Connecting the Pieces
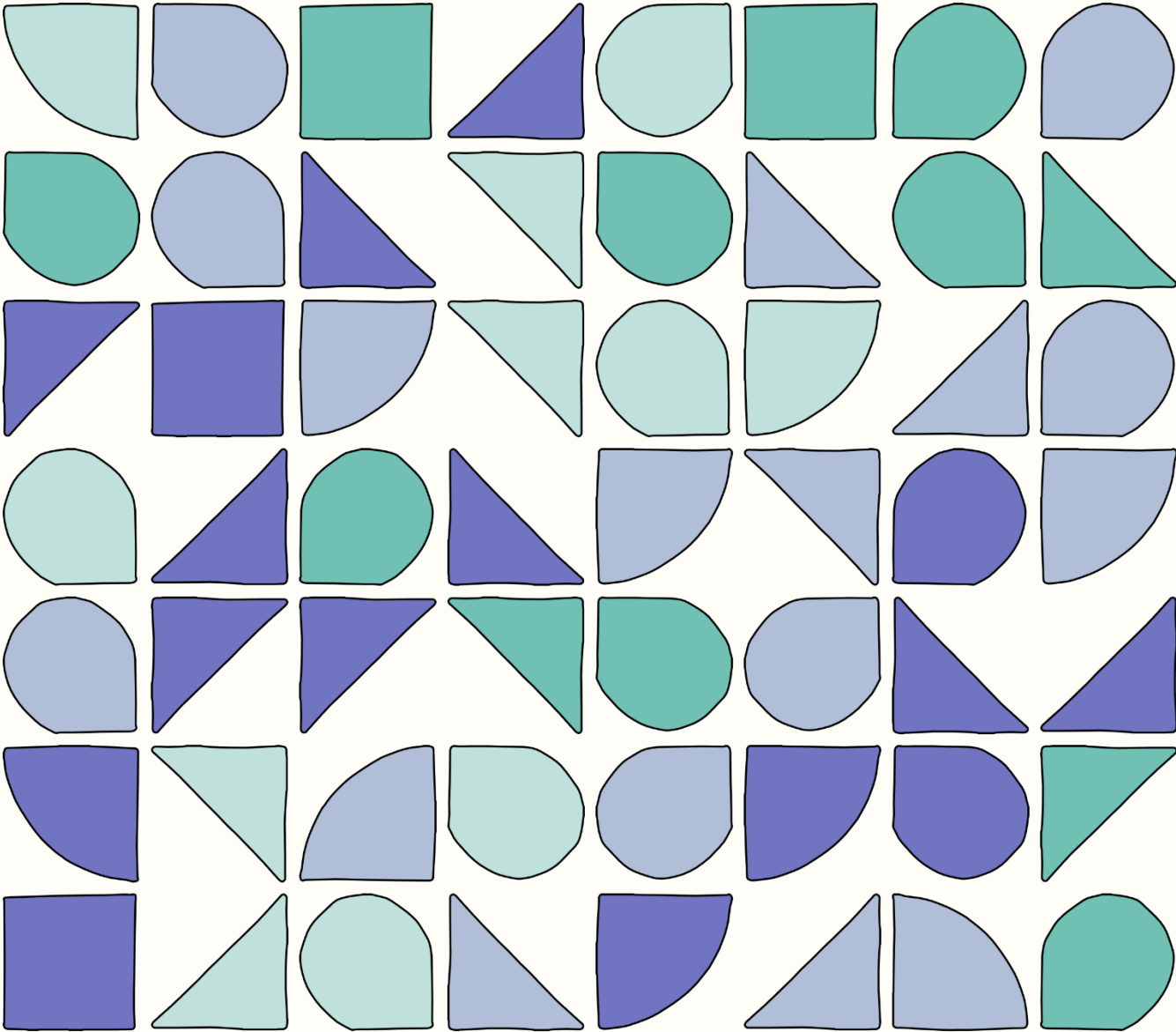
An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic struck, poverty in Canada presented a persistent and complex challenge. But this crisis exacerbated inequalities and shone a light on the many ways poverty creates vulnerability in times of crisis. National statistics and abstract numbers became real lives made visible in the stories of individuals and families who call our communities home. As we pass the one-year anniversary of the pandemic's onset, communities and leaders across the country are looking to each other for ideas and solutions to deal with the unanticipated consequences of economic and social upheaval brought by the myriad changes to our society and communities.

The Niagara Region can contribute to this conversation by holding up as one example a long-running program that supports community organizations to innovate and creatively support people most affected by poverty.

In 2008, the Niagara Region launched the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) program — an innovative approach led by community residents with the vision to improve the quality of neighbourhood life. It is a project-funded model managed and administered by third-party service organizations through an annual request for proposal (RFP) competition process. Since the program's early days, the region's community members, service providers and municipal partners have each played an important role in easing the challenges faced by those individuals and families experiencing economic hardship, while at the same time experimenting with social and community projects designed to enhance health, well-being and social connectivity.

The Niagara region has grown and the needs of its communities have changed over time. The NPI model also gradually evolved, and its individually funded projects have had a range of success and longevity. This evaluation report helps to explore and explain some of the opportunities, challenges and limitations of the program model and its operational practices, as well as why and how project success is directly related and influenced by the overall program design.

Research shows there is no one simple way to tackle the systemic problem that is poverty. Rather, Niagara must take a multi-pronged approach that addresses economics, employment, housing, health and wellness, stigma and social inclusion collectively — as equal pieces in a puzzle. The following visual used by the NPI appropriately positions the program within the larger frame of interconnected issues and partners.
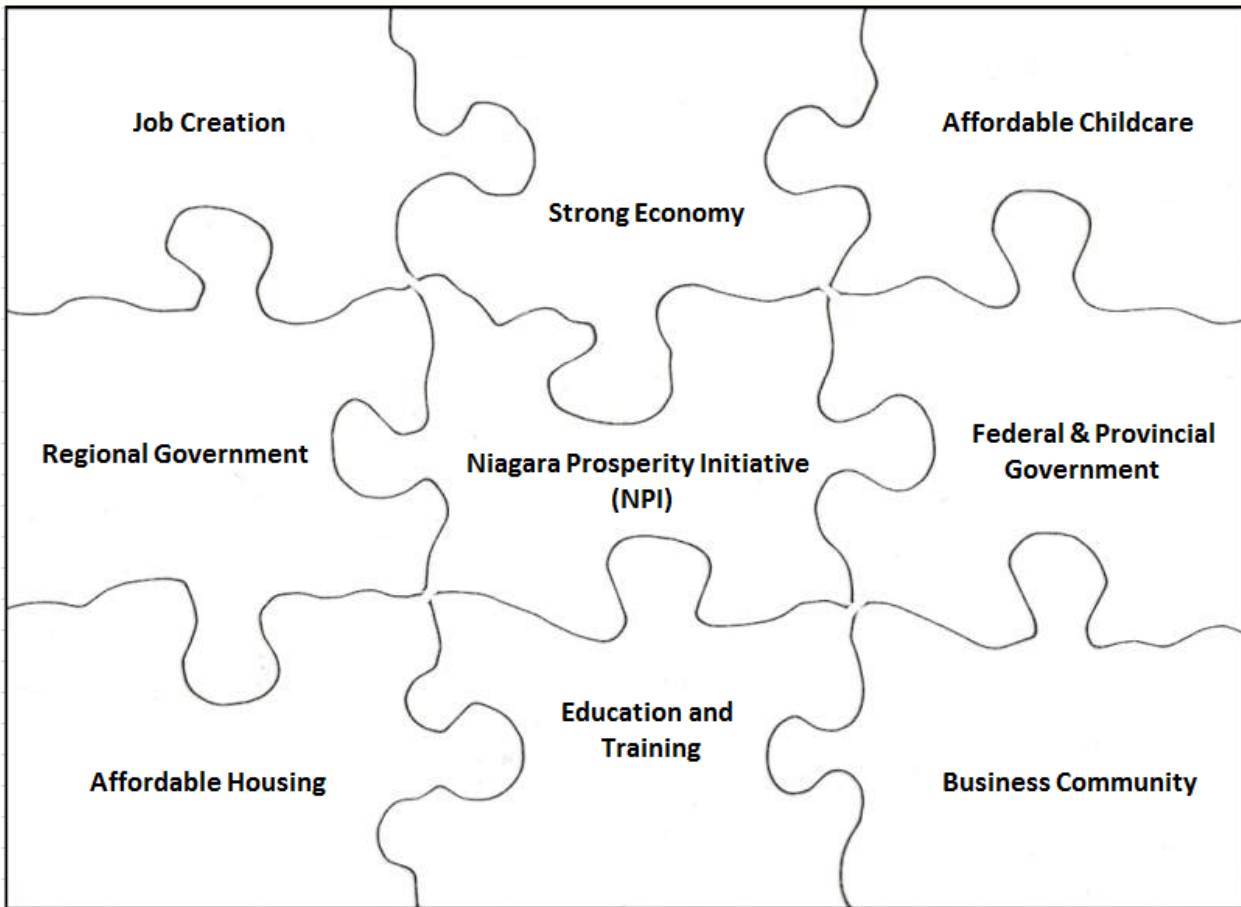
Job Creation

Affordable Childcare

Strong Economy

Regional Government

Niagara Prosperity Initiative
(NPI)

Federal & Provincial
Government

Education and
Training

Affordable Housing

Business Community

Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara is a comprehensive review and analysis of the effectiveness and impact of the Niagara Region's NPI program since it launched in 2008.

The report summarizes the NPI program background, our evaluation process and research findings, and provides recommendations for action to support the Niagara Region's creation of a long-term strategy for poverty reduction. *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative* is a supporting document to the main report. It contains several appendices that provide more information for those who want to delve deeper into how the research was conducted and to explore the findings. Select materials are included, such as: comparative resources, research methodology, select data sets and analysis, and extracts from participant interviews.

This report is presented to the Niagara Region, community residents and service providers to provide objective analysis and critical insight into the NPI so that it may evolve into a more effective and efficient program model that serves the needs of those who need it most.
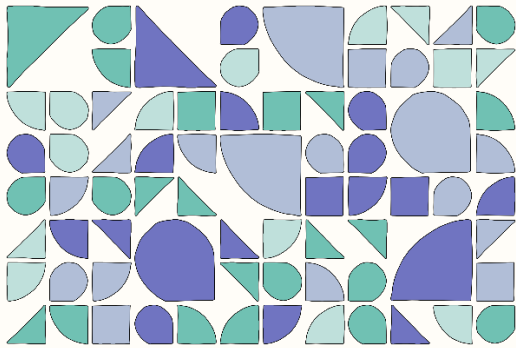
Executive Summary

Poverty in contemporary Canada is a complex problem that remains an important policy challenge at all levels of government. While upper- and lower-tier municipalities see the effects of poverty every day and have effectively become a default safety net for many residents, their capacity to remedy such problems is curtailed to some extent by their relatively small tax base, economic uncertainties, limited jurisdiction, overburdened responsibilities and the precariousness of federal and provincial investments and commitments. That said, local governments continue to have a critical leadership role to play in the fight against poverty, whose wide-reaching and corrosive effects are only likely to be exacerbated by the prolonged COVID-19 crisis. As calls for reduced public spending are likely to follow in the wake of health, employment and fiscal crises, *Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara* seeks to focus attention on the need to strengthen poverty-reduction efforts.

While Niagara itself has not yet developed a comprehensive region-wide poverty reduction strategy, as former Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) chair Elisabeth Zimmerman argues,[1] the Region's ongoing funding of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) has been one means through which it has embraced its crucial "social role," cultivating a sense of collective responsibility and promoting collaborative action against poverty. In 2018, the Niagara Region, in partnership with a trans-disciplinary team of researchers at Brock University, was awarded funding from the province's Local Poverty Reduction Fund (LPRF)

> " The Region's ongoing funding of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) has been one means through which it has embraced its crucial "social role," cultivating a sense of collective responsibility and promoting collaborative action against poverty.
>
> ~ Elisabeth Zimmerman

for a three-year research project aiming to examine the state of poverty in Niagara, conduct an evaluation of the impacts, outcomes, and efficacy of the NPI to date, and offer recommendations on best practices moving forward. This Executive Summary offers a condensed account of the key findings and recommendations of this research project, whose full rationale, empirical basis and procedural implications are discussed in much greater detail in the final report.

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative's Evolution to Date

Enabled initially by a window of opportunity to reinvest savings associated with the implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB), the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) has since 2008 invested approximately $1.5 million annually toward a range of collaborative, place-based, community-led poverty prevention and reduction projects.

Organizationally, NPI was constituted as an arm's-length program funded by the Region but managed and administered by third-party organizations, with service delivery also contracted out to agencies through a competitive request for proposals (RFP) process. From the outset, NPI was to involve two broad bundles of tasks, which came to be organized through the Secretariat and the Convener roles. United Way Niagara and the Niagara Community Foundation are currently fulfilling their respective roles as Secretariat and Convener under five-year contracts that expire at the end of 2021. While there have been slight changes over the division of tasks, in general the Secretariat is responsible for administering funding for NPI projects, whereas the Convener aims to bring together various actors to develop longer-term strategies and coalitions for reducing poverty. At present, this latter role is fulfilled largely through the efforts of the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, a voluntary network of public, private and non-profit organizations concerned with poverty reduction in Niagara.

The NPI has established a long record of grant funding that supports innovative neighbourhood-based poverty alleviation projects across the region. Working with nearly 90 organizations from 2008 to 2019, the NPI has funded 374 projects during this period. The NPI has sought to allocate project funding to the individuals, families, communities and neighbourhoods in greatest need in order to buffer and prevent the hardships associated with poverty. The NPI's annual RFP sets funding priorities for meeting poverty-related needs, and the number of priority funding streams for the program have narrowed considerably over time. In 2019 and 2020, the NPI's three priority funding streams were Housing, Health and Employment.

Within the varying priority categories, the (mostly) two-year projects have been diverse. Over the years, projects have targeted children and youth, adults, seniors, and families. Projects have also varied in terms of their scope. The majority of projects to date have aimed at providing an enduring benefit to individuals and families through education, training and skill development. A second range of projects has sought to provide immediate material benefits to low-income individuals or families. The third type of project has focused on creating neighbourhood infrastructure that people will continue to use after the project has wrapped up. The fourth type of project has worked on the level of the collective, aiming to increase the capacity of communities to support their own members and enhance their quality of life.

These four broad categories of project are summarized in the table below.

Project Category	Scale of Intervention	Examples
Education, training, skills development	Individuals and Families	– Summer day camps for children in priority neighbourhoods – Life-skills programs for pregnant women and young parents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness – Summer literacy programs for low-incoming families with children needing foundational literacy skills
Direct material benefits	Individuals and Families	– The Good Food Box, offering affordable produce to households that lack access to fresh, healthy food – Dental care and denture clinics for adults – A laundromat voucher program – ID clinics to assist people with replacing and safely storing identity documents needed for government services and financial benefits.
Neighbourhood Infrastructure	Community / neighbourhood	– Bike Me Up, a repair shop where people can get help with fixing their own bike or select an affordable refurbished bike – Community gardens, community kitchens, and social enterprises that have some start-up costs but also the potential to develop an income stream – Projects that provide Wi-Fi and internet technology to low-income seniors (NB: a 2020 project)
Community Capacity	Community / neighbourhood	– Projects of drop-in centres that provide a range of supportive community-building activities – After-school educational and social programs for children and young people – Volunteer programs that engage low-income members in community organizing or peer support.

While the total number of annual NPI projects has trended downwards over time, average project size and scope have increased. Similarly, an increasing number of the projects receiving funds target multiple municipalities within Niagara or have a regional focus. The reported number of persons served by NPI projects has exceeded the expected number of persons served in every year of the program's existence. Since 2008, the NPI has not exceeded its funding allocation, and amounts spent have always come in under amounts allocated. While the official amount allocated annually to NPI projects has (with isolated exceptions) remained steady at $1.5 million, inflation has meant that the purchasing power of the fund has declined over time. From 2009 to 2019, the price index increased by 22 percent, so the purchasing power of the funds allocated in 2019 was more than one fifth less than it was in 2009.

Evaluating the NPI's Impacts

Our purpose in this report is not to evaluate individual projects, whose targets and outcomes are already documented by the NPI, but to describe and assess the cumulative impact of more than a decade of grant funding for poverty alleviation. Reporting by NPI grant recipients has been consistent and has provided evidence of the effectiveness of individual projects in meeting their goals. The NPI has received detailed records of projects' *outputs*, defined as how much the funded projects accomplished in terms of the number of unique people served and the types and quantity of units of service that were provided (e.g., drop-in sessions held, meals served, etc.). Across all projects for the first decade of the NPI, the tally of people supported was over 115,000. Additionally, the NPI has collected evidence of projects' *outcomes*, defined as the projects' immediate effects on the people or communities they served. Over the years, outcomes have been identified primarily through testimonials by service users and, to a lesser extent, photographs about what the projects do. Overall, individual participants have indicated high levels of satisfaction with NPI-funded projects.

The NPI has documented the outputs and outcomes of the hundreds of projects to date through quarterly and final reporting by recipient organizations. We also need to evaluate its *impact*, which refers to the long-term or systemic difference the program makes. When speaking of impact, we are asking about lasting changes that have come about as a result of the NPI's funding of many different organizations and projects. To show impact over time is not straightforward, as individual projects' reporting data are insufficient to this task and population-level statistics are not fine-grained enough to measure the NPI's effects. Even though the funded projects have been numerous and have touched thousands of people, they have been relatively small scale and short-lived interventions, which cannot be expected to "move the needle" on the key indicators of poverty that the NPI has mapped by neighbourhood at the population level such as household income and housing affordability.

Supplementing survey data and testimonials with in-depth interviews of former project leaders, we categorize and assess some key long-term impacts of NPI-funded projects. The evidence suggests that the NPI's strongest impact relates to interventions that improved the lives of individuals and families. According to these interviews, individual-level interventions have mainly supported people in the following ways: employment and self-employment, education and training, social integration, and compassionate responses to chronic

poverty. A parallel quantitative study undertaken by the research team suggests that participation in NPI projects is also associated with a small increase in individuals' reported levels of life satisfaction.

