

A Radical Notion

The forging of a community-wide strategy to reduce poverty in Waterloo Region

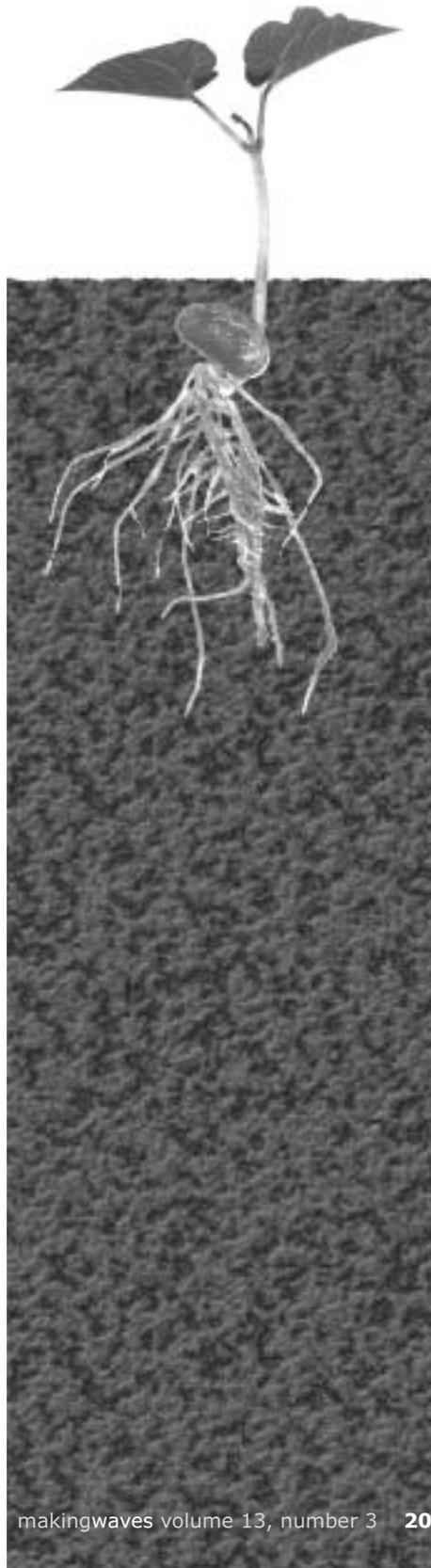
BY DON MCNAIR & ERIC LEVITEN-REID

For the last five years, citizens of Ontario's Waterloo Region have been setting aside vast differences in income, education, ethnicity, and political and religious persuasion to pioneer a multisectoral approach to reducing poverty. Nonprofits, businesses, and governments are looking for ways to take action that actually roots out local poverty, in addition to alleviating its effects. The network that champions and coordinates their action, Opportunities 2000, has had singular success in mobilizing an array of partners and resources, and the imagination of the public at large, behind an initiative that does not claim so much to have answers to poverty, but the determination to find them and help other communities to do likewise.

The following excerpts from the book Opportunities 2000: Creating Pathways Out of Poverty in Waterloo Region (Kitchener, 2002) explain why and how people got a community-wide antipoverty initiative rolling in Waterloo Region.

EVEN BEFORE the Second World War, the cities of Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge were flourishing examples of the "old economy," with its basis in labour-intensive manufacturing. The making of rubber products, clothing, and electrical appliances as well as brewing and food processing employed tens of thousands, many with union wage levels and benefits. Jobs were plentiful for someone with a high school diploma.

The 1980s brought dramatic change. Lower production costs outside Canada, labour-displacing technology, and changing consumer demand tore down the pillars of the regional economy. In the space of twelve



years, 50 plants closed their doors. With the plants went some 20,000 jobs. The number of Waterloo Region families living in poverty, 8300 in 1980, rose to 9700 in 1990.

But the recovery was equally robust. As early as 1992, a new economy was blossoming based on knowledge-intensive services. Thousands of new jobs were created in insurance, computer hardware and software, telecommunications, environmental design, finance, and real estate.

The strange thing was that recovery brought no relief in terms of regional poverty. In fact, the number of households spending a very great portion of their monthly income on necessities (food, shelter, and clothing) rose to nearly 13,000 by 1995. To add to the irony, half these families were supported by wage earners. In other words, people were finding work, but remaining poor. In the mid-1990s, 55,000 residents were living in poverty in the very midst of one of the New Economy's success stories.

Something had come unhinged.

From the first, citizens of Waterloo Region responded to the economic and social crisis with great energy and creativity. The Province's social service and income support programs did their level best, but staffing and budgets were simply inadequate to the volume of need (and would even diminish after 1995).

It fell to other sectors to close the gaps in the social safety net. Fortunately, Waterloo Region is home to over 1500 nonprofit agencies, services clubs,

charitable organizations, and churches. Many of them went into high gear, helping low-income households to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves. Thousands of hours of effort on the part of the staff and volunteers of these organizations, and thousands of dollars in donations, essentially kept Waterloo Region's safety net from bursting in the 1980s and '90s.

