

TCFN Resource Toolkit



Community Foundations Addressing Poverty in their Communities

During its existence, TCFN events offered community foundation practitioners from Europe and North America a wonderful opportunity to exchange knowledge, offer commentary, and share feedback around important themes in community foundation philanthropy.

In April 2010 TCFN held a peer event in Riga, Latvia that offered participants the opportunity to explore their work in reducing poverty. This brief toolkit was prepared following the event. While the conversation is an ongoing one in many organizations around the world, we hope that you may find some of these conversations, questions, and tools useful in your work also.

1. What can community foundations do to alleviate poverty in their communities?

- Partner with others to make recommendations to city and local government about poverty reduction.
- Put poverty as unifying purpose of what we do.
- Empower people to see themselves as agents of change in order to become part of the solution of their situation.
- Provide the coaching and “prize/carrot” necessary to do so.
- Help people help themselves.
- Change the way of thinking about charity and help.

2. IF...THEN scenarios for community foundations

IF a community foundation:

- Connects experts with those affected to inform program design...
- Knows how to inform and motivate its own community using positive language or shocking facts...
- Builds both a long term and short term strategy for addressing poverty...
- Empowers the community by bringing organizations, leaders, and individuals together...
- Could represent the voices and the needs of the local community...
- Could incorporate empowerment of the local community into its programs...
- Could support initiatives that make people empowered to reduce poverty... and secure safety...
- Builds/encourages loyalty, commitment, ownership into grant making...
- Enables leadership into program design...

THEN...the community foundation can develop programs that have meaningful impact on poverty reduction.

3. Perspectives on social justice

Recent work of the Global Fund for Community Foundations and Community Foundations of Canada were highlighted in the peer gathering:

Global Fund for Community Foundations

Global Fund has been through several grant rounds, and our questions and feedback spoke to functions as commonalities. We are beginning to see – anecdotally – that these organizations (emerging community foundations) are doing more. Beyond the demographic information, we started to ask what people are trying to do at a grassroots level. We wanted to see where the community foundations see their own priorities.

Initial data showed that people were thinking about this deeply – how they prioritized and what they are really about. Indicators – community trust, poverty reduction, local groups, building community assets, etc. – confirmed what one felt instinctively, that there was a common set of principles that was there.

One-on-one interviews with 37 organizations were coordinated to push them to think about what they are all about. We also asked people to define the term social justice and what other words they are using. It is clear that people are working in this space but they all do it differently. We want to start to identify what type of groups people fall into (depending on context, leadership, etc) and lead the discussion to a more outcomes oriented direction.

The unique selling point of community foundations is community. Other foundations don't get that. Whenever we talk about social justice, it is done through a community lens. Not enough funders get the factors that matter.

Community Foundations of Canada

CFC brought 8 – 10 practitioners together, regularly, to talk about these issues (who are the people working on it, who is addressed, how do we address this).

CFC determined that it needed to move from the talk to the action. Five of the members tackled this through the community lens. Some used a community roundtable; there was evaluation work in 2 or 3 instances. CFC created a website with tools, research pieces (all in the Canadian context). What is striking, when you look at the community foundations in Canada, is that it is not about money, instead it is about community.

Then, along came [Vital Signs](#) (not necessarily a result of this research). Now, we produce and release a national annual report. Historically, that report is always focused on poverty. In 2007-2008, we made the statement that the needle of poverty has not moved in 20 years (same percentage of people in poverty existed). So, we've moved from thinking to action to research and dissemination of information.

4. Poverty reduction: the ongoing conversation

During the peer exchange that examined how community foundations can develop a strategy to reduce poverty. Here are a few thoughts shared that you might find applicable to your work:

How are we thinking about it? As practitioners, we don't often have time to think about things and it is incredibly helpful to hear what people are thinking about our field and also about our own work. We have far more in common than we think we do.

How is the community involved? There are people that cannot access a high quality of life and that matters to everyone. We use the subtitle, "a community approach" because we need the broader community to support this initiative. We can start by lobbying and getting the community to recognize the problem itself.

How do we talk about what we're doing? Social justice is not always good language. Although there are elements of the social justice package that are good, the whole package is sensitive.

How do we focus our work in a multilateral way? Community foundations can have a significant impact on poverty at many levels, from grassroots (e.g. providing washing machines) to national policy. Public policy is important to all of us, though it may present a difficult challenge.

How do we develop an approach to fit the needs of our unique community? No one approach is going to work within or between communities.

How do we incorporate a balance of practitioners and academics? A lot of research has been done to investigate the impact of NGOs in general on poverty. As practitioners most of us don't get to access this research. Very little of this work focuses on community foundations, which means our perspective has potential to contribute something new and valuable to the field. It would be valuable to link our experiences to a recognized analytical framework. That will enable us to disseminate our learning more credibly, not just within our own movement but to development practitioners and academics more widely.

How is the community foundation role defined in this work? I think that the bridging role is a critical one and one that allows for a much richer response than either research or practice on its own. It takes very active bridging though and space for dialogue about the 'evidence' and its fit within a particular context and then how new learnings can help to contribute to strengthening existing evidence. It would be great to have some focused work in that area.

How do we balance our work with the human and financial resources that are available? Capacity is always an issue.

5. What can community foundations do to alleviate poverty?

A three-page PowerPoint summary prepared for this peer gathering covers some key points. Visit the summary information for this peer gathering on the [Global Fund for Community Foundations website](#) to access it.