In addition to making a difference to individuals, NPI projects have had impacts on neighbourhoods and communities. In spite of their short life cycle, NPI-funded projects have occasionally generated amenities that people continued to make use of after funding had expired. More commonly, project leaders reported on the potentially lasting impact of bringing people together and cultivating supportive networks among service users and between project leaders and service users.

While the NPI's primary poverty-reduction focus is on service users and their neighbourhoods, a secondary area of impact is the non-profit organizations and their workers who have received grants, thereby gaining experience, developing new programs, and enhancing their reach and reputations. Almost all grant recipients were grateful for the funding, affirming that their projects helped them further their mission, catalyse new professional networks or working partnerships, and so on. However, former project leaders also spoke of some significant challenges (discussed in greater detail in the full report) arising from the uncertainties and administrative demands of short-term contract funding.

The NPI allocates funding through annual competitions for time-limited contracts, and its RFP is well-known to local non-profit service providers. The majority of applying agencies in 2019 and 2020 participated in previous RFPs and almost all successful applicants had received NPI grants previously. Through the application process and reporting requirements for funded projects, the NPI largely assigns responsibility for evidence-based decision-making to non-profit agencies, many of which lack the resources and expertise to perform research functions. Even though successful applicants are allocated up to 10 percent for spending on overhead costs, this amount seldom compensates for the time given to grant and report writing tasks. The NPI can alleviate this burden on service providers and increase its own efficacy by taking greater direct responsibility for synthesizing literature, data, and community feedback, as well as project evaluation, thereby enhancing accountability and elevating conversations about poverty in Niagara. Several challenges and limitations associated with the NPI's existing funding model (which is by no means unique to it alone) and operations are discussed in further detail in the report.

As the NPI serves as a model for poverty reduction programs, its impact ultimately needs to be assessed in terms of the value it brings to the region overall. On a fundamental level, NPI-funded projects make a difference by reducing social and economic costs associated with poverty. In addition, the NPI creates impact by stimulating new thinking by non-profit organizations about how to deliver poverty alleviation and prevention projects and by testing these ideas in practice. While such innovation can sometimes help to identify the kinds of interventions that are needed and effective for long-term change, most NPI-funded projects have not continued beyond the end of the funding term. Due to the complex nature of poverty, significant changes to participants' material well-being are unlikely to occur during the timeframe of any given project. This caveat is not to say that the NPI's programmatic interventions are ineffective, but instead that the systemic forces producing poverty are considerable and the NPI is merely one part of a larger and more comprehensive poverty reduction strategy that is needed in Niagara.

The State of Poverty in Niagara

Drawing largely on 2016 census data, this report describes the key socio-economic indicators of poverty in the Niagara context and presents additional, original data from a representative survey of low-income residents and other recent sources. This short summary cannot provide a full overview of this data, but certain broad takeaways bear mentioning.

While the overall percentage of households in Niagara affected by low-income and unemployment has generally been near or below the provincial average over the past decade, poverty remains a significant problem that continues to impose wide-ranging costs upon the region and negatively impact the lives of local residents in a variety of ways. As such, the relatively low overall incidence of low-income in Niagara should not be a cause for political complacency.

In 2016, the Niagara region's population was 477,888. Of this base population, the Market Basket Measure (MBM) calculation shows 12.7 percent of CMA Niagara is considered low-income, compared to 13.9 percent of the province of Ontario.

Different groups are impacted more heavily by poverty. In the region, 25.8 percent of single parent families are low-income, and if you are a female lone parent (children aged 0 - 5) — there is a 62 percent chance you and your children are living in poverty. Meanwhile, 30.8 percent of single people in CMA Niagara were considered low-income. Seniors appear to be faring better, with 5.6 percent of their demographic living below the MBM poverty line in the Niagara region.[2]

> " Rates of poverty vary markedly across the region and across various demographic groups and family types that require special care and attention.

Rates of poverty vary markedly across the region and across various demographic groups and family types that require special care and attention. Niagara's relatively large proportion of lower income jobs in sales and service is one key reason why the region has a growing number of residents who are "working poor" and an average household income sizeably lower than the provincial average. Compounding this problem, Niagara's population has a markedly lower level of university-level educational attainment compared to the provincial average, reinforcing barriers to secure and decently paid employment in today's shifting job market.

While conventional economic indicators prior to the COVID-19 crisis suggested that the region's economy was relatively strong, low-income families and individuals are not necessarily benefitting. Indeed, rising inflation has created new challenges for them in terms of heightened cost of living. This is particularly the case with regard to Niagara's housing market, which has driven up rates of "core housing need" and amplified the region's pre-existing homelessness problem.

Recommendations

After evaluating the NPI's internal processes and external impacts, the full report attempts to highlight some strategic opportunities to deepen and enhance the Niagara Region's response to poverty. What follows is a condensed list of our key recommendations for the future.

Recommendation 1:
Develop a comprehensive Niagara Region poverty reduction strategy

The Niagara Region must commit to resituating the NPI as one component of a larger comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. The NPI is merely one piece of the puzzle embedded in a wider range of actors, services and strategies required to affect meaningful and lasting change.

While short-term programmatic interventions can help individuals with their immediate struggles and mitigate some of the worst effects of poverty, poverty reduction at a community level requires stable services, system change, conscious coordination, and sustained collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders. The Niagara Region's own comprehensive anti-poverty strategy can be crafted so as to optimize multi-sectoral coordination and alignment, leverage resources and address gaps.

Recommendation 2:
Increase investment in poverty reduction

The NPI's budget for funding social services has remained flat, at $1.5 million annually, since its inception in 2008. The year 2020 was an exception, when $250,000 of the poverty reduction fund was temporarily reallocated in response to budget pressures.

To take a strategic long-term approach toward poverty reduction, the Niagara Region could create a social services funding program similar to the Halton Region's Community Investment Fund from tax base dollars. Another way for it to increase its investment, following the lead of poverty reduction administrators in other regions, would be for the NPI to research and leverage opportunities to bring more resources to Niagara. For these and other initiatives to succeed, the Region needs to ensure that its ongoing anti-poverty efforts are supported by an appropriate level of staffing, comparable with those of ambitious and successful anti-poverty programs elsewhere.

Recommendation 3:
Make deliberate investments and provide longer funding terms

A deliberate investment model will afford the Niagara Region's Community Services department opportunities to coordinate its services with those purchased from third-party providers—even to select or design complementary services to fill gaps between or address the limitations of established programs. Through this

approach, the Niagara Region may solidify existing relationships and cultivate new ones with service providers who do not engage with the NPI by enlisting their support to execute its broader strategic vision.

A model based on deliberate investment and longer funding terms has the additional benefit of mitigating the unpredictability and fragmentary nature of services provided through time-limited contracts.

Regional poverty reduction programs that have adopted funding models that emphasize collaborative, reciprocal relationships with stakeholders, such as those inspired by Collective Impact and coalition building frameworks, reap many benefits and avoid consequences often associated with short-term contract-based funding models. This includes service precarity, redundancy, lower-quality services, increased insecurity for service provider agencies, over-reliance on volunteers and unpaid staff labour, and advocacy chill.

Possibilities include coordinating with other government departments and local funders to create a shared pot of funding and single point of contact for third-party providers, increased inclusion of persons with lived experience in advocacy and policymaking, a division of labour that reflects the distribution of expertise and resources within the field, and increased service provider well-being and service quality.
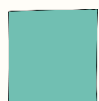
Recommendation 4:
Guide investments with enhanced research

A deliberate approach to funding makes it possible to select and distribute services in the most efficient and rational manner. The identification of priorities, tactics, and points of service should be guided by strong, up-to-date and finely grained research. Developing a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy will require enhancing the Niagara Region's capacity for ongoing, advanced research to guide and support its poverty reduction strategy.

Of course, research requires technical skills and must be guided by subject matter expertise. To perform this kind of work, investing in staff training and recruitment will be crucial in order to make the best use of the recommendations being put forward. It will be necessary for Niagara Region to invest in increased staffing levels and training for these goals to be realized.

While insufficient to meet these ends by itself, the NPI's Mapping Tool can continue to play a useful role as part of the Regional Government's broader approach to poverty-related research. Place-based strategies should continue to be a part of the deliberate investment model, but not all needs are organized geographically. Deliberate investment should be guided by subject matter expertise, as well as transparent spatial and demographic analyses developed from the Canadian Income Survey and a variety of other timely and relevant data sources.

To accommodate a deliberate approach to funding, investment is needed to collect, develop and share data and strategies with stakeholders and providers in a way that is transparent, responsive and receptive to community feedback. To cultivate shared understandings among local stakeholders, data and findings should be broadly shared to elevate conversations around poverty, and to ensure service providers can use them to optimize their offerings and in grant applications that may bring more monies into Niagara.

Service providers have their own expertise and front-line insights into local poverty that should be respected, synthesized, and contextualized within meso- and macro-level analyses. Service providers are also gatekeepers to research sites and participants, making them invaluable partners for refining strategies by testing alternative tactics and exploring what works best, for whom, and why.

Recommendation 5:
Design all services for social inclusion aligned with poverty reduction priorities

The Niagara Region's various departments design and implement public services. Making such services optimally accessible and functional for vulnerable citizens is itself a form of poverty reduction. As an example of one potential program model, the City of Toronto demonstrates this practice by prioritizing building inclusivity for low-income residents into municipal services, even before contracting third-parties to deliver services on its behalf.

To achieve this, Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office convenes regular meetings of the leadership from all government departments to ensure inclusivity is a priority, not just for those staff tasked with poverty reduction, but for the government as a whole. At least one councillor acts as a 'poverty reduction champion', questioning representatives from all departments on how the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged citizens are accounted for in new and existing programs.

This approach has yielded systems change in areas like transit, social procurement, and more. As one of eight two-tier regional governments in Ontario, Niagara Region should approach such systems change with an openness to considering when lower-tier governments can and should play a greater role in the delivery of targeted poverty alleviation efforts.
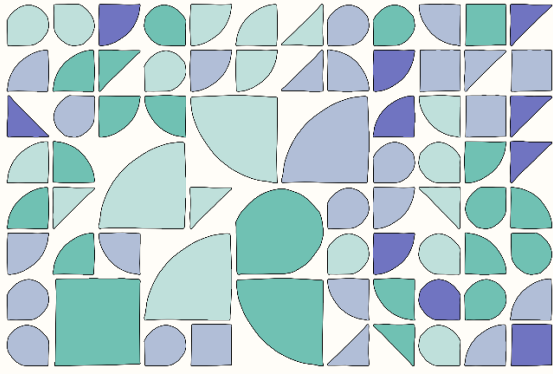
Coming Full Circle - The Action Research Method

Context and History

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) grew from the imaginations, passion and commitment of area residents, organizations and municipal leaders concerned about improving the lives and well-being of their fellow neighbours experiencing poverty and its cascading effects. The Niagara Region is not unique in its efforts to investigate and attempt to tackle this challenge. The stubborn persistence of poverty in contemporary Canada remains an important policy challenge at all levels of government.

As Dr. Susan Arai and Rishia Burke emphasize in their report, *A Legacy of Poverty? Addressing Cycles of Poverty & the Impact on Child Health in Niagara Region*: "Effective strategies to address poverty require making visible the differences among people who live in poverty. Poverty is often associated with men who are homeless and living on the streets but many who live in poverty are invisible in our society. There is greater poverty among women than men, and poverty is on the rise among young adults."[3] However, the face of poverty and inequity is most visible at the community level.

Yet just because poverty persists, it does not mean people do not care or haven't tried to find solutions. Developing an approach that is strategic, measurable and effective is key to creating long-term sustainable solutions to poverty reduction, and the collaboration between governments, service providers and community members is integral to making this happen.

York University's Dennis Raphael has noted the goal of poverty reduction has acquired an increased profile in policy circles and the Canadian public at large, yet evidence for the effectiveness of current anti-poverty strategies and programs has been quite limited.[4]

That poverty persists and targets are missed despite decades of government initiatives and investment can understandably become a source of discouragement and political fatalism. One prominent example is the 1989 all-party federal resolution on child poverty that announced a goal to eliminate child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. More than 20 years after this proposed deadline, Raphael states, "Canada's child poverty rate continues to be among the highest in the developed world."[5] In fact, UNICEF's 2020 Report Card now ranks Canada 30th out of 38 wealthy nations in the overall well-being of children and youth, and 26th in terms of child poverty alone.

> "
> Effective strategies to address poverty require making visible the differences among people who live in poverty.
>
> ~ Susan Arai & Rishia Burke

This troubling reality will likely be exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic which has already revealed a disproportionate impact on low-income families, and especially women-led single parent households.[6] Though Canadians and regional governments have received support through federal government programs, the prolonged employment and economic contractions have been painful, and calls for reduced public spending are likely to follow.[7] The challenges these families face cannot be addressed without also addressing the socio-economic conditions and policy decisions shaping the welfare of families and the communities in which they live.

Governments and community service providers serve important roles in supporting individuals and families navigating poverty and other hardships. However, those involved in the development of anti-poverty strategies and programs need to remain aware that poverty is a multi-dimensional problem resistant to quick, magic-bullet solutions. Poverty reduction requires a coordinated approach with long-term systemic solutions, and this is particularly the case when it comes to municipal efforts.

Because cities have an immediate and ongoing connection to their residents' everyday lives, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has argued municipalities are on the "front lines of poverty."[8] Among orders of government, municipalities are Canada's "eyes and ears on the ground," acting as "catalysts for change, convening diverse actors and tailoring initiatives to local realities…However, while the face of poverty is profoundly local, other orders of government control investment and policy levers that are vital to an effective response."[9]

While upper- and lower-tier municipalities see the effects of poverty every day and have effectively become a default safety net for many residents, their capacity to proactively implement anti-poverty policies is curtailed by their relatively small tax base, limited jurisdiction, overburdened responsibilities, and the precariousness of federal and provincial investments and commitments.

In view of such constraints, not to mention the uncertainties arising from economic fluctuations, private investment decisions and other intermittent disruptions, it is unsurprising that some municipalities have traditionally avoided an explicit social role beyond recreation programs or community festivals. While this stripped-down 'nuts and bolts' approach to operations is understandable, Elizabeth Zimmerman, former chair of Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN), suggests it fails to appreciate the positive leadership role local

governments can play in fostering collaborative action against poverty and developing the social infrastructure that is a "critical part of a community's overall economic and social well-being."[10]

FCM takes the position that municipalities can go far beyond simply filling gaps left by federal and provincial support systems by acting as catalysts of change. Among other strategies, they can pioneer innovative programs tailored to specific local needs, deliver high-quality and accessible services, gather and disseminate important local data, and provide other orders of government "informed recommendations for transformational policy, action and investment."[11]

It is within this context that Niagara Region, its community partners and residents launched the Niagara Prosperity Initiative in 2008 with the vision to create prosperity for area residents by improving the quality of neighbourhood life. *Connecting the Pieces* evaluates the efficacy and impact of the NPI program and the projects it has funded to support Niagara's development of a comprehensive region-wide poverty reduction strategy.

History of this Research Project

Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara represents the latest phase of research and evaluation of an Action Research project initiated by the Niagara Region in 2006, when it determined it needed to be proactive and take action to address increasing community poverty and inequality that was affecting the health and life prospects of adults and children in the area.

Action Research is a paradigm founded by Kurt Lewin (1946) who linked changing social, economic, and industrial conditions to research that targets action intended to alter social conditions. One of the distinguishing principles of this type of research is its cyclical nature where the future direction of a new phase is informed by the analysis and findings of past experiences.[12]

There are three distinct phases to the process – *Beginning-reconnaissance*, *Middle-intervention*, and in the End, an *evaluation*. For the Niagara Region, *Connecting the Pieces* is the third of three reports, where each phase has been explored and defined by its own report, summarized below.

The Beginning Phase – Dr. Susan Arai and Rishia Burke's bellwether 2007 report, *A Legacy of Poverty? Addressing Cycles of Poverty & the Impact on Child Health in Niagara Region*,[13] represented an important early effort to map out the particular contours of poverty in Niagara.

Starting in 2006, Region staff worked with researchers to collect local information about poverty. In an effort to present a comprehensive understanding of poverty, the report defined and described the cycles of poverty, highlighted its generational impact on child development, and outlined its particular effects on different social groups, including women, aboriginal groups, new immigrants, people with disabilities, the working poor, and those experiencing mental illness. Arai and Burke highlighted the social determinants of health as one of several frameworks available to better understand poverty, and provided four corresponding recommendations.

The following year, *A Legacy of Poverty?* was summarized and presented to Regional Council, along with a request for Council to take advantage of what was seen as "a window of opportunity" to reinvest $1.5 million from provincial restructuring of social assistance funding. This action set in motion a series of steps that included community leaders working with Regional Government representatives in a planning session to develop strategies and priorities for the investment, and also responded to the Arai and Burke recommendations.

The Middle Phase – Following the 2008 participant planning session, the middle 'intervention' phase resulted in a strategy for Niagara to define a vision and take actions to implement it. Consequently, two important and distinct roles were developed to support the vision – the Convener and the Secretariat. These roles were served by local organizations, and together they worked to support the strategic goals linked to the newly created Niagara Prosperity Initiative program.

Sarah Pennisi released a follow-up report for the Niagara Region in 2011. *Building a New Legacy: Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Residents by Improving the Quality of Neighbourhood Life*,[14] reaffirmed Arai and Burke's four recommendations and updated many of their findings while drawing attention to emergent economic and political trends that were reshaping the local poverty landscape, especially in response to the 2008 economic recession.

The End Phase – This report, Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara, brings full-circle the action research process that has spanned an impressive 15-year period from 2006 to 2021. The intent and objective of this concluding phase is to measure what was intended to happen when the NPI program launched, and to present recommendations for next steps.