A non-government response of a different order – more like a trampoline than a net – also arose. Under the direction of Paul Born, the Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA) sought to improve the quality of employment opportunities and prepare local people to seize these opportunities. CODA's program included self-employment training, job search assistance, the mentoring of new entrepreneurs, business incubation, and a loan fund for new businesses. In 1993 CODA and 18 partner organizations went on to launch "Opportunities Planning," a decentralized approach to connecting people with work. Social assistance recipients, social service agencies, and the provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services all assisted in designing and administering strategies to overcome the employment barriers facing the most disadvantaged. People unused to talking to each other found themselves collaborators in actual projects.

Yet by 1995 it was apparent that the accomplishments of CODA and all the other intervening organizations were

making only a dint in local poverty. If anything, their efforts were disguising from the general public the extent of the turmoil into which economic change had pitched thousands of their neighbours. The pain had been mitigated without any progress having been made on the process that was inflicting all the injury.

"2, 3, 4, or 5 heads are better than one, especially when they are from different sectors ... intra-sectoral engagement is not enough – inter-sectoral engagement has more impact. To achieve significant impact on poverty reduction the various sectors in our community must work together with those living in poverty to create opportunities." Deborah Foster-Stable

Hatching the Concept

Inefficiencies were partly to blame. A myriad of small organizations were tackling one or another attribute of impoverishment, whether joblessness, or hunger, inadequate housing, crime, or poor health. Only a few did so with close reference to other organizations. Most worked on their own and expended precious resources in the duplication of administrative services.

That was one of the factors driving the merger in 1997 of CODA and another social service organization, Lutherwood. Between them the two had over 25 years of service to the community, considerable credibility, and a wide range of programs familiar to local people. The new Lutherwood-CODA,

with over 100 staff and a single, sophisticated system for administering finances and human resources, had energy to spare.

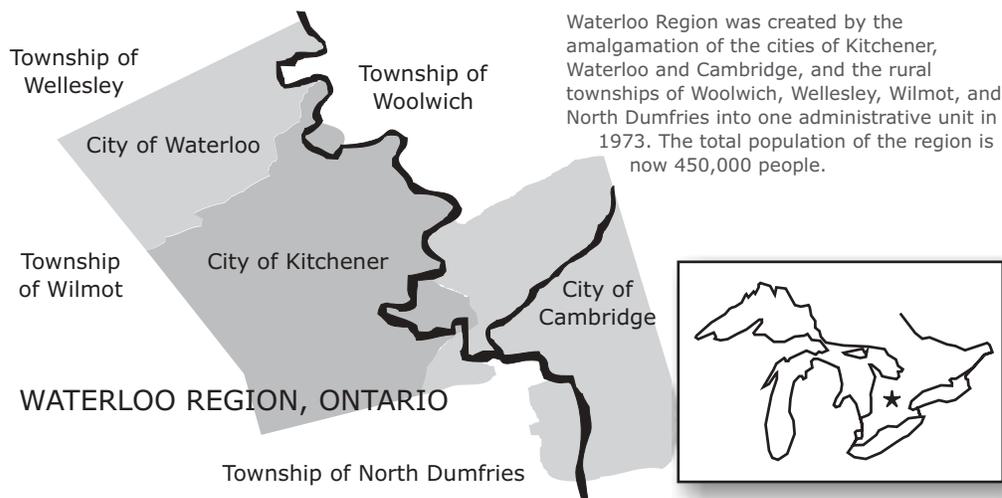
For what? For finding a way to achieve that scale and co-ordination of local action which could reverse, not just retard, the growth of poverty. For a

couple of years, Born and a handful of others, including CODA staff members Mark Cabaj and Allan Day, and Charles Pascal, executive director of the Atkinson Foundation, had been considering the problem. Pascal urged upon them the need to think bold and big. Opportunities Planning seemed to present a promising option. Could its principles and practices be moved into the mainstream of local social and economic life? Could they inform and inspire nonprofit organizations to alter the spectrum of economic opportunities available to low-income people across Waterloo Region?

The scheme called for substantial resources. Pascal got the ball rolling. At his recommendation, The Atkinson Foundation committed \$380,000, which The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation then seconded with \$200,000. Local businessman Rick Brock was another early supporter in terms of money, council, and energy.

The name of the initiative was to be Opportunities 2000, OP2000 for short, and its intention was unreservedly bold: to reduce Waterloo region's poverty rate to the lowest in Canada. More precisely, OP2000 would help 2000 households exit poverty by the end of the Year 2000.

The initiative would make no claim to exclusivity. The Opportunities Planning experience had crystallized the elements of an approach to reducing poverty, not the approach. An important part of the new process would be to investigate, develop, and test-drive more ways of



creating employment and income opportunities and then to share its successes and insights with other Canadians.

This is how it would work. Lutherwood-CODA staff would engage nonprofit organizations, businesses, government, and those living on low incomes in generating ideas for income and employment opportunities for low-income households. These groups represent the four main “sectors” or “stakeholders” in regional poverty. The staff would help nonprofit “project partners” to design and implement viable programs and businesses. There would be a plan of action, but one that everybody expected to evolve with time, as additional organizations joined, launched new initiatives, and learned new lessons.

