.org/cprc/ppt-cprc\\_research%2020090529.pdf](http://peopleplantoronto.org/cprc/ppt-cprc_research%2020090529.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Smith, B. (2003). Public Policy and Public Participation Engaging Citizens and Community in the Development of Public Policy. Ottawa: Health Canada. 14 January 2011 from: [http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/pdf/pub\\_policy\\_partic\\_e.pdf](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/pdf/pub_policy_partic_e.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> Hulchanski, D. (2010). The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970 — 2005. Toronto: University of Toronto, Cities Centre. p 10; United Way Toronto. (2011) Vertical Poverty: Poverty by Postal Code 2. Toronto. Accessed January 2011 from: <http://unitedwaytoronto.com/verticalpoverty/downloads/Report-PovertybyPostalCode2-VerticalPoverty-Final.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> United Way Toronto. (2007). Losing Ground: the Persistent Growth of Family Poverty in Canada's Largest City. Toronto. Accessed January 2011 from: <http://www.unitedwaytoronto.com/downloads/whatWeDo/reports/PovertybyPostalCodeFinal.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> United Way Toronto. (2011).
- <sup>8</sup> Mississauga Summit. (2009). Building Our Human Services Capacity; York Region. (2008). Just the facts about your community: Diversity of Residents living in York region. Accessed 16 January 2011 from: <http://www.york.ca/NR/rdonlyres/mqgter3i4mgiupekn6zx2asc2i2txcumyhguxnczdroxiu7coyzxov7jlhg756hq363guw3oey3o3tiy4i344bfof/Employment+Income+Fact+Sheet.pdf>; United Way Toronto. (2011); p. 6.
- <sup>9</sup> United Way Toronto. (2011).
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> United Way Toronto. (2007); p. 34.
- <sup>12</sup> This identified nine (later expanded to thirteen) neighbourhoods, for investment by governments, business, and labour and community organizations, and outlined a tripartite agreement to mobilize further government investment in community infrastructure.
- <sup>13</sup> United Way of York Region. "Strength Investment" Accessed 17 January 2011 from: <http://www.unitedwayyorkregion.com/strength-investments/>
- <sup>14</sup> United Way of Peel Region "Community Councils" Accessed 17 January 2011 from: <http://www.unitedwaypeel.org/get-involved/in-community-councils.html>
- <sup>15</sup> United Way Toronto. (2011).
- <sup>16</sup> These neighbourhood level initiatives would not be a substitute for broader policy reforms but would form part of a variety of interventions, policies and programs that are required to help ensure that all neighbourhoods meet their potential and effectively address disparities across the region. Other CivicAction working groups have examined complementary policy objectives which must also be advanced, including increasing income security and social infrastructure, ensuring the a mix of affordable housing options, improving access to public transit, and promoting economic development and labour-market planning.
- <sup>17</sup> People Plan Toronto. (May 2010). Re: The next Chief Planner and the future of planning in Toronto. Toronto. Accessed 17 January 2011 from: <http://peopleplantoronto.org/Future%20of%20Planning%20Letter%20signed.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> United Way Toronto. (2011).