About this Report: Clarifying Goals, Objectives and Desired Outcomes

This three-year evaluation process started in 2018 when Niagara Region partnered with Brock University to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the NPI program on local poverty reduction. The research project was supported by Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Government of Ontario through the Local Poverty Reduction Fund (LPRF).

Niagara Region wants to improve the prosperity of its community members and serve a constructive role in reducing poverty and its negative impacts. It had several goals for this research project: this comprehensive evaluation would provide it with information on best practices, present recommendations that would allow for continued investment, and be a source of literature that may guide other parties and funding agents in other localized poverty reduction strategies.

Brock University and its NPI evaluation research team served the role of third-party evaluator of "the intervention" (i.e., the NPI). The trans-disciplinary research team assembled for the project aimed to fulfill its obligation to produce an independent, scientific review and analysis of the NPI program. The team wanted to contribute honest, accurate information and data to the Niagara Region and community to facilitate the

creation of a broader poverty reduction strategy so the program can be improved, and necessary supports strengthened for those who will benefit from NPI in the future.

The United Way Niagara, which serves as Secretariat for the NPI, was named by the Niagara Region to provide oversight and support for this LPRF evaluation process and final reporting. The Secretariat provides operational management of NPI projects by conducting a Niagara-wide request for proposal process, administering contracts, and monitoring project delivery.

Report Structure

The reader should note that *Connecting the Pieces* is presented in a two-document structure: this main evaluation report and a supporting document that contains several appendices with technical and detailed explanations, including research methods, data and statistical analysis, updated indicators, and select interview extracts. *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative* is provided for the audience seeking a deeper understanding of the research methods employed, and it allows for a comprehensive presentation of data not possible within the main report.

Opportunities, Challenges and Limitations of this Evaluation

Opportunities

Since the start of this multi-year research and evaluation project in 2018, several opportunities and challenges have been presented to the research team. The most significant opportunity was the broad-based involvement of the community in the NPI program and this corresponding evaluation process. This project presents a unique opportunity to evaluate a community service program and its impacts both over an extended period of time, as well as across a wide sector of the population.

Service providers, program users, community members, and several current and former Regional Government representatives participated in various stages of the research. As was revealed through interviews and personal satisfaction surveys, residents recognize the diverse contributions of the program to the community, and expressed appreciation for the values and intended goals of both the NPI project and the independent evaluation of the program's long-term impact. It is evident the broader community has shared goals to see a reduction in poverty being experienced by their fellow Niagarans, to increase public participation (in programs, poverty reduction strategies, as well as civic engagement), and to enhance community livability through social connectivity, improved access to services, access to nature, and improved food security, among other measures.

Connecting the Pieces provides the opportunity for Niagara community members, and in particular those with lived experience with poverty and marginalization, to see themselves and their voices represented in the final evaluation. There is consensus that an independent scientific analysis will provide the opportunity for critical reflection and allow for program improvements where necessary. In this way, the NPI program model and the

Connecting the Pieces report can both serve as resources for the provincial government and other communities, regions and municipalities.

Challenges and Limitations

Every research project presents its own unique challenges and limitations that researchers must acknowledge, evaluate and adapt to. The academic team assembled to contribute to the Connecting the Pieces NPI evaluation project were cognizant of the similar challenges faced by the report authors of the two earlier phases, Arai, Burke and Pennisi, namely: the differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods and their appropriate use in action research; and, the lack of a regional-wide approach and a standardized, pre-existing measurement system that would facilitate the collection and evaluation of non-uniform quantitative and qualitative data across NPI projects and initiatives.

Simply put, how you collect particular data affects how it can be measured and evaluated against other data. If a comprehensive and standardized method is not in place, it can be very challenging, if not impossible, to accurately compare. Qualitative research presents unique challenges in terms of grouping and coding data, yet it reveals important and nuanced information that quantitative data analysis alone would overlook due it its restrictive measurements.

As both *A Legacy of Poverty?* and *Building a New Legacy* reports recommended previously about data collection, "monitoring progress" through the development of a formalized and comprehensive approach to collecting and accessing data would provide the Niagara Region with a more accurate and uniform set of data over time. NPI uses Sustainable Livelihoods and Most Significant Change as data-capturing methods to collect user feedback. These are valuable as 'snapshots in time' that capture anecdotal experience regarding poverty and social inclusion; the measures also contribute to program and contract management where lessons can be learned from one year to the next. However, these qualitative tools are difficult to translate into numeric data for quantitative analysis. So while the cumulative results have provided some valuable insights, a rigorous scientific standard of measure was not in place.

In an effort to compensate for inconsistencies or limited data in some areas and to contribute value to the context of poverty in the Niagara region, Brock researchers expanded the initial research plan and their scope of inquiry later explored other data points, such as Niagara Health Services and local hardships experienced by low income people.

The Ripple Effects of COVID-19

The cascading impacts from the global pandemic will be felt and measured long into the future. Unfortunately, the pandemic declaration in March 2020, and subsequent national lockdowns, coincided with the final phase of research, data collection and analysis that was planned to take place in the crucial completion stage of this evaluation project. This presented the research team with additional unexpected challenges as it looked to meet the project conclusion deadline of December 2020.

Not only were the lives of our researchers, the program administrators, and community members upended, but the systems and access points the research team relied upon previously, and that would normally provide

resources in a timely manner, suddenly ground to a halt for several months. As noted above, efforts were made to compensate for areas that lacked information (e.g., due to individuals who did not respond to queries, data sources that were never delivered, etc.).

These are highly unusual circumstances under which to conduct a multimodal review. We have adapted our measurements and analysis tools to the best of our ability in order to provide a rigorous, independent and scientific analysis under the current limitations and to meet necessary deadlines.

Situating Poverty

Poverty Defined

Poverty is a complex, multi-faceted and emotionally loaded term whose precise meaning is often contested. Such disputes are typically not purely technical in nature but reflect underlying moral and political disagreements that bear directly upon the type of policies put forth to prevent, mitigate or reduce socio-economic hardship and inequality. There is no definitive description or categorization of the differences between poverty reduction or alleviation, and it is difficult to define when viewed from multiple angles – depending on where we start from, there are different ways of looking at the resulting impact. Later in this report we reflect on the overlap and interconnections between them, yet it is important we start from an understanding that poverty alleviation is just as important as reduction on the lives of those experiencing its effects.

> "
> Poverty is a complex, multi-faceted and emotionally loaded term whose precise meaning is often contested.

In academic and policy circles, the ongoing debate includes whether poverty should be defined in *absolute* or *relative* terms. **Absolute poverty** refers to a situation in which an individual or household lacks the means to access the basic goods and services (housing, food, clothing, and so on) needed to sustain a minimal standard of physical well-being. **Relative poverty** is defined largely by the context in which it occurs; that is, individuals or households are poor in relative terms if they are deemed unacceptably distant from the opportunities and general life standards that prevail in the broader community, even if their "basic needs" are being met or exceeded.

Within these terms, there are four commonly accepted frameworks for understanding poverty[15]:

1) Measures that include monetized definitions (LICO, LIM, MBM)
2) Impact on the social determinants of health
3) In terms of an individual's experiences of powerlessness and social exclusion
4) In terms of the impact on community

In Canada, progressive anti-poverty advocates have tended to favour relative definitions of poverty, whereas conservative voices have generally endorsed definitions of poverty targeting absolute shortfalls in a limited number of basic needs.

Even the strictest absolute definitions of poverty in Canada have included a range of goods and services that would not be considered to be "basic needs" in many poorer parts of the world and would reflect a standard of living far exceeding the World Bank's established international benchmarks for extreme or even moderate poverty. Within affluent regions of the world, as the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) explains, "virtually all measures of low income are relative…and they differ mainly in their underlying assumptions about how wide a gap should exist between 'the poor' and fellow citizens within the same society."[16]

Common standards for measuring poverty

Poverty rates in Canada have traditionally been derived from three common low-income measures published by Statistics Canada: the **low income cut off (LICO)**; the **low income measure (LIM)**; and the **market basket measure (MBM)**. Each of these measures varies in terms of where it falls on the continuum between absolute and relative definitions of poverty, and in terms of its relative concern with income, consumption and a range of other factors. Different versions of these basic indicators (e.g., before tax, after tax, rural vs. urban, etc.) are also published by Statistics Canada. In every case, persons in households or family units who fall below the established threshold are considered "low income" – a proxy for poverty.

Low Income Cut Off – LICO was widely employed as an informal poverty line in Canada from the 1960s until relatively recently; it is a hybrid measure that incorporates a concern for both relative income and basic needs. LICO is based on the premise that a household suffering low income is "in straitened circumstances" if it must spend an inordinately large percentage of its income on three categories of essentials: food, shelter, and clothing; thereby leaving very little income left for the purchase/consumption of other essentials and non-essentials.

'Inordinately large' is arbitrarily defined as 20 percentage points higher than the average across all households. There is an after tax LICO and a before tax LICO. There are also different LICOs calculated for seven different family sizes (from unattached individuals to families of seven or more), and for five community sizes (from rural areas to urban areas with a population of more than 500,000). These different versions are

meant to capture some of the different spending patterns (and required incomes) of different household sizes and households that face different costs of living as a result of living in different sized communities.

LICO

According to the Campaign 2000 Report Card, for the Province of Ontario, the After-tax low income status of census families (in 2018), a family is below the poverty line if their total after-tax income is at or below the following:
Lone parent with 1 child - $19,580; Couple with 1 child - $27,090; Lone parent with 2 children - $26,170; Couple with 2 children - $33,840.[17]

Low Income Measure – In contrast to the hybrid LICO measure, the **LIM** is a purely relative measure of poverty. In this regard, as economist Andrew Jackson argues, the LIM is a relatively "generous and inclusive measure which draws attention to inequality and not just severe material deprivation."[18] Any household with income less than one half of the median household income is considered low income according to this measure. The choice of half of the midpoint of the income distribution is rather arbitrary and, in practice, other measures such as 60 percent or 40 percent of the median are sometimes used. Three versions of the LIM are calculated; one for each of market (i.e., earned) income, before-tax total income, and after-tax income. The LIM also adjusts for the size of the household by dividing household income by the square root of the number of people in the household. One advantage of the simplicity of the LIM is that it is easy to calculate. Unlike the LICO, which requires surveys of incomes and expenditures, the LIM only requires data on incomes. As a result, many countries also publish their LIMs and international comparisons are readily made.

LIM

According to the Campaign 2000 Report Card, for the Province of Ontario, the After-tax low income status of census families (in 2018), a family is below the poverty line if their total after-tax income is at or below the following:
Lone parent with 1 child - $30,877; Couple with 1 child - $37,816; Lone parent with 2 children - $37,816; Couple with 2 children - $43,666.[19]

Market Basket Measure – The **MBM** became Canada's official poverty line in 2018 with the launch of the federal poverty reduction strategy. It defines the cost of a specific basket of goods and services that are meant to represent a modest, basic standard of living. The base case reference basket specifies quantities and qualities of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter, and other expenses for a family of two adults and two children. The base cases are then adjusted for family size, and the basket and its cost are calculated separately for 50 different geographic areas, including different municipality sizes in each province and specific municipal areas. The cost of the MBM is updated annually for changes in the prices of the items in the basket. The contents of the basket are also revised periodically to reflect changing expenditure patterns. This ensures that the basket continues to reflect the same basic standard of living over time, that the differences across different geographical regions are kept up to date, and that the disposable income available to families to purchase the basket is appropriately defined and measured over time.

The MBM is a more regionally sensitive measurement and can provide us with a more nuanced view and understanding of local poverty. In the view of economist Felice Martinello, "the MBM is the the best measure of low income by far. It is much more comprehensive and far less arbitrary than the LICO or LIM, and its underlying assumptions/parameters are updated at reasonable intervals."[20]

Unfortunately, the public use census data released by Statistics Canada for the Niagara Region[21] does not include percentages of economic families and persons not in economic families that fall below the MBM threshold. MBM is the most "absolute" of Statistics Canada's low-income measures in some regards, and it establishes low-income thresholds at a much finer geographic level than the other measures.

MBM

The MBM for CMA Niagara is currently being recalculated. However, the MBM in 2018 for Ontario-population over 500,000 for a family of four is $45,703.[22]

Poverty in Niagara

While it's important to be aware of national and provincial trends, we also need to recognize the various ways the nature and composition of poverty can vary significantly between regions depending on many factors including their local demographics, culture, geography, and unique socio-economic challenges.

Demographically, for instance, Niagara's population is not only older and increasing more slowly than Ontario's on average, but the region has a significantly smaller share of some groups shown more likely to be low-income (including visible minorities, Indigenous persons and recent immigrants) relative

> " In the Niagara region, 25.8 percent of single parent families are low-income, and if you are a female lone parent (children aged 0 - 5) — there is a 62 percent chance you and your children are living in poverty.

to Canada and Ontario, and particularly to large urban centres like Toronto. Such differences do not mean that poverty in Niagara is entirely different than elsewhere, merely that we need to remain attuned to the particularities of its local context.

This report draws largely from Canada's 2016 Census data. Unfortunately, attempts to capture the unique local features of poverty at the municipal level are often impeded by a lack of timely and finely grained local data. *Connecting the Pieces* updates the key indicators first outlined in Pennisi's *Building a New Legacy* report. A selection of the most recent Census key socio-economic indicators are included below, and can also be found in *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative*.

In 2016, the Niagara region's population was 477,888. Of this base population, the MBM calculation shows 12.7 percent of CMA Niagara is considered low-income, compared to 13.9 percent of the province of Ontario.

As economist Felice Martinello highlighted in his technical report for *Connecting the Pieces*, different groups are impacted more heavily by poverty. In the Niagara region, 25.8 percent of single parent families are low-income, and if you are a female lone parent (children aged 0 - 5) — there is a 62 percent chance you and your children are living in poverty. Meanwhile, 30.8 percent of single people in CMA Niagara were considered low-income. Seniors appear to be faring better, with 5.6 percent of their demographic living below the MBM poverty line in the Niagara region.[23]

While the overall percentage of households in Niagara affected by poverty and unemployment has generally remained near or below the provincial average, such rates vary markedly across the region and across various demographic groups and family types. Moreover, when considered in isolation, such measures can often conceal other relevant areas of concern.

For instance, as Sarah Pennisi highlighted in her 2011 report *Building a New Legacy: Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Residents by Improving the Quality of Neighbourhood Life*,[24] while the proportion of local children living in low-income households in 2006 was a full three percent lower than the provincial average, the depth of poverty faced by Niagara's children was actually greater, owing, in part, to the comparatively larger number of local families relying on social assistance.

A 2012 brief for the Niagara Community Observatory by Doug Hagar and Sophia Papastavrou[25] makes similar points about the need to avoid complacency in view of the number of Niagara families falling below the LICO. Such figures, they argue, do not adequately capture the disturbing realities faced by disproportionately vulnerable groups, nor do they account for the significant and wide-ranging costs that enduring poverty imposes upon the region. This undermines the Regional Government's capacity to make productive long-term investments in health, housing, transit, senior care, and other areas of social need.
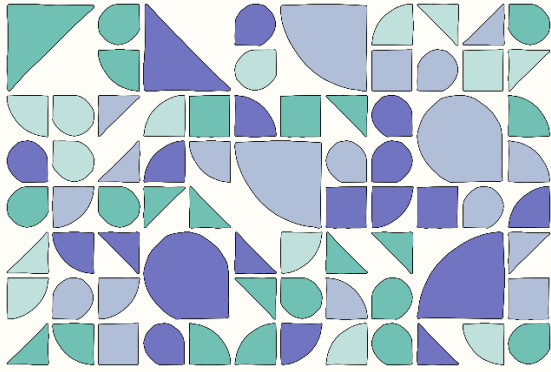
NPI: History and Program Model

Origins of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative

The NPI in Historical Context

While novel in the Niagara context, the NPI can be situated alongside many other local poverty reduction and alleviation initiatives that have emerged across the country over roughly the past decade and a half. During that period, York University's Dennis Raphael notes there was "an explosion of local and municipal anti-poverty strategies and programs across Canada, a response to the increasing recognition of the corrosive effects of poverty on individuals, communities, and Canadian society as a whole."[26]

In Niagara, just as elsewhere, such programs did not simply "explode" onto the scene fully formed, rather they took shape over time and in response to changing local and political landscapes. Years of local discussion and dedicated community organizing helped raise awareness about the nature and extent of poverty in Niagara, inspired the political will for anti-poverty action, and popularized specific approaches such as Asset Based Community Development. This foundation of community and government engagement was based on models introduced by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (*Discovering Community Power - A Community-Building Workbook*), Jim Diers (*Neighbour Power: Building Community the Seattle Way*), and the Tamarack Institute among others, and was further supported by emerging research into poverty reduction by addressing its connection with the social and economic determinants of health, an approach even endorsed by the Canadian Medical Association in a 2012 policy brief.[27]

Social and economic influences on health

Many factors have an influence on health. In addition to our individual genetics and lifestyle choices, where we are born, grow, live, work and age also have an important influence on our health.

Determinants of health are the broad range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that determine individual and population health.
The main determinants of health include:

- **Income and social status**
- **Employment and working conditions**
- **Education and literacy**
- **Childhood experiences**
- **Physical environments**
- **Social supports and coping skills**
- **Healthy behaviours**
- **Access to health services**
- **Biology and genetic endowment**
- **Gender**
- **Culture**
- **Race / Racism**

Social determinants of health refer to a specific group of social and economic factors within the broader determinants of health. These relate to an individual's place in society, such as income, education or employment. Experiences of discrimination, racism and historical trauma are important social determinants of health for certain groups such as Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ and Black Canadians.

~ Source: Government of Canada[28]

These early efforts helped to address the apparent lag between Niagara's changing economy – notably, the ongoing loss of manufacturing jobs and the relative growth of low-wage service sector employment – and public acknowledgement of the dire impacts such changes were having on Niagara's households. The Niagara Region's shifting and insecure economic landscape gradually forced a greater recognition of the fate of persons living in chronic, as opposed to short-term poverty, and with it, discussions of chronic or intergenerational poverty. In this regard, a key aspect of the NPI's early focus was the effort to reshape

narratives around poverty in Niagara away from narrowly conceived child-focused models and toward a more inclusive concern for neighbourhoods in need.