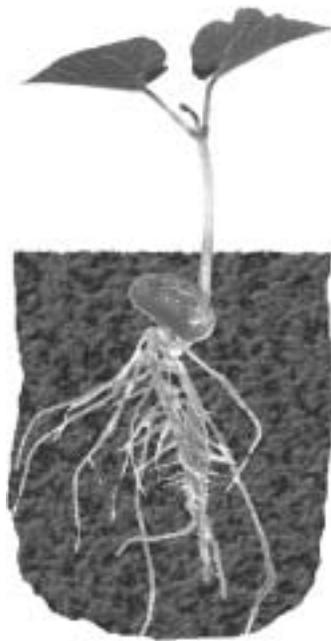
A Leadership Roundtable would convene to guide the initiative. The 20 members would again include representatives of all four sectors. In addition to developing a long-term plan for combating poverty in the region, Roundtable members would act to build community support for OP2000 and raise awareness about poverty and poverty reduction.

The scheme was ambitious. To some, the very size of the vision was reckless. How was this idea for radical change, essentially conceived in private by a small circle of people, to become a truly community-based and -driven initiative?

The early stages of OP2000 saw hundreds of staff hours devoted to engaging a critical mass of people and organizations. Given the Opportunities Planning experience, engagement meant participation in specific projects that offered results in the here and now. OP2000 was leery of community development “processes” that were strong on wide-ranging discussion but weak on concrete action. People had to realize their ability to have a measurable impact on poverty. At the same time, they could build relationships with collaborators, learn about poverty, and devise new ways to beat it.

OP2000 staff expected nonprofit organizations to take the lead in developing these poverty reduction projects. The role of business, government, and low-income households would be a supportive one. They would offer

“Like the stone dropped in the pot of boiling water, ‘2,000 by 2000’ engaged people’s attention sufficiently to allow a complex & ambitious project to unfold.” Paul Born



guidance to nonprofit organizations and would open doors that might help them in their work.

Shaping such a range of sectors and organizations into a working network was an extraordinary effort in itself, carried out against well-founded doubts. What Born, Day, and Cabaj were proposing was unprecedented. Was it credible? Was it hype? What types of project would OP2000 encourage, and what support would it provide? Was this approach compatible with the goals and needs of prospective partners?

Finding the Money

Doing great things is one thing. Doing them with other people’s money is quite another, especially if the money is to be a gift. The first thing in OP2000’s favour was its bold intention to change the way that the whole community thought about and responded to poverty. Second, the proposal gained credence from Lutherwood and CODA’s long record of investment and accomplishment in

helping people make a better living. A third factor was that OP2000 was asking for much more than cash.

The Royal Bank’s experience was emblematic. In early 1998, Born approached one of its regional vice-presidents, Jim Gordon, for a donation of \$240,000 over four years – plus all the business know-how and connections that the Royal could spare. In Born’s words, “We needed people who understood how the economy works and had a network we could tap into.... Jim can engage, with one phone call, someone it might otherwise have taken us months to bring on board.”

Gordon, for his part, was intrigued by the idea that OP2000 would not be satisfied with money alone, but wanted to tap the Royal’s “heart and soul.” He committed the money, and two staff secondments besides. (Secondments proved invaluable to the initiative.) In time, he too would come to see the money as secondary to the effect that OP2000 had on employees. “Getting involved with this initiative is probably one of the most rewarding things that some of our staff has done,” he said later.

Frank Rovers of Conestoga-Rovers and Associates (a consulting engineering company) donated another \$100,000. Such an affirmation of support from a local firm was a great source of leverage. Additional grants from Budd Canada, Canada Trust, and M&M Meats followed. By the time of OP2000’s official launch in May 1998, its 4-year operating budget was in place. The \$1.1 million would cover the costs of a core staff that grew from three to seven full-time positions (including three secondments) and a number of subcontractors and university placement students.

It is important to remember that OP2000 assembled these resources at a time when the federal and provincial governments, among others, were cutting their spending on social programs. There was real public skepticism about programs that were supposed to assist people living on low incomes. The fact that so many people and organizations nevertheless chose to support OP2000 speaks to the wisdom of its choice of strategy: sustained, community-wide collaboration to assist individuals as they seek to move out of poverty.

Defining the Goal

A paradox lay at the very center of OP2000. It was intended to be a genuine, community-wide learning experience in which all sorts of residents, OP2000 staff and partners included, learned about poverty and how they could reduce it.

But what could ignite such widespread enthusiasm to participate and experiment? What goal could become the focus of public attention, the standard around which people could rally? Would the same goal also be meaningful to a lot of professionals in the fields of social work and economics?

The answer to the last question turned out to be “no.” To engage people in an exhilarating process of discovery, OP2000’s originators finally decided to identify the project with a goal that made sense, but defied logic: “2,000 households out of poverty by the end of 2000.”

The trouble was that the goal assumed people already knew what the initiative was supposed to help them understand. What are the attributes of poverty, so that we know who is impoverished now, and is no longer in 2001? No-one in or out of OP2000 had a specific answer.

For good reason, many people consider low income the signal attribute. When a household spends a very great portion of its income on nothing more than food, clothing, and shelter, its members might be said to live in poverty. The Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) calculated by Statistics Canada specifies the level of income below which households of various sizes must devote most of their resources to basic needs. Numbers of households living below the LICO therefore might serve as a measure of the incidence of poverty.