Within this framework of community awareness and early background work, Niagara Regional Council was strategically well-positioned to redirect $1.5 million in cost savings recently freed up through implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit toward regional anti-poverty initiatives and what would ultimately become the Niagara Prosperity Initiative.

The NPI's Evolution to Date

Since 2008, the NPI has invested $1.5 million annually toward a range of collaborative, place-based, community-led poverty prevention and reduction projects. As noted on the Niagara Region's website,[29] the NPI's stated aims are:

- To guide and direct investments on identified initiatives to alleviate poverty in neighbourhoods across Niagara
- To advocate for change that will reduce and prevent poverty in the community
- To develop and enhance collaborative relationships between stakeholders
- To engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways to ensure that investments reflect need

The NPI has established a long record of grant funding that supports innovative neighbourhood-based poverty alleviation projects across the region, and it was recognized for its early efforts. In 2013, after operating for five years and funding 183 projects, the NPI program was awarded the Canadian Urban Institute's *Prosperity and Renewal Award*. The award recognized the Region's leadership and commitment to poverty reduction, as well as the dedication of community agencies to providing innovative programs and services that helped serve people and communities in need.[30] Between its creation in 2008 and 2019, the program has worked with nearly 90 organizations and funded 374 projects.

The program has evolved since its 2008 launch and it remains a work-in-progress. Small changes have included revisions to the specific priority areas that receive funding, and Regional Council members were given a fixed number of positions on the proposal review committee. The operating model and management structure remain largely unchanged, but there have been updates to the funding RFP process. Following is a brief summary of the program's evolution, and how program administrators responded to the recommendations presented in the earlier reports.

In *A Legacy of Poverty?*, Arai and Burke (2007) called for a "comprehensive and multi-pronged strategy" based upon four primary or "pillar" recommendations, summarized below: [31]

1. **Decrease poverty through advocacy.** Given that poverty does not arise and cannot be confronted purely at a local level, the people of Niagara need to advocate for the coordination of a universal set of comprehensive healthy public policies that can address poverty's systemic roots and the complex array of factors that entrench it across time.

2. **Develop appropriate and flexible supports which address the broader determinants of health for adults living in poverty.** This recommendation grows out of a recognition that many people in Niagara, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalized groups, are kept in poverty not simply by low income, but by inadequate access to health and social supports, education, housing and opportunities for meaningful social connection and community engagement.

3. **Mitigate the negative effects of low income on children and youth through programmes and services.** Developing stronger, more prosperous and resilient communities requires a variety of concrete measures to support families and create a safe, positive environment for healthy child development.

4. **Monitor our progress.** Understanding poverty at the local level, and acquiring the appropriate baseline information to track progress toward its reduction, requires the development of a "Niagara Region-wide approach to assessing data and indicators of poverty and social inclusion."[32]

Arai and Burke identified poverty as a "significant and enduring" fixture of Niagara life, and the report issued an urgent call for local leaders "to act quickly to decrease the lasting impacts of poverty on children, families and community."[33] While providing flexible supports and programs for individuals in immediate need was crucial, an effective local strategy would also need to address the systemic underpinnings of poverty. The authors emphasized the "need to build stronger communities to mitigate the enduring impacts of poverty and the stigma and stress associated with living in poverty. Stronger and healthier communities will provide individuals with social supports and access to the broader determinants of health."[34]

In retrospect, while the first three of these four recommendations to some extent built upon established institutional capacities, the fourth recommendation could build upon no pre-existing practices or institutions. It was an early call for the creation of data capturing tools and measures.

The first report served as what Sarah Pennisi would later call a "catalyst for local learning and focused action."[35] Regional Council supported the recommendations of a community-led planning session on an anti-poverty investment strategy that could speak directly to Arai and Burke's recommendations. It was agreed the new initiative required a lead body that would remain community-driven and responsive to urgent local needs.[36] In September 2008, Niagara Regional Council members on the Public Health and Social Services Committee directed the new initiative be launched through a two-year agreement with Opportunities Niagara and the Business Education Council.[37]

Opportunities Niagara was selected as NPI's initial Convener, and was an early local champion of the Tamarack Institute's Vibrant Communities approach to community development. The now-defunct Business Education Council (BEC) was chosen to be the inaugural Secretariat. Opportunities Niagara unexpectedly announced its closure before the end of 2008; this resulted in BEC being awarded the Convener role as well. Early in 2009, the Niagara Prosperity Initiative's Advisory Committee (NPIAC) was established as a multi-sectoral advisory body tasked with overseeing and guiding local anti-poverty investments.

During this early phase of NPI's existence, the union of both the Secretariat and Convener in the same organization was a point of contention, in part because it ran counter to the original plan for NPI's bipartite structure. This issue was eventually resolved in early 2011, when the Niagara Community Foundation took over the Convener contract.

Three years after the NPI's launch, Sarah Pennisi released her report which updated the original *Legacy of Poverty's* four pillars for local action. In *Building a New Legacy: Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Residents by Improving the Quality of Neighbourhood Life* (2011), Pennisi refined the original recommendations and was able to provide deeper insight from participant interviews and her review of organizational practices.

Pennisi showed that larger systemic issues remained intact and argued for continued and sustained attention to overcome the barriers to prosperity. She noted competition and a lack of trust between service organizations and pointed out that, despite the NPI Advisory Committee's attempt to encourage collaboration, what emerged was that competition for scarce resources proved to be a "serious impediment to collaboration".[38] She advocated for economic development initiatives to be part of neighbourhood prosperity work, and emphasized that successful anti-poverty plans should include meaningful engagement with those experiencing poverty.

On the issue of appropriate response to the local dimensions of poverty, Pennisi advised they should be flexible. "This flexibility emerges as tension about the appropriateness of funding agencies to deliver programs across the region," she said, "as opposed to funding local agencies to deliver programs within their municipality."[39] She also highlighted the struggle organizations had with the need to provide service at the same time as measuring outcomes.

Pennisi concluded by issuing a reminder on the need to monitor progress, and recommended that a comprehensive approach to data collection, analysis and program evaluation be implemented (including qualitative research methods). She reminded us that program sustainability is dependent upon community ideas, involvement, and increasing capacity at the individual and neighbourhood levels, so attention should be focused on cultivating local leaders and their skills to encourage collective local action.

> " Tackling poverty requires that we recognize and respect the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty and its impacts, assuring that purpose and intent are constantly adjusting policy and practice accordingly.
>
> ~ Sarah Pennisi[38]

The issues of advocacy, competition between service providers, meaningful and sustained community engagement, as well as data collection and program evaluation, have remained ongoing considerations and challenges as NPI evolved over the years.

Program operations continued much as they were until late 2014, when the United Way of Greater Fort Erie and Niagara Falls (later, the United Way of Niagara) was awarded the Secretariat position. In this instance, the

institutional continuity of maintaining the same staff (and their knowledge of the undocumented, month-to-month operations of the NPI) was key in insuring a smooth transition.

With Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities (SAEO) staff currently providing oversight and leadership to NPI, United Way Niagara and the Niagara Community Foundation are currently fulfilling their respective roles as Secretariat and Convener under five-year contracts that expire at the end of 2021.

Key Features of the Evolving NPI Model

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative uses a research-based approach to address the root causes of poverty, allocating resources where they will have the greatest effect. While some projects are designed to meet the immediate needs of individuals living in poverty, the NPI is also focused on longer-term strategies which require stronger partnerships and improved coordination and planning across the public, private and voluntary (not for profit) sectors and among stakeholders.

The NPI program has continued to adapt and change since its inception and, in many respects, it remains a work in progress. As an evolving model for local poverty reduction and prevention activities, it is comprised of several distinctive features that merit highlighting, including an organizational structure with Convener/Secretariat roles, a community mapping tool, and an annual grant program for approved projects.

Organizational Structure and Key Roles

NPI was constituted as an arm's-length program funded by the Niagara Region. The NPI program is managed and administered by third-party organizations, with service delivery also contracted out to agencies through a competitive RFP process. From the outset, NPI was to involve two broad bundles of tasks, which later came to be organized through the **Convener** and the **Secretariat** roles.

While there have been slight changes over the division of tasks between these two arms, in general, the Convener aims to tackle poverty reduction at the structural scale, while the Secretariat aims to address poverty reduction at the operational level. Following is a brief summary of roles, relationships, and responsibilities.

Niagara Region

The Niagara Region flows funding for prosperity projects through the Secretariat. Final approval of projects and delivery agents for the prosperity projects rests with Niagara Region Community Services. Responsibilities include: provide funding and funding framework and guidelines; coordinate communication between Convener and Secretariat; provide feedback on outcomes and outputs from Convener and Secretariat; and, provide direction regarding funding imperatives.

Secretariat – United Way Niagara

The Secretariat provides the administrative infrastructure for NPI projects. It oversees the financial flow-through and management of reporting requirements for NPI funded projects. Broadly, this includes issuing the call for proposals and all associated responsibilities from answering initial applicant questions, facilitating the adjudication of proposals, overseeing the disbursement of funds, and receiving quarterly and final reports from agencies when projects conclude. It manages research projects (PEPiN and LPRF), develops the Convener work plan, and updates the NPI Mapping Tool.

This role has stayed mostly the same throughout NPI's history with the following exceptions. In 2017, the Secretariat took on the role of providing guidance and direction to the Convener on behalf of the Niagara Region. In 2018, the role of administrative support for Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) was moved from Secretariat to Convener.

Convener – Niagara Community Foundation

The Convener role focuses on building collaborations and partnerships within the community to meet the goals of the NPI. It aims to bring together various actors in a sustained way to develop strategies and coalitions for reducing poverty. The NPI funds the Convener position which provides administrative support to the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN). The Convener serves as a link between the working tables of the NPRN committee and the committee as a whole, and other external bodies working toward increasing prosperity.

This role has undergone some changes between 2015-19. The role description remained the same but there was a shift to provide short-term support to committees/tables and to develop leadership within them so they could continue independently. In 2017, the Convener staff person was directed to work more closely within a few specific areas and neighbourhoods, and was not closely connected to NPRN's work. In 2018-19, the role of supporting NPRN was moved to the Convener and the new job description for the Convener staff person was to provide specific support to NPRN.

Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN)

Niagara Poverty Reduction Network is a voluntary network of public, private and non-profit organizations working to collectively eliminate poverty through education, collaboration and advocacy (see www.wipeoutpoverty.ca). What they share in common is providing a space in which poverty reduction strategies focusing on the structural causes of poverty at the local, provincial or federal scale can be developed and circulated to politicians of all political parties. Its work is done by subcommittees focusing on particular aspects of poverty. NPRN was born out of an earlier advocacy group – the Niagara Prosperity Initiative Advisory Committee (NPIAC - 2008-11) or Niagara Prosperity Community Committee (NPCC - 2011-12).

NPI Mapping Tool

The development of the NPI mapping tool in 2009 helped to foster a better understanding and awareness of the spatial dimensions of poverty in Niagara and lay the groundwork for later place-based interventions.

The foundation for this community mapping project dates back several years when regional staff first created written neighbourhood profiles that highlighted relevant assets and risk factors across the full range of Niagara neighbourhoods. This later evolved into an online portal which users could operate. The mapping tool divides the region into its 12 municipalities, then further sub-divides into 74 neighbourhoods.

The portal provides general population information and relies on a range of standard poverty indicators to identify some neighbourhoods as high priority sites for strategic NPI intervention. To be eligible for funding, proposals submitted to the NPI should identify locations in need as designated by the story mapping tool. In its early days of use, not only did the mapping tool make transparent which locations were eligible for funding, it also helped to topple claims that poverty was only found in Niagara's biggest urban centres.

As Pennisi suggests, the underlying intent of the tool was not only to steer funding toward areas where services and supports were absent, but to "generate discussion about how neighbourhood assets can be leveraged to foster prosperity."[40] In this respect, the mapping tool reflects the formative influence that Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) has had upon the design and implementation of the NPI. Associated most closely with the work of John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, and in particular their 1993 book *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, ABCD refers to what Kretzmann calls "a set of perspectives and strategies that emphasize the importance of mapping and mobilizing the existing strengths – or assets – of struggling neighborhoods."[41]

Throughout the NPI's existence, there has been a strong and consistent commitment toward the notion of mapping and mobilizing community assets. The specific wording in service agreements and RFPs has varied over the years, but the NPI has generally asked service providers to explain how their projects would best leverage existing community assets, connect with existing neighbourhood assets, improve access to community assets, and so on.

In contrast to top-down, centrally planned anti-poverty programmes, ABCD proposes a largely bottom-up approach that aims to revitalize neighbourhood life by enlisting the knowledge, creativity, skills, infrastructures, associations, institutions and networks already present in even the most challenged communities.

While this model with its emphasis on 'letting the community lead' allows for direct citizen engagement in the creation of local programming, it has also been critiqued for placing excessive obligations upon ordinary citizens and stakeholders for remedying neighbourhood poverty and destitution, thereby absolving more powerful government and business interests of their responsibility.

In *Neoliberalism With a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland*, MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) suggest that this 'responsibility on the individual' advances a type of politics which blames individuals and reframes the government as not responsible for the welfare of its citizens. ABCD thus enables a political culture which shifts ideological dependencies from the state to one's self; government responsibility is minimized and poor individuals are reframed as solely responsible to

improve their own situation – a situation arguably brought about by structural inequalities which create poverty.[42]

In Kretzmann's (2003) view, ABCD functions best not as a stand-alone strategy, but as part of a dual approach that addresses "the powerful systemic forces, both political and economic, that affect communities from the outside" while also affirming "the capacities of local residents to solve problems and build stronger communities themselves."[43]

NPI Granting Program: Priorities and Projects

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative program model principally involves funding locally-run community projects through an annual request for proposals application process. The program has a long record of grant funding that makes possible innovative neighbourhood-based poverty alleviation projects across the region. Working with nearly 90 organizations from 2008 to 2019, the NPI has supported two to three dozen projects each year, with a total of more than 374 projects during its 12 year history.

NPI sets funding priorities and has attempted to direct project funds to the individuals, families, communities and neighbourhoods in greatest need in order to ease, buffer and prevent the hardships associated with poverty. Priority areas have evolved over time and are informed by quantitative and qualitative measurement tools, including the Most Significant Change and Sustainable Livelihoods' asset mapping models, which are described later in this report.

Approved projects run for either one or two years in duration. Following is a brief overview of the grant program's priority areas and examples of the types of projects and organizations it has supported since 2008. The program's priority areas have been consolidated into fewer categories over time. Although the newest funding priorities are broadly defined, some of the original projects would no longer qualify for funding under the new categories.

2008-2016	2017	2018-2019	2020
11 priority areas	6 priority areas	4 priority areas	3 priority areas
# of projects funded: 306	# of projects funded: 21	# of projects funded: 47	# of projects funded: 20
– Assistance with Shelter – Life Skills Programs for Adults – Job Specific Skills – Educational Programs for children/youth – Direct Services – Transportation Initiatives – Community Development – Community Gardens – Access to Food – Back to School Programs – Research / Conference / Seminar	– Assistance with Shelter – Life Skills Programs for Adults – Job Specific Skills – Educational Programs for children/youth – Direct Services – Transportation Initiatives	– Housing (improved access to street outreach services; life skills training; accessibility for people with disabilities) – Health (mental health; dental; addictions; access to healthy food; medical supports; children) – Employment (social enterprise projects that create employment, increase employability; living wage) – Neighbourhood and community empowerment (projects that create leaders with lived experience skilled in self-advocacy; develop community hubs)	– Housing (improved access to street outreach services; life skills training; accessibility for people with disabilities) youth; preventing homelessness) – Health (mental health; dental; addictions; access to healthy food; medical supports) – Employment (social enterprise projects that create non-precarious employment opportunities, increase employability; work with businesses to secure jobs paying living wage)

Within the priority categories, the (mostly) two-year projects have been diverse. Over the years, projects have targeted children and youth, adults, seniors, and families, and have varied in terms of scope. The *majority of projects* to date have been focused on providing an enduring benefit to individuals and families through education, training and skill development. A *second range of projects* has sought to provide immediate material benefits to low-income individuals or families. The *third type of project* has focused on creating neighbourhood infrastructure that people will continue to use after the project has wrapped up. The *fourth*

type of project has worked on the level of the collective, aiming to increase the capacity of communities to support their own members and enhance their quality of life.

These four broad categories of project are summarized in the table below:

Project Category	Scale of Intervention	Examples
Education, training, skills development	Individuals and Families	summer day camps for children in priority neighbourhoods life-skills programs for pregnant women and young parents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness summer literacy programs for low-incoming families with children needing foundational literacy skills
Direct material benefits	Individuals and Families	the Good Food Box, offering affordable produce to households that lack access to fresh, healthy food dental care and denture clinics for adults a laundromat voucher program ID clinics to assist people with replacing and safely storing identity documents needed for government services and financial benefits.
Neighbourhood Infrastructure	Community / neighbourhood	Bike Me Up, a repair shop where people can get help with fixing their own bike or select an affordable refurbished bike community gardens, community kitchens, and social enterprises that have some start-up costs but also the potential to develop an income stream projects that provide wi-fi and internet technology to low-income seniors (NB: a 2020 project)
Community Capacity	Community / neighbourhood	projects of drop-in centres that provide a range of supportive community-building activities after-school educational and social programs for children and young people volunteer programs that engage low-income members in community organizing or peer support.

Trends in Projects and Fund Allocation

This section provides a brief overview with highlights and select data visuals on project contract amounts and the regional distribution of funds, projects and collaborations that emerged. It's followed by a snapshot of program outreach that reveals the numbers and groups of community members served by NPI projects over time. This is intended to give the reader an appreciation of the distribution of dollars awarded, as well as a high-level understanding of project trends and target populations. Additional data and analysis can be found in *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative*.

Through the RFP grant program, NPI has shaped a response to poverty in the region by selecting organizations to receive grants, guiding the administration of those funds, and establishing processes for reporting on what the funded projects achieved. Since NPI started in 2008 and through to 2020, a total of $17,647,168.96 has been distributed to community projects.

While the official amount allocated annually to NPI projects has (with isolated exceptions) remained steady at $1.5 million, inflation has meant that the purchasing power of the fund has declined over time. From 2009 to 2019, the price index increased by 22 percent, so the purchasing power of the funds allocated in 2019 was more than one fifth less than it was in 2009. In other words, $1.5 million in 2009 could be stretched further than $1.5 million in 2019.

Actual grant amounts awarded for projects has varied from year to year. There are three reasons for this:

- First, $150,000 of the $1.5 million can be allocated for administrative overhead and expenses. In the program's history, administrative costs never reached or exceeded the $150,000 allocation, and any remaining funds from this line item were allocated to projects.
- Second, some projects did not spend their full contract amounts. Whenever this occurs, all of the unspent funds are re-allocated to new contracts.
- Third, in some years, interest accrued on the funds and was incorporated into the amount given to projects. If the amount of unspent or unallocated funds was large enough, a second round of RFPs for projects would be held in a given year. If not, the funds were allocated to the next year's RFP.

The figure below shows considerable variation across years due to leftover funds from previous years, interest accrued, or excess administrative budgets. For example, the contract amounts awarded dropped sharply in 2014, and the unallocated amounts were not large enough to warrant a second round of project RFPs. The 2014 unspent funds were moved to the 2015 RFP and given out in 2015, resulting in almost $1.6 million awarded that year.

Total Contract Amounts, by year, 2008-2019

Dollar amount in millions (y-axis: 1.0, 1.2, 1.4, 1.6, 1.8)

Year (x-axis: 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019)

Nominal dollar amount

Adjusted for inflation from 2009 dollars
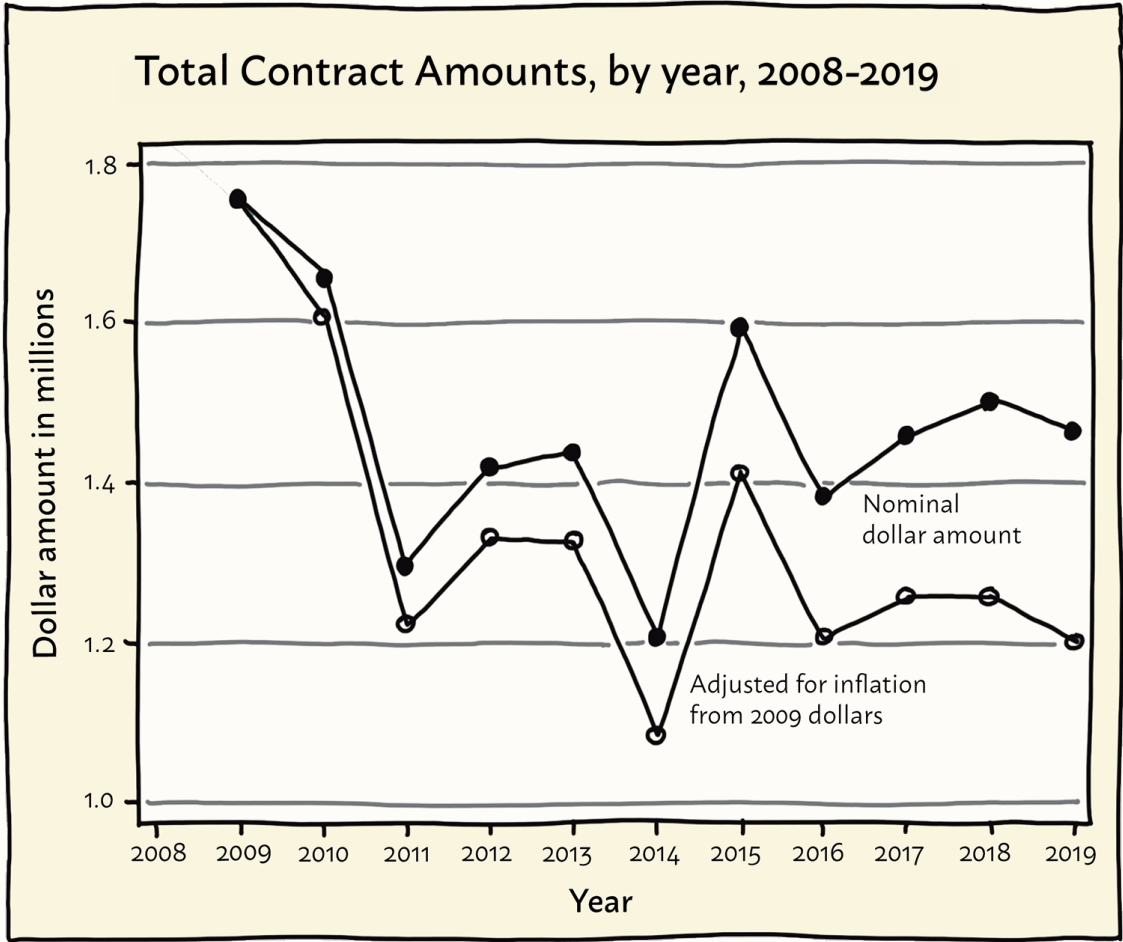
While the total number of annual NPI projects has trended downwards over time, the average project size and scope have increased, with some notable changes in disbursements occurring since 2017. Historically, 68.4 percent of all projects funded through NPI have received less than $50,000 in annual funding. However, in 2017 and 2018 the average award size grew, with more than half of the projects awarded receiving over $67,000. In 2019, more than half of the projects awarded received more than $52,650. The majority of grants have been in the range of $8,000 to $80,000, though several have been over $100,000, and a select few at $200,000. It's important to note that, throughout its history, NPI contract awards have always come in under budget.

An increasing number of the projects receiving funds target multiple municipalities within Niagara or have a regional focus. Notably, St. Catharines received approximately 30 percent of projects and the same proportion of funding (roughly equivalent to its share of Niagara's population). While 11 percent of projects have provided region-wide services (41 projects) with 15 percent of total funds awarded, most have targeted specific neighbourhoods that score high on socio-economic indicators of poverty, such as the percentage of families below the low-income measure.

Contract Amounts Awarded by Municipality, 2008-2019
Fractions of projects allocated for multiple municipality projects

Percent of total contract amounts

St. Catharines: 29.5
Regional: 15.0
Welland: 13.4
Niagara Falls: 12.6
Port Colborne: 8.5
Fort Erie: 7.8
Grimsby: 4.6
Thorold: 3.9
West Lincoln: 3.1
Lincoln: 0.6
Wainfleet: 0.4
Niagara-on-the-Lake: 0.3
Pelham: 0.2
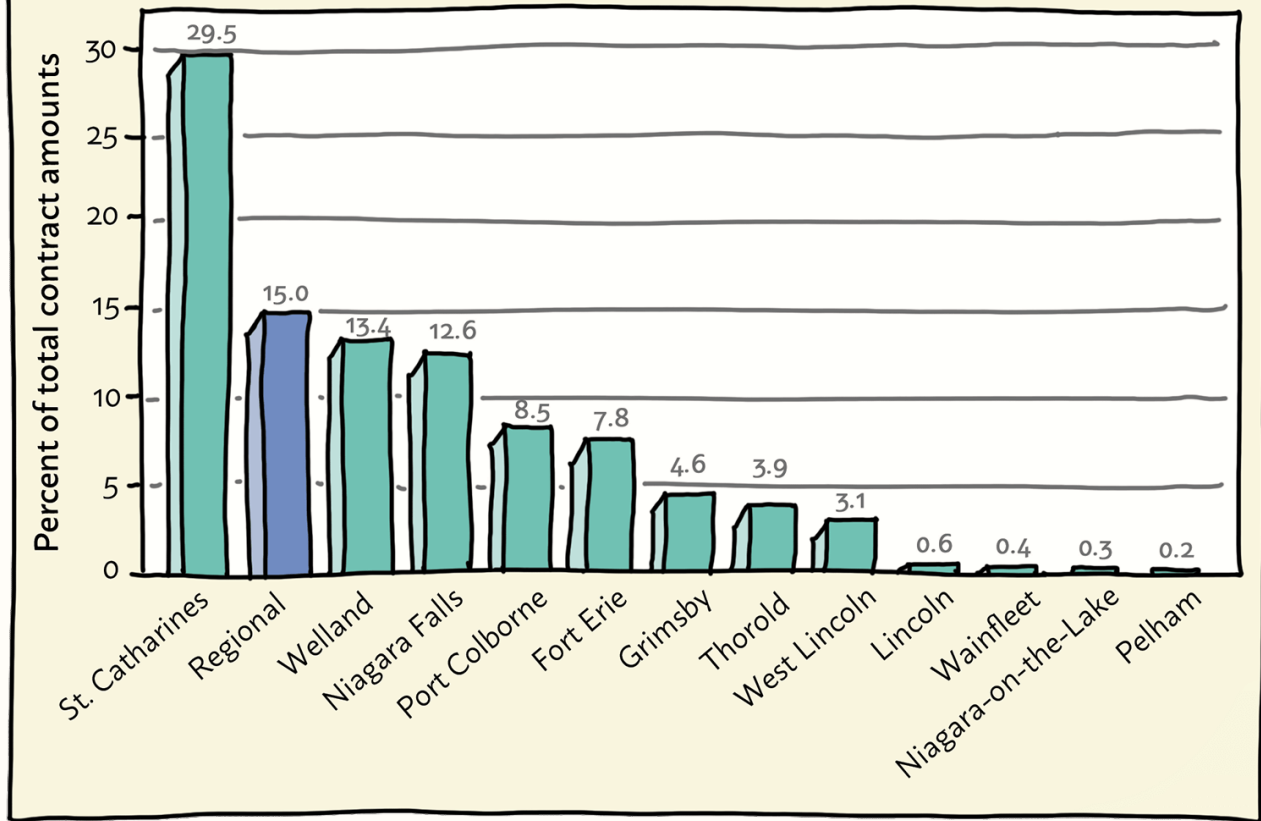
The majority of region-wide projects have occurred in the last three years, and the proportion of funded region-wide projects has grown considerably in that time. Overall, the growth of region-wide projects trends closely with the rise in average funding amounts.

In addition to projects addressing the entire Niagara region, roughly 14 percent of total projects funded (53 projects), are collaborations between one or more municipalities within Niagara. The most common project partner is St. Catharines, which accounts for 32 partnerships with 13 different partnership combinations. St. Catharines and Thorold account for the most frequent collaboration (9 projects) followed by St. Catharines and Niagara Falls (8 projects) and Grimsby, Lincoln and West Lincoln (4 projects).

The figure below demonstrates the proportion of cross-municipality and Regional projects that have been funded over time. The number of cross-municipality and Regional projects has trended upward since 2012, with region-wide projects overtaking inter-municipal collaborations in 2019.

Percentage of Region Wide & Multiple Municipality Projects

Multiple municipality

Regional

X-axis: Year (2008–2019)
Y-axis: Percentage of projects in each year (0–35)
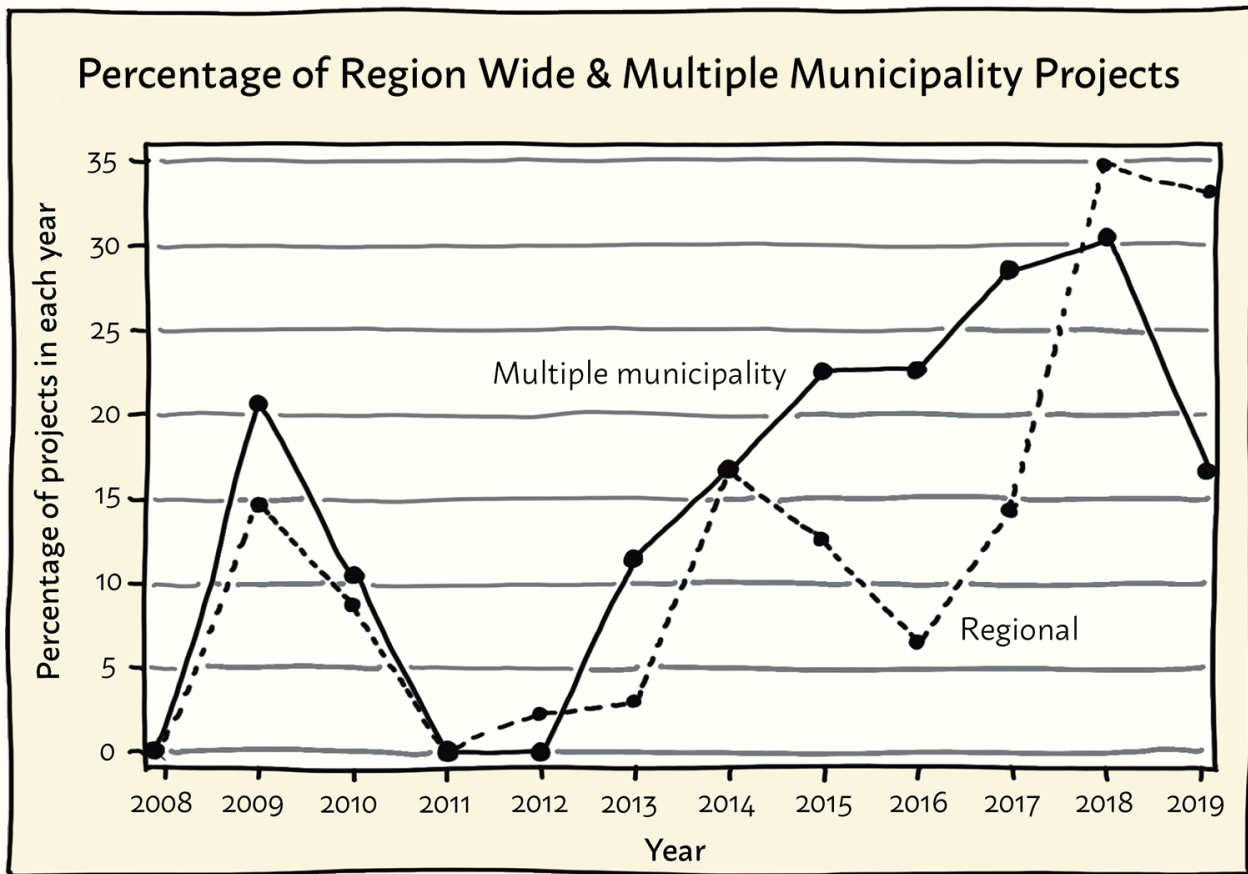
With respect to project management, it's important to keep in mind that some agencies have the administrative and outreach capacity to manage more and larger projects than others. The agencies that received the largest share of funding in the first decade of the NPI were: *Community Care* of St. Catharines & Thorold, *Start Me Up Niagara*, *Port Cares*, *Project SHARE* of Niagara Falls, and the *United Way* of St. Catharines and District (now United Way Niagara, prior to amalgamation and becoming the Secretariat). These five organizations taken together have received less than 35 percent of funding over the years.

Program Reach: Outreach Measures and Goals of Funded Projects

Applicants must indicate their proposed projects' anticipated outreach (including 'outputs', such as number of people served, projected revenue, number of jobs secured, improved access to healthy food, etc.), followed by a count of the actual number of individuals served if the project is awarded funding. The figure below shows the number of expected people served compared to the actual reported number. These numbers include children, youth, adults and seniors served by all projects.

In every year, the reported number of individuals served exceeds the expected number of people served.

Notably, there is a large spike in the expected and the reported number of persons served in 2012. This spike is due to one large project that focused on school nutrition. (As the project served all schools, the combined expected and actual number of children served was 13,000.) However, if this project were removed from the 2012 totals, the expected and actual number of persons served would exceed the 2011 totals.

In 2017, the gap between the expected and reported number of persons served was substantially higher than in previous years. These results stem from two projects: Roughly 5,000 of the unexpected extra persons served occurred in a St. Catharines project providing life skills workshops for women. Another 2,000 more than expected were served in an outreach project for the homeless focusing on Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Port Colborne, and Welland. Overall, the expected number of persons served appears to be increasing between 2017 and 2019.
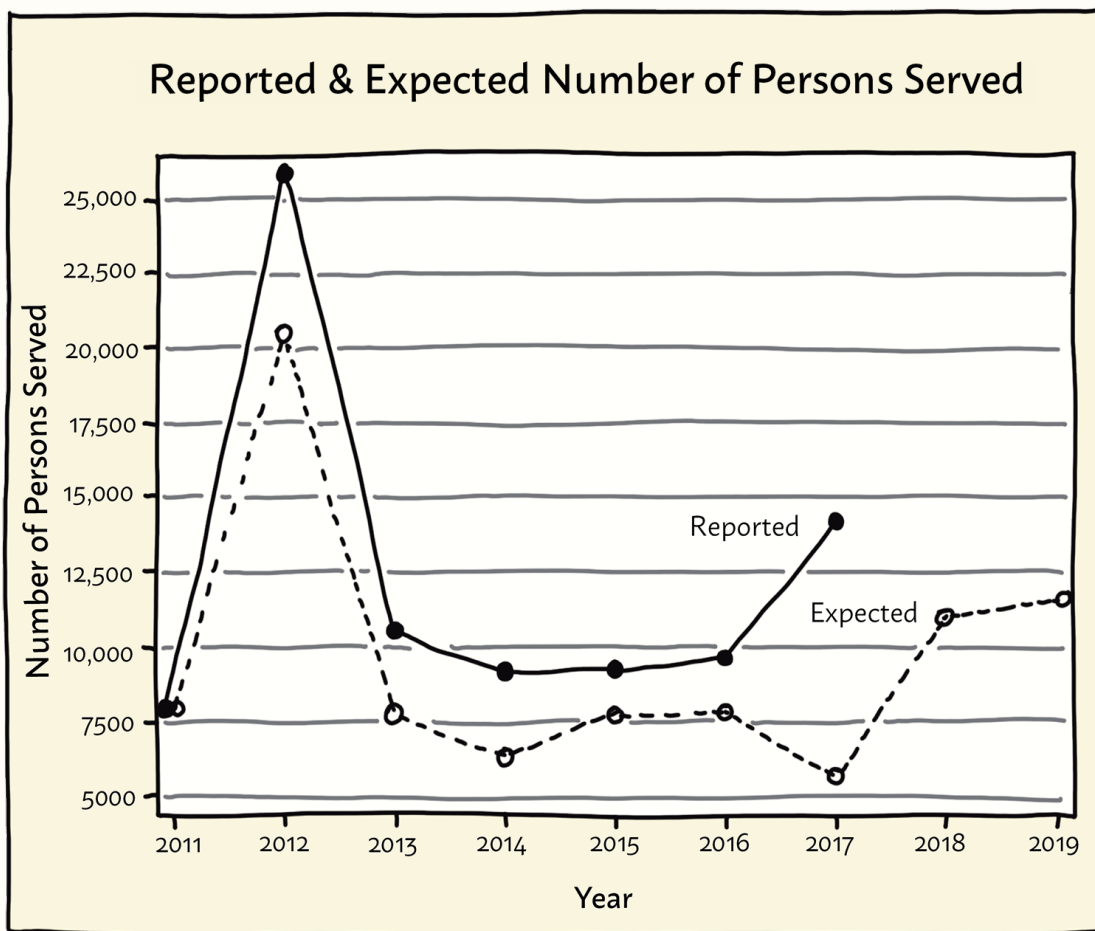
Note: This analysis of persons served was prepared before the 2018 and 2019 project cycles had been completed and therefore reported numbers were not available at the time of publishing.