Unfortunately, as anybody who has experienced it first hand can tell you, the roots of poverty are tangled and multidimensional. In addition to a household’s income or financial assets, poverty can be tracked in terms of health, social relations, education, and other factors. An additional \$2,000 per annum in somebody’s pocket might look good on a graph, but do nothing to improve their health, housing, or long-term employability.

That the LICO was central to OP2000’s definition of poverty came as a great frustration to many people who already knew something about it. “2,000 by 2000” seemed to be an absurdly unrealistic target, and what’s worse, a marketing ploy that vacuumed away public attention and resources from agencies that had gained great insight into poverty from years of “front-line” experience.

OP2000 stuck to its guns. Whatever its failings, “2,000 by 2000” did fire the public imagination. As rough a measure of poverty as income might be, it was the best single indicator available. Above all, it was crucial for OP2000 to demonstrate that community-wide initiatives don’t need a sophisticated understanding of poverty from the word “go.” Citizens can accomplish great things without it, and in the course of their endeavours gain the deeper insight. The people living in poverty have already waited long enough. As Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute warned, “The debate over the definition of poverty has slowed the national agenda – don’t let it slow the local agenda.”

“Building bridges between people who typically would not talking with each other is 80% of it,” says Joe Allen of OP2000’s approach to poverty reduction. (above) The Morning Glory Café; (middle) an open-air forum with Pat Capponi; (below) a public rally.



“OP2000 is wonderful for its achievement of social cohesion and civil society – just getting such diverse people around a table to discuss problems is an accomplishment – that’s where the hope is.”

Brice Balmer, House of Friendship



Assembling Leaders

Fundraising at OP2000 therefore went hand in hand with the recruitment of leaders – real leaders, with significant responsibility and authority. The Leadership Roundtable, first struck in the spring of 1998, was to serve as the project's great "forge." There ideas could be brought, discussed, heated, and shaped into a likely instrument of poverty reduction. Lutherwood-CODA assumed full responsibility for the financial and administrative side to OP2000, so Roundtable members could focus their attention on making things happen.

Each of the major sponsors was obliged to place a representative on the Roundtable. The majority of members arrived by way of a personal invitation from Born as he sized up the initiative's strategic needs and who was available to help address them. Representation for all four stakeholder groups was of central importance.

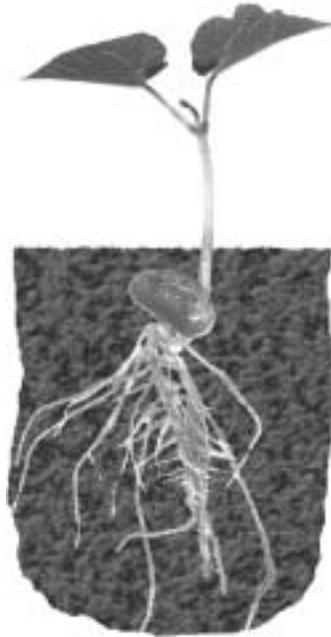
In the course of 1998 the Roundtable grew steadily from 10 to 20 members. OP2000's message was a big help in this recruitment, for in its breadth and simplicity it spoke to people in many different walks of life: poverty is a significant problem in our region; we need new and better ways to reduce it; everyone in the community can help; by working together, we can make even more of a difference.

Pat Henderson was an early recruit. The one-time executive director of a major hospital had retired to devote more time to her family. Did membership on the Roundtable jive with that? "Yes," in her view:

"I have four grandchildren living in this area and three just outside of Waterloo Region. I can't help but wonder what my generation has left them as an inheritance – I think it's a huge social debt.... I am grateful that I was asked to be a part of Opportunities 2000 because I think it is ... helping to lessen that debt."

Joe Allen, who later co-chaired the Roundtable with Henderson, came across OP2000 while "shopping" around Kitchener-Waterloo's nonprofits for an opportunity to volunteer. After a

"Make sure you get people who understand that involvement is what is wanted – even above money." Joe Allen



meeting, Henderson invited him to the Roundtable. "I was looking for them and they were looking for me," he says, on account of his expertise in employment procedures and practices. (He was a director of human resources at KPMG.) What set OP2000 apart? Allen was intrigued because, unlike other useful work, this involved "community capacity building – helping the community become aware that poverty is everybody's problem and that there's a way for everybody to get involved in reducing it."

Ann Van Norman, by contrast, found herself volunteered to the Roundtable as a representative for Conestoga-Rovers. She decided to stay, nonetheless. For her, the experience has been both humbling and exciting. Humbling because, as she says, "I had got to be a 'know it all' adult. This work told me maybe I don't know so much." Exciting because OP2000 afforded the opportunity to go quietly about something that would have a huge impact, and not just on the community. To Van Norman's great satisfaction, she

now sees her own children assuming positions of leadership.

Frank Adamson, executive director of the United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries, was a natural choice for the Roundtable. His very profession concerned connecting the nonprofit and private sectors. To Adamson, on the other hand, aligning his organization with OP2000 was a "no-brainer." If the United Way was going to help fund recreational programs and housing for low-income families, surely it should help the heads of those households to get a job, shouldn't it?

In the event, Adamson found that logic a lot for many of his contacts to swallow. People – even generous, community-minded people – did not see why they should mix their charitable deeds with economic action. They considered alterations to the economic system to be someone else's responsibility. It took Adamson fully six months of presentations, meetings, memoranda, and phone calls to put enough money on the table to pay for a United Way staff secondment to OP2000.