The next figure provides an overview of the types of individuals served by NPI projects between 2013 and 2017.

Reported Types of Persons Served, 2013-17
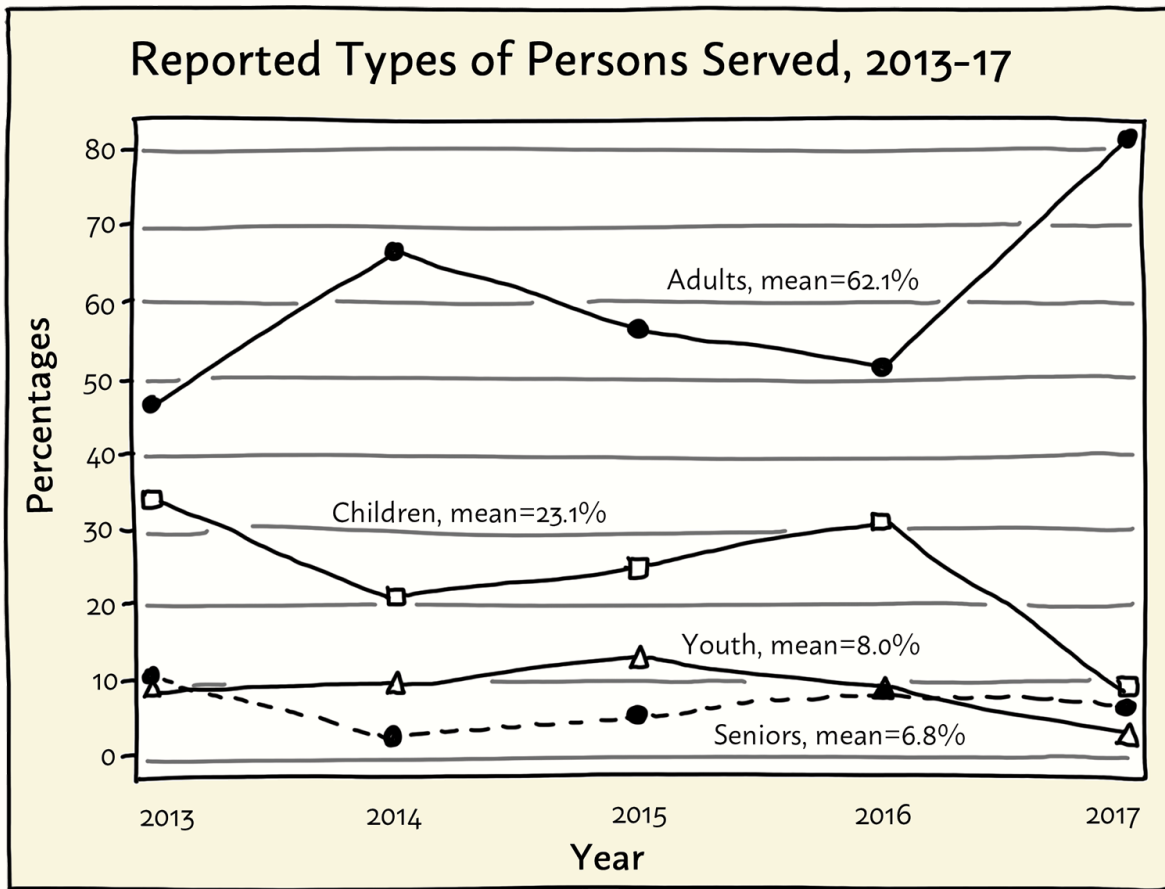
The majority of projects target adults in Niagara, followed by children, youth and seniors. As for general trends, adults' share of persons served trends upwards over the five years shown, reaching a high of 80 percent in 2017 while the share of children trends downwards. Projects that received funding tended to focus on addressing unemployment, no high school diploma, or spending 30 percent or more of income on rent. Consistent with the demographic breakdown shown above, a higher proportion of projects addressed issues concerning adults directly, rather than other demographic groups.

Summary

According to the Tamarack Institute, any given poverty reduction strategy is characterized by whether it focuses on *programmatic interventions* – activities that generate immediate and direct benefits for people experiencing poverty (e.g., employment program, transportation, etc.) – or *systemic interventions* that focus on addressing the policies, systems, etc. that make people vulnerable to poverty in the first place.[44]

NPI projects aim to build community capacity to fight poverty, yet are 'programmatic' insofar as they generally help people to build assets in key areas of individual and household life (housing, literacy, food security, life skills, transportation, childcare, etc.). However important, such projects on their own are unlikely to do more than alleviate poverty given they do little to address what Tamarack calls "the policies and systems that shape people's life prospects."[45]

> **"**
> Effective advocacy necessarily involves grassroots-based practice along with lobbying policymakers.
>
> ~ Linda Mayoux

The Secretariat plays an important role in supporting agencies and distributing funds to projects that address shifting community needs. In addition, the Convener is well-positioned to influence the structures that produce long-term poverty through its provision of administrative support to the NPRN. The NPRN is itself an important community asset of key agencies and individuals working together to advocate for policies that address the systemic underlying causes of poverty in the Niagara region. That NPRN is independent from government is notable, as this status strengthens its ability to represent Niagara's community members and offer input to government on behalf of those with lived experience.

There is growing research on the role of advocacy, different strategic approaches, and practices of nonprofit direct service agencies – see A. Biglan (2009), G. Field (2012), J. Dalrymple and J. Boylan (2013), L. Mayoux (2003), S.E. Kimberlin (2010), and P.K. Spink and N.J. Best (2009). For example, in *Advocacy by nonprofits: Roles and practices of core advocacy organizations and direct service agencies*, Kimberlin argues that human service nonprofits (those that represent marginalized populations) have the means for successful advocacy efforts as their position in society allows them to connect with both policymakers and marginalized communities.[46] In *Advocacy for poverty eradication and empowerment: Ways forward for advocacy impact assessment*, Linda Mayoux provides an overview of strategies and frameworks by several international groups including the World Bank, USAID and OXFAM, and argues that effective advocacy necessarily involves grassroots-based practice along with lobbying policymakers.[47]

Research also indicates that independent advocacy groups like the NPRN serve a critically important role in the community through facilitating solidarity and coordination between agencies and amplifying the voices of persons living in poverty.

While the majority of NPI's programs and resources over time have been invested in addressing 'programmatic strategies', it is important that the work of NPRN continues to play a role in strongly advocating for policies that address the upstream causes of poverty in the region. NPRN's work helps shape the NPI and serves an important community function, both locally in Niagara and through its ability to advocate for poverty reduction to higher levels of government. Now we turn our attention to understanding and evaluating the NPI program's relative effectiveness and impact over time.
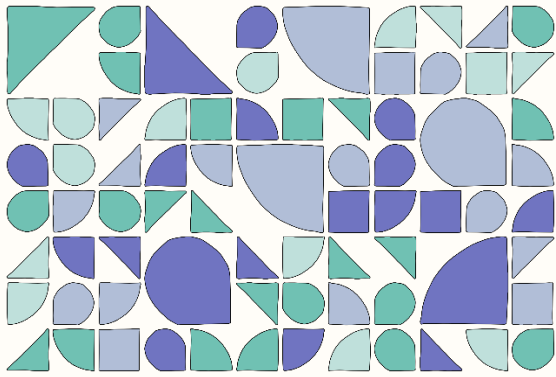
NPI: Process and Impact Evaluations

As Niagara contends with the coronavirus pandemic, the NPI is entering its fourteenth year as a social services funding allocation instrument for the Regional Government. Individuals and their families continue to struggle, and many have had their lives and livelihoods made worse as a result of the economic contractions brought on by societal lockdowns continuing into a second year. The pandemic has shone a bright light on social, economic and systemic inequities that communities across Canada are reacting to in various ways.

As University of Alberta urban planner Jason Syvixay et al. wrote in *Canadian Architect* in November 2020:

To make large organizational change or systematic change, it either takes incredibly influential people or a crisis to be open to doing a step change or a left turn. COVID-19 provides that opportunity to shift policies and frameworks to more inclusive and equitable ones….We need to ensure consultation is not just lip service or a checkmark on a legislative or regulatory checklist, but rather there is space created to hear different voices and a willingness to truly take into account different perspectives.[48]

Thankfully, the Niagara Region was already well-positioned to offer community supports through the program infrastructure it has in place via the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI).

Our purpose in *Connecting the Pieces* is not to evaluate individual NPI-funded projects but to describe and assess the *cumulative impact* of grant funding for poverty alleviation, and to provide suggestions or recommendations so the Niagara Region is better prepared to create a long-term poverty reduction strategy.

Impact refers to the long-term or systemic difference a specific program makes on an individual or community. When we speak of impact, we are asking about the lasting changes that have come about as a result of the NPI's funding of many different organizations and projects. In this case, impact is informed by collecting and measuring individual project *outputs*, then evaluating their *outcomes*.

However, it is not straightforward to show impact over time as individual projects' reporting data is insufficient to this task, and population-level statistics are not fine-grained enough to measure the NPI's effects. Even though the funded projects have been numerous and touched thousands of people – in its first 10 years of operation, more than 115,000 people were served – the projects themselves have been relatively small scale and short-lived interventions. Individual NPI projects cannot be expected to "move the needle" on the key indicators of poverty that the program has mapped by neighbourhood at the population level, such as household income and housing affordability.

Around the world and across Canada, there are many different poverty reduction models and frameworks in use, as well as various tools to measure community impact data both quantitatively and qualitatively. There is no perfect combination, and communities and governments often adapt their measurement systems and tools as their individual programs evolve through use and over time, much like NPI has done since its launch.

Some examples of poverty reduction models include:

Market-Based Models focus on removing the barriers that prevent the poor from participating in markets, both as producers and as consumers. Examples: *Microfinance, Work Integration Social Enterprises*.[49]

Asset-Based Models are based on the premise that people in communities can organize to drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing assets to respond to and create local economic opportunity. Examples: Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), Individual Development Accounts, Appreciative Inquiry, Collective Impact, Sustainable Livelihoods Approach.[50]

Needs-Based Models look to define strategies based on the needs of poor households, such as identifying barriers to employment and treatment needs.[51]

Poverty Prevention looks at the strategies that need to be implemented to prevent poverty, rather than just alleviate it. The primary model is the *Social Investment Approach*, whereby policies invest in human capital development and help make efficient use of human capital, while fostering greater social inclusion. It is the primary welfare model in several European countries, as well as in Quebec.[52]

Place-Based Strategies target an entire community and aim to address issues that exist at the neighbourhood level, such as poor housing, social isolation, poor or fragmented service provision that leads to gaps or duplication of effort, and limited economic opportunities. By using a community engagement approach to address complex problems, a place-based approach seeks to make families and communities more engaged, connected and resilient. Examples: *Comprehensive Community Initiatives, Community Economic Development.*[53]

People-Based Strategies are grounded on the idea that poor people with low skills need assistance regardless of whether they live. The goal is moving people from welfare to work. This strategy is focused on human capital and improving access and mobility for individuals. Examples: *education assistance, job training, housing assistance, relocation assistance and addressing skills and education gaps*.[54]

Our approach to evaluating the NPI started with understanding the current and historic operating and administrative systems of the program and any changes it has undergone. This can lead to identifying

strengths and weaknesses in program process and recommending needed improvements. We then review and assess the degree of change brought about by the NPI-funded projects over time. We refer to the first research focus as **process evaluation** and the second as **impact evaluation.**

In the next section, we discuss the findings of our process evaluation. Our research took place over three years and moved through nine distinct phases of quantitative and qualitative analysis that involved: review of institutional data and research publications; analysis of applying agencies' financial records; direct observations of NPI operations; confidential interviews and surveys with participants, project leads and stakeholders; review of three RFP funding cycles; impact evaluation of funded projects (2008-19); analysis of testimonials and photo reporting evaluation; a case study at eight different agencies that were all broadly oriented toward literacy; and comparisons to other regional poverty reduction programs. Following each phase, researchers produced a technical report that summarized findings and made observations and/or recommendations. Those broad findings inform our evaluations that follow and can be reviewed in greater detail in *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative*.

NPI Evaluation Data Analysis

3,494 'most significant change' testimonials from 77 agencies evaluated

46 former leaders of NPI-funded projects interviewed

10 persons involved in NPI program inception, design or management interviewed

8 literacy-related projects studied through individual interviews with 19 project leaders and staff

72 participants in literacy-related projects interviewed in focus groups

783 low-income Niagarans surveyed by telephone (random sample)

394 participants surveyed in June 2019 upon starting one of 15 NPI projects (pre-test)

94 participants surveyed after continuous involvement in a 2019 project (post-test)

64 applicants who sought NPI funding in 2019/20 surveyed about experiences of the application and evaluation processes

11 reviewers who adjudicated NPI applications in 2019/20 surveyed about the review process

Process Evaluation

As we move through the process evaluation, the different components of NPI's structure and operations are described and examined then, where appropriate, observations and/or suggestions are summarized in the "Observations & Suggestions" section. The Niagara Region and NPI administrators may reflect on these for future design of program implementation. A detailed summary of Brock University's nine phase research plan can be found in *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative*.

Program Administration

NPI operates through an alternative service delivery model that contracts out to a Convener and Secretariat the overall management and disbursement of program funds. According to NPI records, as of December 2019, the NPI had cumulatively spent $16,330,569 up to 2019 – $15,524,478 of which went to fund services, with the remaining $1,602,122 spent on administrative costs. Administrative costs fluctuate year-to-year, but typically amount to $150,000 per annum. Approximately one-third of this funds the Convener role, hosted by the Niagara Community Foundation, and two-thirds are directed to the NPI Secretariat, hosted by the United Way.

Secretariat - United Way Niagara (UWN)

Currently, UWN receives $100,000 annually. This funding covers the salary of one full-time staff member and any discretionary funds (totalling ~ $90,700). Approximately $9,300 (i.e., less than 10 percent of contract value) is directed to offset program management expenses.

Discretionary funds are typically used for operational expenses like hiring temporary workers to review and summarize project reports, professional fees for legal review of contracts, travel, office supplies and printing, and information and communication technology.

The Secretariat role is performed by a Program Manager. The role oversees the annual RFP release and hosting of an information session, and serves as the point-of-contact for applicants through the duration of the project contract period. This includes providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants, monitoring and enforcing the conditions of the contract, and the collection of any surplus funds. Together with a manager from the Niagara Region Community Services department, the Secretariat assists the RFP review process by facilitating review meetings, liaising with applicants on their project proposals and reviewer decisions, and negotiating contracts so funds may be distributed. The Secretariat manages the NPI program funding, receives quarterly and final project reports from service providers, and relays them to the Niagara Region Community Services department. It reports directly to the Niagara Region.

Convener - Niagara Community Foundation (NCF)

Currently, NCF receives $50,000 annually. This funding covers the salary of one part-time staff member and any discretionary funds (totalling ~ $45,000). Approximately $5,000 (i.e., less than 10 percent of contract value) is directed to offset program management expenses.

The Convener is afforded 24 paid hours per week. The role initially involved making service providers aware of NPI funds in advance of annual competitions, bringing service providers together to prepare joint applications or otherwise coordinate service offerings, and undertaking neighbourhood-level community development work.

At present, the Convener's hours are devoted to providing the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) and its various committees and task groups with administrative support. It serves as NPRN's primary point of contact and also provides media and communications support. It convenes new task groups or communities of practice, as directed, and encourages new membership to NPRN. Through this role, the Convener brings together stakeholders and coordinates strategies across sectors in alignment with the NPI recommendations. The Convener's administrative tasks include: scheduling meetings, preparing agendas and minutes, developing documents, monitoring activities and ensuring alignment with NPRN's work plan, and facilitating access to resources.

Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN)

The NPRN is comprised of public, private and nonprofit organizations (including social agencies, educators, faith communities, government representatives, and individuals) concerned with poverty reduction in Niagara. What they share in common is providing a space in which poverty reduction strategies focusing on the structural causes of poverty at the local, provincial or federal scale can be developed and circulated to politicians of all political parties. The network evolved in 2011 out of a community-based committee that had an interest in guiding a pool of poverty-reduction grants provided by Niagara Region. As the NPRN website describes its origins, at the time, "committee members identified the need for a network to tackle the issue of poverty reduction beyond grant-making because grants are finite but the depth and breadth of the issue of poverty is infinite."[55]

The work of NPRN takes place in Niagara and the 12 municipalities within this geographic boundary. The network meets five times per year in September, November, January, March and May. The Coordinating Committee is comprised of a Chair and Vice-Chair, Task Group Facilitators, and two ex-officio non-voting positions (Niagara Region and Convener).

Task Groups and Priority Tables focus on particular aspects of poverty and include membership from groups working with NPRN, though not all individuals involved in them are directly involved with the NPRN. Currently, NPRN's active Priority Tables include: business engagement, government relations and advocacy, health equity, housing, marketing and communications, and a speakers' bureau. It also has a 'wages and work' priority table responsible for releasing and updating Cost of Living and Living Wage calculations and reports, and for engaging with local employers to promote the Ontario Living Wage Employer Certification Program.

NPRN members serve on a voluntary basis and often have competing obligations like full-time careers. The network receives no additional funding beyond Niagara Region support via the Convener.

Observations & Suggestions

NPI's current recording of its activities is achieved through the development of Secretariat and Convener work plans, and regular reporting to Niagara Region Community Services, which submits Committee ('COM') reports to Council. A more comprehensive reporting process could be considered to better document workflow procedures which could then be outlined in a master document (e.g., an Operations Manual). This would ensure clarity of roles, responsibilities and communications processes, as well as serving as a mechanism for knowledge transfer of daily operations in the event that staff change, or the Secretariat/Convener positions are awarded to other organizations.

Through its independent role, NPRN is well-placed to influence the structures that produce long-term poverty via its lobbying work done by members of various NPRN working groups. Particular examples include its members' ability to pose long-term solutions to policy makers of all political parties on reducing employment precarity and consideration of living wage legislation.

Interview participants, including central figures in NPRN, indicated to researchers that the Convener's administrative assistance is crucial to the network because of the support provided to the organization and its members who serve on NPRN's Coordinating Committee and various Priority Tables and Task Groups.

NPI: Overview of Priority Streams and the Funding Cycle Process

NPI's request for proposal process is well-known to not-for-profit service providers in the Niagara region, likely due to its long-standing presence in the community. The majority of applying agencies in 2019 and 2020 participated in previous RFPs and almost all successful applicants had received NPI grants during other application cycles. The number of agencies funded by the NPI program only increased by one, from 84 to 85, between 2018 and 2020.

Word of mouth was the most common way applicants initially heard about the NPI funding opportunity, accounting for approximately 60 percent of awareness. NPI outreach (e.g., RFP email announcement) and presentations at events (e.g., Niagara Funders' Roundtable) accounted for approximately one-third of awareness.

NPI recognizes six conditions of poverty – absolute poverty, relative poverty, poverty as dependence, poverty as exclusion, poverty as capabilities deprivation, poverty as inhibition. It has adopted a multi-dimensional theory of change where poverty is conceived as a state resulting from deficits of skills and resources (e.g., "low education", "low self-esteem", "lack of role models") and barriers to normal social and economic participation (e.g., "poor transit system", "lack of good paying jobs", "high shelter costs").

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative poverty pyramid diagram: POVERTY at the top, with levels descending through Not Enough Income / Lack of Capital (Homelessness); Low Education / Mental Health; Addiction; Illness; Injury / Unemployment; Abuse / Lack of Stable Housing / No Access to Doctors & Medication / Lack of Good Paying Jobs; Low Self-Esteem / High Shelter Costs (including bills) / Lack of Role Models / Lack of Transportation / Poor Economy; Segregation; Isolation / Lack of Affordable Housing / Discrimination / Lack of Access to Good Nutritious Food / Poor Transit System / Lack of Training Opportunities. Arrows labelled RISK and ACTION along the sides. Niagara Region logo at the base.

From this broad conceptual starting place, NPI narrows the range of possible interventions by specifying funding priorities, placing limits on the length of funding terms, and restricting what agencies may use grant monies for.

The Niagara Region hosts a webpage that includes various NPI-related materials. It includes NPI background history, links and resources of benefit to RFP applicants, and that community service providers can turn to for general information, such as: Statistics Canada, Regional public health, housing and literacy data sources (https://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/niagara-prosperity-initiative/default.aspx). The Region's webpage also lists successful NPI funded contracts from 2014 through 2020. It provides basic information on organization name, project title, the amount awarded, and a brief summary of the project scope.

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative hosts its own website that provides background materials and other resources to support project applicants in the completion of their submissions, as well as information for the general public (http://www.niagaraprosperityinitiative.ca). The website also serves as the application portal where service agencies first submit their application and then later progress reports. Available resources include data sources, testimonial and photo consent forms, and the testimonial collection form. It also provides downloadable documents and presentation materials that apply to the most recent RFP application period – questions and instructions, and a pre-application information session.

In order to determine annual investment priorities, the NPI reviews local, provincial and national reports and seeks input from community actors, resulting in a set of funding streams (priority areas) for that given year. The funding streams are approved by Niagara Region Community Services, after recommendations made by the Secretariat. In 2011 and 2017, NPI held consultations and focus groups to gain insight from people with lived experience of poverty. Agencies are directed to engage with their clients for the development of their specific project applications.

RFP and Application Review Processes

Each funding cycle, NPI publicly identifies the streams and specific areas of project focus through its information session and Q&A documents. The Secretariat opens the RFP application process which usually occurs annually in the spring (typically February or March) over a four-week period. Following are items to be addressed within the application:

- Project summary
- Description of activities and expected outcomes
- Service provider's experience and expertise in delivering similar project
- Expectations of continued impact post-funding for participants and community
- List of anticipated outputs based on project area (e.g., number of people served, projected revenue, employment, housing and shelter, transportation, health and education)
- Budget
- In-kind contributions

Once the application period closes, submissions are evaluated by an Application Review Committee (typically from March to mid-April). Applicants are informed of the final award decisions in mid-late April, approximately six weeks later; project contracts begin and funding is released May 1, or as soon as signed contracts are submitted. (Historically the funds begin to flow the first day of the month after the review month.)

NPI-funded projects run for one or two years in duration. Several factors influence the duration of a project's length. Reviewers may decide to only approve a single year because:

- There is insufficient funding to cover all the projects in the current application cycle;
- Originally NPI was used as pilot funding and a second year required some type of evolution. If the second year was too similar to the first, the second year was not funded;
- The agency or project was too new and reviewers exercised caution during the first year (i.e., reduce risk). Agencies were informed the second year of funding was contingent on the success of the first year (agencies had to complete a year-end report at 10 months to be considered for the second year).

Projects that applied for two years and only received one are advised to subsequently re-apply for the second year.

Service agencies are required to submit quarterly updates and final reports to the Secretariat. These reports encompass both quantitative and qualitative measurements. Quarterly reports include activity reports (which

track outputs) as well as a financial report. Final reports are due 30 days after project end and include two Most Significant Change testimonials that are incorporated into the Sustainable Livelihoods framework (measures that will be discussed later in the report), and a qualitative-based analysis.

Observations & Suggestions

Gathering Input to Help Shape Priorities

While NPI does invite guidance from those directly engaged in the work of poverty reduction (e.g., NPRN, service providers) and has invited input from persons with lived experience in the past, this opportunity for direct engagement and collection of feedback could be expanded. For example, Niagara Region's Public Health division and service providers funded by NPI already convene lived experience groups that have valuable insights into poverty and social services in Niagara and they have indicated a willingness to advise NPI administrators.

The RFP Application

The United Way has retained a programmer to develop and maintain an online platform for NPI that makes it easier to receive and process applications; this represents an advancement over form-fillable PDFs and makes data gathering and analysis much more efficient. Agencies generally stated they find the application questions clear and reported that the NPI Secretariat is available to discuss questions and proposal expectations. However, some participants from 2019 and 2020 RFPs expressed uncertainty regarding what counts as evidence, how to measure continued impact, and program milestones.

In addition to the information session provided to agencies where questions are reviewed, NPI could share examples of strong proposals to the community to clarify expectations. Adding explanations of what makes some responses stronger than others would give applicants additional information they can use to make sense of competition outcomes.[56] For example, Alberta Foundation for the Arts provides online access to "Expert Panel application feedback" for its most recent grant application cycles, and the Ontario Arts Council produces a *Guide for OAC Assessment* to understand the process for evaluating applications and making grant decisions, including the roles and responsibilities of assessors. These additional resources could be added to the website so service providers could refer at their convenience.

Many service agencies are repeat applicants and have become familiar with the processes and expectations. However, several expressed their frustration that the application seemed unnecessarily "onerous". One common complaint about the NPI application form is that it does not permit attachments and that response length is limited, which hampers those who want to share research documentation or more lengthy explanations. Some argue for relaxing application requirements, while others ask for additional resources and support for the grant writing process. NPI strives for a balance yet can always explore future adaptations to streamline the application process.

As *Connecting the Pieces* researchers Jeff Boggs, Dawn Prentice and Joyce Engel note in their phase report, "NPI operates in an environment of limited budgets and high public scrutiny. Abolishing the reporting requirements is out of the question. Even relaxing reporting requirements should only be undertaken with utmost care. Nonetheless, NPI navigates a knife edge between accountability and accessibility."[57]

Agencies and the Application Process

In our survey of 2019 and 2020 applicants, we explored agencies' experiences of the NPI application process. According to NPI's website, the application serves as a mechanism to make service providers responsible for the NPI's commitments to a "research-based approach to address the root causes of poverty" that will "engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways to ensure that investments reflect needs."[58]

The NPI asks applicants to conduct needs assessments and to use both research and input from people who would benefit from proposed projects to inform project designs. Evidence-based practice and lived experience perspectives are important. Unfortunately, needs assessment, program design, and lived experience consultations represent unpaid work shouldered by service providers. This burden is exacerbated by the fact that NPI funding, if won, may only be used for service delivery, and the 10 percent allocated towards administrative fees is often insufficient to cover agency administrative and research costs.

We did not compare NPI's application form to that of other granting agencies, so we cannot speak to any similarities or differences. Our survey results revealed that, on average, agencies estimate the cost of completing NPI applications at $1,299.50, including staff compensation and expenses. The average application takes 24.2 hours to complete. Nearly 40 percent of applying agencies do not have staff whose primary duties include grant writing, and almost 60 percent report the application interrupts regular service delivery (e.g., reassigning staff from client-facing work to grant writing). Only 30.6 percent of agencies have staff whose regular duties include research pertaining to need and service design, and none have budgets for purchasing data and research services. Concerns regarding staff time and resources being directed to the completion of grant applications are not unique to NPI.

This information helps us understand where agencies invest their time and energy based on the anticipated return on their investment. Writing proposals is unavoidable and all funding grants require this investment. However, our research participants revealed that programs and services are under-staffed and current staff and volunteers are overworked, contributing to burn-out and shortages in human resources.

To help lessen this workload, NPI may consider streamlining the process for applicants. For example, if a service agency is reapplying for the same project in a second cycle, permit them to amend or extend their initial application thereby allowing them to save on staff or volunteer time.

Larger agencies often have an advantage over smaller agencies when it comes to research and grant writing as they are often better staffed and resourced. However, this advantage does not necessarily correlate with quality of services or strength of agency-client relationships.[59] RFP reviewers noted that the quality of research presented in applications varies, and that 'applicants do not always have the experience or ability to

adequately provide the needed answers.' Reviewers also expressed concern as to what counts as evidence in the NPI process.

One idea NPI administrators might explore that could potentially mitigate the inequity between agencies who do not have skilled grant writers is to permit mixed-media applications. Mixed-media, such as short video responses to application questions, or video and image attachments that illustrate written descriptions and justifications, are well-suited to conveying complex information in ways that are easily digestible by time-constrained review committees.

We understand NPI addresses this issue in the reviewer orientation to ensure reviewers consider the quality of the program over the quality of the writing. The larger concern that appears from this insight is sufficient access of agencies to the information and resources necessary to adequately complete the application and estimate project outputs, outcomes and impact. Agency staff are primarily experts in service provisioning – helping individuals and families, over time and in times of crisis, to enhance their well-being – and the majority of agencies do not have research budgets or access to data sets beyond publicly available resources like Statistics Canada.

The resources supplied by NPI provide valuable insight and context to applicants, but they are not helpful in answering fine-grained questions that arise in service design and delivery, and those are key items RFP applicants report having difficulty answering. Project leads are obviously willing to do the work necessary to secure funds. They are asking for support to streamline processes that lessen their workload, and this would be welcome in the areas of grant writing and research support.

Our research revealed that other regional poverty reduction programs (for example Waterloo Region) often have staff who possess research expertise, and that in smaller programs, staff with research expertise attend to output measurement and receive data analysis support through partnerships with university-based research institutes. NPI could consider partnering with Brock University to provide research and data support to area service providers in the completion of their project applications, or alternatively, Niagara Region could consider dedicating a staff person to this role to support the community.

The Region and NPI could also explore ways they might be able to facilitate additional support to applicants with their research and estimations of outputs. Some resources are already available but new networks and relationships could be implemented via NPI. Examples include NiagaraOpenData (https://niagaraopendata.ca) and Data For Good (https://dataforgood.ca) – both are resource rich with data and could offer their expertise to nonprofits.

Shifting Priorities Limits Systems Change

In 2020, the NPI's investment priorities were housing, health, and employment. These priorities correspond to measurable hardships faced by low-income Niagarans. This three-item list represents a winnowing down of social services domains for which NPI will accept proposals. One trend in this winnowing process stands out as an apparent divergence from the intentions of those community members involved in the creation of NPI. At the outset, creators hoped NPI's short-term investments in programmatic interventions would serve as a springboard to deliberate systems change (e.g., inclusive transit systems, community development, institutionalizing the involvement of persons with lived experience in decision-making processes, and partnerships with systems actors in the region).

Some NPI-funded projects have ventured towards systems change, especially in the area of health services. However, transportation was only an investment priority in early funding rounds, after which NPI opted to provide transit passes to facilitate participation in NPI-funded projects. We acknowledge that NPI encourages applicants to request funds to ensure transportation is not a barrier to participating, and that through its work with NPRN, it has successfully advocated for more affordable Regional Transit. However, transit passes consumed in the course of participating in a social services project does not address the lack of access to reliable transportation more broadly.

Likewise, community development work that was once facilitated through NPI Community Animators and service providers has been discontinued. Within the context of the NPI, this is not a failing. Community development, building inclusivity into municipal services, and collaborating with systems actors is labour-intensive, long-term work that is difficult to manifest into action through brief initiatives. As part of its process in developing a long-term poverty reduction strategy, Niagara Region (and municipalities) should review their current practices as perhaps these actions would be better managed and supported from a municipal level.

Community economic development (CED) or local economic development (LED) is a community-driven process where communities identify and initiate their own solutions to economic, social and environmental issues to build healthy and economically viable communities. CED contains principles and goals based on a grassroots approach to development where communities choose deliberate actions to influence the local economy and improve the quality of life for its residents. The role of municipalities is extremely important to provide leadership and support to implement and sustain an effective community economic development process.

- Community Economic Development for Municipal Councils Handbook, by Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development[60]

In a summary report prepared for *Connecting the Pieces*, Dr. Zachary Spicer, Director of Research and Outreach with the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, wrote: "Two-tier government provides an array of opportunity for policy-makers to best align servicing needs over a large geographic area."[61]

Given their relative proximity to the community, Spicer affirms that lower-tier governments "would be best placed to fund and support" community based initiatives, adding that the work could be done in conjunction with the Niagara Region. Taking action on poverty alleviation necessitates more local insight, support and service delivery. "Lower-tier governments," he says, "are best placed to support and conduct necessary community development work. The region is far too broad and disconnected for collective responses to naturally percolate upwards. Instead a re-think of servicing responsibility should take place with the Region." He concludes by stating that the moving of servicing responsibility to another tier should not be seen as a "retreat." Rather, it is an opportunity for "greater formal collaboration and not an admission of failure. Both should be seen as responsible management of vital public services."[62]

The programmatic interventions funded by the NPI are undoubtedly important, and the NPI program has shown its adaptability over time. However, for the Niagara Region to realize the NPI's full potential, it must leverage lessons learned through the program to move beyond it and evolve into a structure that offers more longer-term, sustainable supports. This line of thinking is developed in our recommendations for a Niagara Region poverty reduction strategy later in this report.

The Application Review Committee and Process

The research team observed the application review process three times – 2018, 2019 and 2020, and surveyed NPI application reviewers from the 2019 and 2020 rounds. In each round, the NPI gathered upwards of 13 volunteers to serve as reviewers. Reviewers convene for two 3-hour meetings: first for an orientation presentation, then to deliberate.

Each application is assigned at least two reviewers who score applications out of 100 points, following the application component weightings. In meetings, primary reviewers introduce their assigned applications by sharing their assessments and scores. Applications are then discussed by the committee as a whole. If questions about proposals arise that cannot be answered by primary reviewers, the Secretariat solicits answers from applicants in between review meetings. Reviewers recommend projects to fund and set project budgets through consensus decision-making; final project approvals are made by Regional staff.

Several applicants reported that the questions and feedback relayed through the Secretariat left them wondering if reviewers understood their proposals. Direct communication between applicants and reviewers should be encouraged, but neither are compensated for their contributions to the NPI and both writing and reviewing applications are time-consuming undertakings. Over time, issues arose such as inappropriate contact between reviewers and applicant; applicants getting overloaded with questions from select reviewers while others received no questions; or, questions and responses not getting shared with the reviewer group. To address these issues, the decision was made to have the Secretariat mediate the communication between applicants and reviewers so all reviewers know which questions are being posed and are included in receiving responses.

We understand that, in that past, NPI had tried a similar one-on-one process but ceased the practice due to inefficient use of time for all parties. Based on our research feedback, we suggest NPI may reevaluate this practice and perhaps offer options. This type of service administration/application feedback could be achieved through a simple biannual applicant follow-up survey.

Review committees tend to be equally balanced with new and returning reviewers. Volunteers are drawn from three areas: local service provider agencies, Regional Council, and local funders (i.e., the Niagara Community Foundation). Persons with lived experience of poverty have always served on the committee, though securing regular representation has, at times, been challenging (a minimum of one individual but occasionally two or three). In their conversations with researchers, many reviewers noted one of the most consistently weak sections of applicant proposals was the explanation of benefit to people experiencing poverty.