Like Adamson, other Roundtable members took up the task of mobilizing their colleagues, connections, and the public at large. Jim Gordon and Paul Born organized a "poverty tour" that brought a carload of Royal Bank staff to food banks, training centres, and other sites along the front lines of poverty reduction. As the invisibility of the problem diminished, person by person, energy and determination grew. The realization that children made up the majority of local people living in poverty sealed the Royal's commitment to OP2000, for example.

Despite its attractions, OP2000 demanded a lot of patience from its leaders in its first months. The Roundtable brought together busy, skilled, and high-powered people who, often as not, were strangers due to the different sectors in which they circulated. There was no formal corporate structure, and no formal mandate. There was no definition of "poverty" to which every member agreed, just lots of ideas about how to reduce it. There was as yet no plan, nor a firm idea about how one should take form.

Ambiguity was in the very nature of OP2000 at the outset, and intentionally so, for otherwise there would have been little “elbow room” for people to think and act unconventionally in the task at hand. In return, OP2000 needed leaders who gave it time and space to resolve its ambiguity.

It got them. As things turned out, they only spent a small fraction of their time in the Roundtable meetings, held for two hours once a month. The rest of their commitment they spent out in the community, raising awareness, motivating people, using what they knew and who they knew to get things moving.

Off & ... Running?

By the spring of 1998, the foundations of the project were in place. Funds had been committed. Basic infrastructure had been developed. The Leadership Roundtable was underway. A few projects were even under consideration. Some important expectations had already been met. Now was the time to give OP2000 a more public profile.

At the official launch May 12, local media joined 200 organizations and other friends at Regional Council chambers to hear Paul Born’s “call to action.” As OP2000’s consulting director, Born described the event as a “celebration of the power of community.”

“Waterloo Region is an exceptional community – by almost any standard. If poverty cannot be eliminated here, then where? If not now, then when? We have a history of collaboration in this region. By working together we have created a quality of life recognized around the world. By working together in the spirit of a Mennonite barn-raising we can and will make great progress in creating the lowest level of poverty in Canada here in Waterloo Region.”

Pascal placed OP2000 in a national context. It is beyond the capacity of government alone to halt the divide growing between rich and poor in Canada. What we require is long-term, sustainable, community-based action to supplement government social policy. In an era of mounting social challenges, he identified OP2000’s work as a “beacon of hope for Canada.”

To an outsider, the launch may have looked like the catalytic moment it was intended to be. The project seemed blessed with good fortune, and things seemed to be falling into place. But insiders to OP2000 were disconcerted. The launch did not bring about any dramatic change to OP2000’s rate of development. There was an engine and it was indeed turning over, but progress was halting.

A number of factors were troubling the Leadership Roundtable. Its composition, while dynamic, was not representative of the major stakeholders. Only one or two low-income residents were participating, when the design had called for eight. The timing of meetings (before 8 a.m.) did not work well for people without childcare. Nor did the corporate premises and people in suits and ties do anything for the comfort of low-income people. Without their participation, the Roundtable could not say with any assurance that its decisions made sense in the eyes of the income group they were supposed to assist.

More participation from government was also desirable. The regional municipality, while supportive, had not yet defined the role it wished to play. The response of the provincial government was similarly guarded. WorkFare, a program that steered social assistance recipients into the labour market, remained the Province’s strategy of choice in poverty reduction.

By the summer, Roundtable members were also eager to assume a more focussed, tangible role in poverty reduction. For several months now they had met and discussed the nature of poverty and OP2000’s strategic direction. A prolonged debate over the definition of poverty had frustrated one prominent member to the point that he withdrew. The attendance of some others got a little shaky. The leaders figured it was time OP2000 went into action.

Nonprofits, however – the very organizations that were supposed to take the lead in shaping OP2000 and running the projects – were holding back. Only 15, not the projected 30, had agreed to partner with OP2000 by that summer. Still fewer had actually developed projects.

Learning the Hard Way

In OP2000’s initial phase, the urge to tap available funds and “get the ball rolling” sometimes led staff to court partners and projects very zealously, to the detriment of good planning. This happened in the case of the Good Food Box.

This was a bulk food-buying service run by the Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank (a food co-op for people of low income) and several other partner agencies. The Food Bank’s executive director and OP2000 staff were excited by the prospect of retooling the program to reduce poverty.

The Food Bank’s partners were less certain. The Good Food Box was a tiny initiative. The Food Bank had just experienced some turnover and its staff, while full of ideas, could not agree upon a strategy. Should the program focus on nutrition? Should it become a training program? Should it offer only organic food from local producers?

To prompt a consensus, OP2000 staff went ahead and outlined a project that encompassed all the ideas under consideration (11 in total). Rather than amend this “plan,” the Food Box partners approved it and forwarded it to a funding agency. Happily, Trillium Foundation declined the proposal.

The lesson was a simple one: there is no substitute for a sound plan, which must be owned, understood, and within the capability of the agencies who are supposed to carry it out. People learned it quickly! When one partner proposed that they submit the proposal to another funder, OP2000 flatly refused. Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank, for its part, has gone on to demonstrate just how a food bank can be reshaped into a powerful instrument for reducing poverty.

Allan Day was one of the OP2000 staff involved in this whole affair. He observes, “It’s two steps forward, one step back. People learn by doing, myself included. If they don’t get the opportunity to make mistakes, recover, and carry on, things are not going to happen.”

Caledon Institute

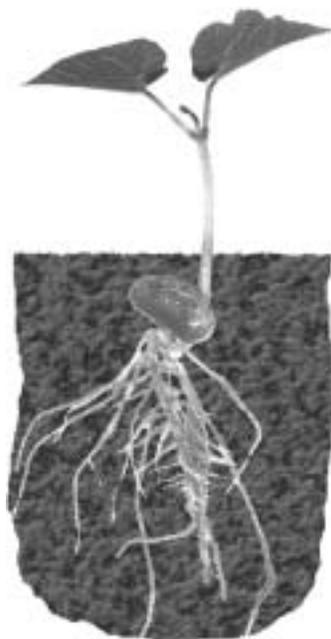
The research and communications portion of OP2000 was delegated to specialists: the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, a national policy institute with an active interest in community responses to social problems.

This link is one of the things that has really set OP2000 apart. Courtesy of Caledon's research expertise, people have been invited to reflect on the project within a wider understanding of poverty, regionally and nationally, and different ways to fight it. Rather than proceed within an information "blackout" broken by news releases and annual reports, OP2000 has cultivated a culture of frank, informed discussion and learning from the first. Caledon's efforts have been essential to that culture.

In papers released in 1997 and 1998 Caledon researchers broached fundamental questions for residents of Waterloo Region and other interested observers. Exactly who was impoverished and by whose definition? Why was there poverty when unemployment was declining? Soon after, *Can Communities Reduce Poverty?* drew on the experience of places inside and outside Canada to outline the roles that communities play in poverty reduction.

Many more papers followed as OP2000 gathered momentum and complexity. Responsibility also fell to Caledon for designing and conducting a system of evaluation that would feed a cycle of reflection and action on the part of OP2000 staff, partners, and participants. The subtext for all these actions was one and the same: enough of the gap between thinkers and doers, the urgency of poverty is too great; let's all of us learn by doing, and then roll our insights and queries into still more doing.

*"OP2000 opened my eyes to partnering with the business community in a new & positive way."
Arli Klassen*



All the project partners were depleted, in spirit as well as capacity, by recent government cutbacks to social services. Many, while well-versed in social and charitable services, had precious little experience in envisioning and developing projects geared to generate income and employment. OP2000 staff could and did assist with planning and training. On occasion they found themselves tempted to even do some of the project management. Given all that effort with so little to show for it to date, they wondered, could the nonprofit sector in fact generate the desired results in the time available?

Funding Nonprofit Initiatives

To a degree, OP2000 could thank itself for this puzzling situation. OP2000 justified its very existence by arguing that previous nonprofit initiatives had not been able to reduce poverty. Although that assessment also applied to

Lutherwood and CODA, it diminished years of effort by many nonprofit agencies, especially small ones. They resented it. Some also feared that Lutherwood-CODA was the beginning of wave of nonprofit amalgamation to which they would eventually fall victim.

Some nonprofits respected OP2000 for so ably recruiting businesses to a common front against poverty. Arli Klassen, a Roundtable member for the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo, understood how critical this multisectoral approach was to harnessing new resources and getting people "to think and work beyond the walls of their organizations." Other nonprofits found OP2000 all too business-oriented. They counted the number of business people on the Roundtable and wondered why their own sector did not have a greater presence.

One-time collaborators were therefore smarting as old relationships went by the board. A more serious drag on nonprofit participation was a lack of resources. Few agencies were in any position to commit to an OP2000 project with their existing staff and budget. OP2000 staff were trying to remedy the situation by creating a Local Investment Fund that could offer grants of last resort to innovative poverty reduction projects. Capitalizing the fund, unfortunately, demanded more time and energy than they could spare. It was a classic Catch-22 situation.

Relief came unexpectedly. Bob Irwin, manager of the regional office of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and an original member of the Leadership Roundtable, felt that OP2000 had matured to a point where a substantial investment would be well used. He recommended that his department kick-start a Local Investment Fund by investing a block of funds in partner projects. Discussions ensued in the fall of 1998. HRDC agreed to allocate \$1.1 million to a "OP2000/HRDC Fund" for allocation by a committee that included representatives of OP2000, HRDC, both local United Ways, the Kitchener-Waterloo Community Foundation, and the Ontario Ministry of Social Services, among others.

With this in its fuel tank, OP2000 could really begin to accelerate. Even before the money became officially available, moreover, the HRDC/OP2000 Fund created an extraordinary opportunity to get leaders rethinking their role in poverty reduction.

That was particularly the case for Frank Adamson. He leapt at Born's invitation to serve on the allocations committee. He then went a great deal further. Fundraising put him in personal contact with the senior management of 102 businesses in Cambridge and North Dumfries. With the support of his board, Adamson pledged that the United Way of would work with its community and business partners to help 200 households move out of poverty – two for every business. The secondment of one full-time staff person, Debra Foster-Stahle, would give OP2000 the capacity to assist three projects by nonprofits as well as business initiatives that together

improved the income or employability of 100 people.

This entailed a real change of corporate culture for the United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries, and not an easy one. "Prior to OP2000," recalls Foster-Stahle, "our focus had been on fundraising. The board's stance was that we were here to put a roof over people's heads. Now came an opportunity to take action ourselves and act as a catalyst." Poverty reduction, once an expression confined to the organization's vision, became enshrined in funding principles and priorities. The United Way became engaged in planning its own obsolescence, by creating a community that no longer needed alleviation services.

United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries was the first of what OP2000 would later call its "cornerstone partners": an organization that shared in the work of engaging community members in specific poverty reduction projects.

Leadership Revisited

About the same time as HRDC funding became available, a couple of structural innovations sent a jolt of electricity through the Leadership Roundtable and many of OP2000's other supporters.

The size and complexity of the task that OP2000 had assumed was far greater than originally imagined. The initiatives of nonprofits alone were not going to have the impact on economic opportunities that OP2000 was after, the OP2000/HRDC Fund notwithstanding. Required was a fully multisectoral partnership with a role on the front line for government, business, and low-income people, as well as nonprofits. If that was the case, OP2000 would have to do more than assist nonprofit action. Staff would have to back off from intensive relationships with specific initiatives in order to animate and facilitate a broader range of projects by a broader range of partners.

"Prior to OP2000, the focus of the United Way of Cambridge & North Dumfries had been on fundraising. Now came an opportunity to take action ourselves & act as a catalyst." Deborah Foster-Stahle

Creating Opportunities

The beauty of a citizen-led movement is the way it unleashes creativity and generosity of spirit in every quarter. People get inspired to invest their own resources in a project – and then just do it. The more people act on their own initiative, the more the movement belongs not to an inner circle, but to the community as a whole.

Early in 1999 Paul Born and Joe Allen went looking for new ways in which to engage businesses. It made sense to help each business understand its potential to be an "OP2000 project" in its own right, reducing poverty by the instruments at hand: wage levels, hours of work, benefits, job reclassification, in-house training, bursaries, and so on. Of course, that first meant recognizing the implications of current employment policies and practices for the living standards of people on the shop floor.

Born and Allen chose a very conventional strategy for the purpose: publishing an educational booklet. The production process was the unusual part. The Roundtable struck a committee, chaired by Allen. OP2000 hired a contractor to do the writing. The committee then engaged in an 8-month process of writing, editing, and rewriting. (Private sector partners made in-kind contributions of design, layout, and printing services.) Representatives of the business, government, and nonprofit sector all had a hand in the

first draft. That was then subject to additional examination by three labour representatives and by the Community Action Team.

Creating Opportunities: Using Human Resource Practices to Build Your Business and Your Community, released early in 2000, explained the great variety of things that a business could do to improve its employees' circumstances without compromising its viability. With reference to numerous local examples, the booklet showed how these practices could even enhance a firm's performance.

Hundreds of copies of *Creating Opportunities* went into circulation. Some managers contacted OP2000 to report the action they had taken. The most dramatic sign of the booklet's effectiveness was a decision by the City of Kitchener to conduct a detailed audit of its own employment practices. (The municipality would later publish a booklet on what it had learned from this experience: "What Cities Can Do To Reduce Poverty.") The United Way itself discovered from *Creating Opportunities'* income table that the salaries of two employees left them below the Low Income Cut-Off. Frank Adamson was appalled and said as much: "This is ridiculous – we support social service agencies, and we're employing people in poverty?"

Given this heightened level of activity, the Leadership Roundtable per se had to supply firm, authoritative strategic guidance or OP2000 would be liable to fly off in all directions. Was there a way to do that and give the individual members a more hands-on role in reducing poverty?

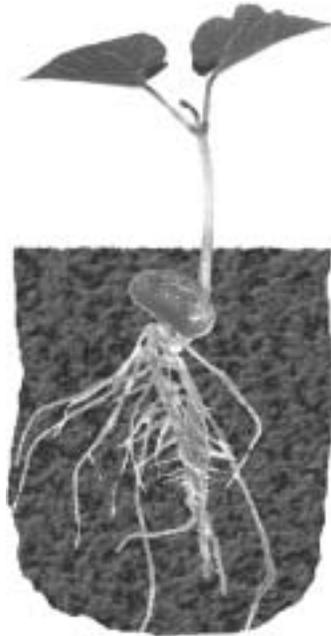
"Working groups" appeared to be part of the answer. Essentially, these were informal extensions of the Roundtable through which members could mobilize friends, experts, colleagues, OP2000 staff, and other interested parties. The first working groups crystallized around stakeholder groups, the business and government sectors particularly. Later, they branched off into fields of activity, like "transport and housing" or "youth." Either way, the working groups became a flexible means by which people could discuss which initiatives to undertake and then connect them with OP2000 staff and other resources. The decisions of the working groups were nominally subject to review by the Roundtable.

The working groups did not ensure that the views and insights of low-income people were available to the Roundtable. No "low-income working group" ever formed. What did finally take shape was the Community Action Team. Invitations to join this body were extended through partners and community groups. Soon 6-20 people began to gather at least monthly to consider suggestions, comment on projects, and learn about meeting procedure. Its members varied, for low-income people are as busy as anybody else, only without many additional conveniences. The experience satisfied many Team members that OP2000 took them seriously. By 2001, two or three of them were sitting at the Leadership Roundtable.

The working groups helped shift the ownership of OP2000 from the staff to a widening network of community partners, and enabled the Leadership Roundtable to concentrate on strategic decision-making. Of even greater effect in both these respects was the "search conference" held in January 1999. The search conference is a planning process that enables people with very diverse interests to recognize their common stake in a complex issue.

"To be a catalyst, you bring two foreign substances together to create something new & wonderful."

Pat Henderson



OP2000 carefully selected 50 sectoral leaders to invite to this event, including the Leadership Roundtable. After exploring the broad, long-term factors contributing to poverty in Waterloo Region, the participants discussed what had to be done to improve the situation and specific ways in which they could collaborate. OP2000 staff incorporated their ideas in a framework of the work to be done by staff and working groups as the project evolved.

If this agenda sounds commonplace, its impact was not. In fact, the search conference marked the emergence of a common spiritual commitment to OP2000 by a very diverse and influential group of community leaders. It was also the point at which a long-term strategy for poverty reduction in Waterloo Region began to emerge.

The simple framework that began to take shape brought to project selection and design the strategic element that had previously been lacking. It identified areas where staff and volunteers should best work together for maximum impact. No longer did OP2000 try to do

everything that might satisfy its huge mandate to reduce regional poverty. Staff could say "yes" to projects that touched on issues that the broader community considered a priority, and "no" to other issues. (In truth, no local initiative was ever turned away. If it concerned a non-priority area, OP2000 staff said so, but still offered to lend a hand.)

So the official announcement of the allocation of HRDC's project funding late in 1998 could not have been timelier. Gas was in the tank, the spark plugs were all firing, people were at the wheel – and they even had a rudimentary map. By February, 30 nonprofits collaborated to submit more than 20 proposals to the OP2000/HRDC Fund. In due course, 18 of these projects were funded and launched.

Excitement and determination about OP2000 began to permeate Waterloo Region. After 18 months of labour, the project was achieving a life of its own.



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In 2001, Paul Born launched Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement to help citizens work together to build more prosperous, caring, and healthy communities. In collaboration with the Caledon Institute and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Tamarack has created "Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Poverty Reduction" (CCI). In addition to sharing the lessons of OP2000, this 4-year project will help organizations to design and carry out multisectoral initiatives of their own. Caledon will provide reference material, documentation, and research services. Tamarack will supply technical assistance.

McConnell funding will help partners launch an organizing process: to form multisectoral partnerships and gain the support of key government and business leaders; to engage the low-income community and raise funds locally; and to draft plans for local action. The local plan may be eligible for an additional 3-year matching grant from the McConnell Foundation. For more on CCI, go to www.tamarackinstitute.ca.

Opportunity Development Accounts

Lutherwood CODA experimented with two approaches to building the financial assets of low-income people. Each one trained people (like these program graduates at right) in money management so they could accumulate savings. The project then contributed \$3 for every \$1 saved in these Opportunity Development Accounts (ODAs). Lutherwood CODA and an allied foundation contributed an office, staff member, administrative support, and operating costs.



Focus For Ethnic Women

Focus for Ethnic Women (FEW) is one of several nonprofits that have launched businesses with OP2000's technical and financial assistance. A training organization for immigrant women in the sewing trades, FEW tested the viability of a sewing business for six months. Six women completed sewing contracts while the board of directors tracked progress and adjusted FEW's structure and mandate to suit nonprofit enterprise. A multi-year project subsequently went forward. The groundwork that FEW so carefully laid has helped it tackle practical issues with added perspective and commitment.

A Sample of OP2000 in Action



Small Steps To Success

A project of Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank (at left), Small Steps introduced 12 women to the world of work by first helping them with issues of self-awareness, self-esteem, and interpersonal relations. Subsequently, the program helped them find temporary jobs in a sector of their choice. The jobs were a milestone for many of the women. The program was a milestone for Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank, which now understood the role it could play in poverty reduction as well as poverty alleviation.



Game-stirs

Five women, active in the collective kitchens of Waterloo Region Food Bank, began to wonder if there was some way to turn home cooking into saleable cuisine. OP2000 put them in touch with a local rancher who could supply them with venison and other meats that they began to use in wild-game pies. "Game-stirs," the women called their business, and it became the inspiration for the Waterloo Region Food Bank to encourage other collective kitchens to create specialty-food microenterprises.

Experience Matters

Sponsored by Waterloo Region's Department of Social Services, Experience Matters brought together social assistance recipients, training agencies, nonprofit organizations, and local restaurateurs, café owners, and other food outlets in a program of customized training that integrated job readiness, skill training, and work experience in the food and retail sectors (see photo at right). Although half the participants drop out before completing the program, 85% of graduates have found work in the sector of their choice.



Job Enhancement Program

The Job Enhancement Program sought out employment opportunities to match the interests and skills of new Canadians who already had a job. By working evenings and weekends, staff made it possible for clients to use this service without interrupting their current employment. No other OP2000 project had a greater impact on participants' income – an average monthly increase of \$956. Although clients (like Gerard Phillip, a social service professional, at the podium on left) were relatively skilled, they could not have realized such a change in their circumstances so readily without the efforts of a job broker.