NPI reviewers bring experience and expertise to the program. Recruiting reviewers with expertise relevant to the proposals they evaluate is of utmost importance. When reviewers, in one round, expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to evaluate projects in the Housing stream, NPI staff invited a staff member from Niagara Region Community Services to act as a subject matter expert. This practice can be expanded, and subject matter experts could be recruited from the community or outside of the Niagara region, as required.

Most reviewers say they volunteer with the NPI to learn about and serve their community; instrumental motives like professional development and networking are also reported, but far less frequently. No reviewers indicate interest in rewards for their contributions. Review meetings are characterized by collegiality and concern for the best interests of vulnerable Niagarans.

The NPI manages financial conflicts of interest by asking reviewers to declare conflicts of interest at the beginning of the adjudication process. They are required to sign a disclosure agreement and asked to declare conflicts if they should arise. Reviewers step out of meetings when proposals are tabled from agencies they are employed by. Non-financial conflicts of interest are more difficult to detect, but represent a threat to the process all the same.[63] Because the NPI places value on agencies' service delivery experience and partnerships, reviewers cannot perform their function without identifying applicants.

NPI's application review process appears comprehensive and balanced, with individuals who bring experience as well as fresh perspective to the adjudication process. Due to the nature of its projects and shifting funding streams, we would encourage NPI to continue to expand the representation of people with lived experience of poverty and groups disproportionately affected by poverty (youth, racialized communities, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, and so on) on the Review Committee, or through other models for inclusion, to ensure broader perspectives are heard and incorporated.

We must continue to try harder and with intentionality to ensure representation of marginalized voices are heard and respected in our communities and governments, but our systems and structures can be intimidating and slow to change. One example to consider increasing participation in NPI's project review process responds to the difficulty of ensuring different perspectives have equal voice by allowing lived experience volunteers to participate independently of those with professional backgrounds;[64] lived experience reviewers may enrich the deliberative process by providing feedback on applications without the burden of participating in review meetings.

Annually during the NPI celebration after projects are approved, both reviewers and approved project recipients meet to discuss different topics – this is a good practice to facilitate relationship-building and address any additional questions. To further its insights into the application and review process, the NPI could draw on discretionary funds to facilitate paid focus groups, once annual competitions have been adjudicated. This would bring the perspectives of applicants and reviewers into deeper conversation and go beyond its current practice of collecting written feedback from these groups separately.

Agency Competition-Collaboration

As a funding instrument, NPI annually consumes and disseminates $1.5 million in Regional tax base dollars, and through this action it contributes to shaping the social services field in Niagara. Most directly, as a gatekeeper to public monies, the NPI imposes economic discipline on local service providers who may not be accustomed to forward-planning and bureaucratic reporting processes. In some respects, these types of systematic and administrative approaches can assist organizations with longer-term thinking and enhance their operational efficiency. However, we are reminded by research participants that, due to their often meagre resources, such administrative changes can strain them and reduce their capacity to provide front-line services.

Service agencies are often focused on their day-to-day tasks and responsibilities, and expressed frustration and fatigue with having to source funding to maintain operations and establish a financial 'cushion'. They are conscious of competing for dollars within a limited pool of resources, including both public and private funding streams.

Like many other funding models, NPI puts agencies into competition with one another. It attempts to curtail systemic problems arising from competition by asking applicants to "Name and describe how you will form relevant partnerships with organizations in the neighbourhood to foster sustainable and collaborative approaches to increasing prosperity". The Secretariat is responsible for identifying opportunities and facilitating partnerships between applicants during the application period. In fact, the NPI lists "to develop and enhance collaborative relationships between stakeholders" as one of its four goals.[65]

The creation of NPI with its funding pool set in motion a process through which agencies and individuals could develop a more structured approach to reducing community poverty. It is impossible to retroactively measure and assess the impact NPI has had on the formation of relationships and collaborations between Niagara social service agencies. However, the program created a structure and networking opportunity in 2008 that hadn't been in place previously, so we can surmise that it played a role in facilitating many relationships that exist at NPRN today.

Our research team did have the opportunity to survey applicants from the 2019 and 2020 funding streams on the origins of their partnerships. The findings serve as a snapshot of recent collaborations between agencies:

- 77.1 percent of the relationships represented in partnership lists were formed prior to writing their applications
- 19.4 percent of these relationships were initiated by agencies in the course of writing applications
- 3.5 percent of these relationships were facilitated by NPI staff during the application process.

- Roughly half of these partnerships continued after their applications were declined or the funding terms ended.

The NPI serves an important role as project facilitator and connector within the Niagara community. Thoughtful collaboration is important for social service agencies as it can contribute to program innovation at the same time as addressing multiple needs of service users – it is also part of community relationship-building. Outreach and networking are vitally important amongst agencies, but we can't overlook the fact that it also takes precious time away from the hard work of service provision, and why many research participants expressed their fatigue with the application process and competition model.

Interconnections: Funding Models and Contract Terms

It is important to understand the context within which NPI was created, shaped and currently operates, because this informs the various challenges and limitations it faces, as well as any opportunities it could embrace. NPI administers funding through a competitive alternative service delivery (ASD) model, sometimes referred to as the "contracting regime" or "contract culture", and this model shapes the structure of its granting process. ASD is a set of organizational arrangements that emphasize reliance on non-governmental actors to realize the mandates of government departments and is the main mechanism through which the field of social services has been reshaped in accordance with the prevailing philosophy of governance.[66] Government uses tax dollars to purchase services for citizens through contractual relations. More often than not, contracts are tendered through a competitive bidding process.

> " Although the rise of contract culture has prompted many not-for-profit organizations to diversify their funding sources, especially in the human services sub-sector, most remain dependent on and seek out government funding.

The mid-1990s saw the ascension of a new philosophy of governance that sought to achieve greater efficiency and redistribute risk away from government by using business practices and market frameworks to coordinate human activities.[67] This political transformation initiated a profound restructuring of the Canadian social services field. In the preceding period, relationships between government and service providers were generally characterized by cooperation and a complementary division of labour, and government provided flexible, long-term, stable, core funding. NPI reflects the political culture and practices of its time. Although the rise of contract culture has prompted many not-for-profit organizations to diversify their funding sources, especially in the human services sub-sector, most remain dependent on and seek out government funding.[68]

In their literature review for *Connecting the Pieces*, researchers Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker, Kevin Gosine, Tiffany Gallagher, Palmina Conversano and Amber-Lee Varadi explored challenges with non-profit service delivery and found significant research regarding the impacts on service agencies due to a changing political climate

and increases in privatization and managerialism. With reference to the research of Dominelli (2010) and Baines et al. (2014) they argue:

[G]lobalization has led to increases in privatization and new managerialism, which has impacted the delivery of social services, its labour processes, and the relationships between social workers and their organization's Service Users. With these increases, non-profits that have not previously held a profit-motive are pressured to introduce business and market practices, and become more entrepreneurial through the use social enterprise models to generate additional revenue.[69]

Now decades-old, this model is well-researched and the findings of previous studies highlight its benefits and limitations. Baines et al. turn their lens to Ontario and note: "With a reliance on unstable and short-term contract-based funding, less than half (48%) of Ontario's non-profit labour force work full-time, which reveals the insecurity, vulnerability, and temporariness that characterizes this work and indisputably influences the quality of service delivery."[70]

This analysis is germane to our evaluation of NPI's current structure and as we consider how the program may evolve in relation to Niagara Region's long-term poverty reduction strategy. In the later "Impact Evaluation" section of *Connecting the Pieces*, we will hear the voices and perspectives of service providers on this issue. For the moment though, we look to other regional poverty reduction programs of this type across Southern Ontario and beyond, and find programs that still use this model are distinguished by the ways they address its documented limitations.

Since the mid-2000s, many municipalities in partnership with their local social service agencies and funders, have reviewed their community poverty reduction and prosperity goals and come together to discuss new program models that are shaped in response to unique local needs and opportunities. Of course, local socio-economic indicators play an important part in informing this response.

As part of the research process for *Connecting the Pieces*, we explored a cross-section of poverty reduction and prosperity initiatives across Ontario and beyond. More than 30 regional programs were reviewed including Dufferin County, Halton, Hamilton, Bruce Grey, Peel, Kingston, Waterloo, Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie, Toronto, Lakehead, and Kenora. We also peeked into programs, both regional and provincial, that others found notable in places such as New Brunswick and Manitoba.

It was beyond the scope of our research plan to explore these comparisons in great detail; however, several were selected for interviews and those program highlights are provided in *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative*. The findings from this research, as well as through our literature reviews, inform this evaluation and our recommendations. This early-stage research into other program and funding models is intended to point Niagara Region in the direction of other communities so it can learn from and make thoughtful, strategic decisions as it looks to evolve NPI going forward, and to what degree it will play a role in the Region's future long-term poverty reduction strategy.

Broadly we learned that open-ended investment priorities allow social services funding programs to keep pace with social change and developments in best practices. Many communities created on-going roundtable groups comprised of various partners (social service agencies, non-profit organizations, people with lived experience, government representatives, local business, community members) who initiated strategic plans,

then committed to revising their strategies on a regular basis to account for changing local circumstances and need. They accept the premise that poverty costs all communities in similar ways, and while there are many similar target areas (community development, living wage, school nutrition, housing and transportation needs), their approaches are not prescriptive. Below we briefly outline two examples – Halton and Waterloo – to show Regional commitment, community involvement, and funding models.

Halton Region (2016 Census pop. 548,435)

Halton Poverty Roundtable[71] (HPR) operates under the auspices of the United Way - Halton and Hamilton and has several partner organizations. HPR is comprised of individuals who have experienced poverty, local businesses and government, as well as community members. It provides information, makes note of any trends and examines local issues. The roundtable also provides insight on what needs to be changed and addressed, then suggests methods for doing so. *Halton Community Benefits Network* (HCBN) is a strategic initiative of HPR and does community consultation and advocacy work; the program model in use is *Community Benefits Agreements*.

Community Benefits Agreements are negotiated contracts between public and private sectors in endeavours, such as the development of infrastructure projects – a way to leverage money that governments have already committed to spend in order to gain economic and social benefits for the community. In this process, these agreements engage input from a cross-sector coalition of Connector Organizations – community organizations, businesses and citizen groups, which typically include non-profit employment and social service agencies, colleges, faith-based groups, trade unions, chambers of commerce and professional associations.[72]

Halton's program funding model is the *Halton Region Community Investment Fund*[73] (HRCIF), which provides one-year and multi-year grants to programs and initiatives through two categories of funding. HRCIF funding applications must focus on supporting residents vulnerable to negative health and social outcomes. HRCIF encourages proposals that demonstrate collaborative approaches to addressing community needs.

HRCIF is funded through Halton Regional tax base. In response to pressures made worse by COVID-19, Regional Council increased HRCIF from $3 million to $3.5 million in December 2020.[74] This is for grants alone and does not include staffing costs. The Human Services team is largely dedicated to planning and policy around poverty reduction efforts and emergency planning from the social services perspective. Approximately 10 full-time staff are dedicated to this work.

Waterloo Region (2016 Census pop. 535,154)

Wellbeing Waterloo Region[75] (WWR) is a community-led collaborative where members work together across sectors to improve the wellbeing of residents in Waterloo Region. WWR's 160+ members come from all parts of Waterloo Region, representing local residents with various lived experiences and 70+ organizations. Now in its fifth year, WWR's first report to the community reported measures of 80 indicators which informed the development of a citizen survey that filled data gaps.

Its enabling structure is informed by the *Connected Community Approach* – changing and strengthening local systems, including the ways residents, service providers, and community leaders work together. It is different yet complementary to services that offer direct support to community members. The Connectors Hub provides oversight and ensures integration for the overall directions of the collective work of WWR. Through the Hub, multiple other working groups and advisory circles operate, including the Measurement and Monitoring[76] working group that reports various indicators and impact measures back to the Region, which serves as a *community backbone organization*. While they don't consider themselves to be following a collective impact framework, they are committed to the idea of collective, coordinated action.

Local funders came together (e.g., United Way, community foundation, etc.) to hear the community during the consultation stage and the funders created a shared pool of dollars for service provisioning; funders and Waterloo Region review applications together. With funders contributing most of the dollars, the Region contributed $250,000, plus seconded staff – police, public health, nurses, housing, full time community development professional, and two additional staff members hired to help with measurement (research and analytics) and administration.

The community directs the strategy in identifying priorities and program staff act as facilitators to help those coming from different positions in the community understand one another's positions and find ways to collaborate. Lived experience involvement is compensated with stipends for attending working group meetings, training sessions, etc. There is still some competition for funds, but agencies tend to work together and sort out divisions of labour for multi-agency initiatives, which also results in less redundancy in service offerings.

In addition, Waterloo Region offers the *Community Innovation Grant* – the $50,000 award provides "one-time grants to support not-for-profit community organizations, partnerships or groups undertaking innovative projects with potential to provide effective and sustainable solutions to existing or emerging needs within the region. In any year, Regional council can decide to award the entire $50,000 to one eligible proposal or award lesser amounts to several projects. Successful candidates will have two years to complete the project."[77]

By explaining the historical context of NPI's creation and its operating model, as well as showing different models and funding frameworks, we aim to make the connection that the research also   reveals – longer-term funding arrangements that support collaboration over competition are often more stable and efficient for both recipients and fund administrators, and direct regional support in terms of staffing and financial resources make for stronger community-government collaboration. We recognize that short-term projects can and do have lasting impacts for individuals and communities. However, for some agencies, longer-term funding leads to increased stability, which means agencies can better plan and develop more sustainable strategies. This is opposed to remaining in a cycle of short-term contract cycles and service or human resource precarity.[78]

As a starting place, NPI could investigate extending contract lengths beyond two years on select projects to collect baseline measures and monitor program success over time, and it could also consider streamlining the application process for repeat projects to lessen the investment of service agency staff time and resources.

Communications, Accountability and Transparency

As a publicly-funded organization, NPI is accountable to Niagara Region, the community, and other funding partners. NPI has a regular reporting structure that functions between Convener, Secretariat and Regional staff, who then report program and financial details to Regional Council.

There are many opportunities for NPI to be communicating its stories and successes with the Niagara community and service providers – its annual celebration after project approval is one good example already in practice. The Secretariat currently acts as go-between for reviewers and applicants when reviewers have questions about proposals and in communicating reviewers' final decisions. These interactions are good opportunities for NPI to make applicants feel their work and expertise are valued, and that decision-makers respect them, and we encourage NPI to continue this practice.

The Niagara Region currently lists NPI's contract award recipients for funding years 2014-20. This is a good practice in transparency through listing recipient name, award amount and project summary. As noted previously, NPI's annual funding stream priorities are acknowledged on its website via the Resources tab as content inside the "NPI Questions and Instructions" information document for potential applicants. As this information is news-worthy and important for applicants each funding cycle, NPI could place this information in a more prominent location on its website home/landing page through a design that also highlights the information that influenced the decision-making process for that year (e.g., updated indicators or other socio-economic data). NPI might also consider using the home page to promote highlights of recent successful projects or updates, because at-first-glance, visitors to the website would not know where to access this information.

These are modest suggestions that would improve communication within the community. This knowledge and information-sharing nurtures a sense of openness and accountability which in turn leads to increased levels of trust in the adjudication and administration processes.

NPI Mapping Tool

As discussed earlier in *Connecting the Pieces*, the NPI also supports reviewers and applicants by way of the Story Map, a tool meant to support its place-based approach to poverty reduction that divides Niagara into neighbourhoods and highlights disadvantaged neighbourhoods with reference to the following indicators: Low Income Measure, household income under $20,000 after tax, working poverty, income inequality, tenants paying 30 percent or more income on rent, unemployed, no high school diploma, early development instrument, child care subsidy.

NPI and the Region are to be commended for the creation of this data-rich public resource. During our research, reviewers told us the story mapping tool was central to their decision-making with regards to which

projects to fund; the average reviewer response on a scale from 0-10 was 7.3. In particular, reviewers look to the map in reflecting on the distribution of projects across the region. However, the experience of project applicants is opposite. Only 11 percent said they found the tool's aggregate data on population-level indicators useful for identifying service users' needs, and when we asked agencies to indicate the importance of the tool in determining service delivery locations on scales from 0-10, the mean response was 4.6. NPI has since stopped recommending the story mapping tool be used for the application form.

The Niagara Region has been a leader in supporting community initiatives like the NPI and, as mentioned previously, the Niagara Open Data Portal. Niagara Open Data is one example of another local resource that could benefit NPI project applicants, but if service agencies lack the knowledge, skills or time to interpret the information and apply it to their project applications, then it risks becoming an overlooked resource.

We understand NPI has revised its use of the mapping tool regarding RFP applications (evolving over the years from paper to an online format). It remains an insightful resource that may prove more useful and accessible to agencies if additional research and interpretation supports were put in place. We encourage Niagara Region and NPI administrators to engage with service agencies and the community to better understand how these resources might be used to their benefit, such as by hosting a 'data day' or participating in International Open Data Day, as the City of Edmonton has done in partnership with Edmonton Public Library.[79] Ideally, NPI needs to present the most useful and relevant data for applicants in an easily digestible way for those with no data background.

In addition, the NPI has access to examples of poverty reduction projects and data held by the Niagara Region, and it's well-positioned to learn about the needs of low-income Niagarans in greater detail. With appropriate resources (trained staff and funding), the Region could facilitate through NPI the creation of a catalogue of poverty reduction tactics, administer tests and build models to identify the most effective tactics vis-à-vis specific neighbourhoods and types of service users. It could then leverage findings to guide future investments as it develops its Regional long-term poverty reduction strategy. However, additional staffing resources would be required to make this happen.

Program Evaluation and Reporting

The NPI's orienting framework is to take a "research-based approach" to poverty reduction programs around the Niagara region – supporting new and on-going community social service initiatives to see what works, which groups benefit most, and then facilitating service program improvements where necessary. This process of on-going monitoring has evolved over NPI's history, and has always involved both quantitative and qualitative measures in an effort to get a deeper understanding of project impacts on poverty reduction in the community.

Data evaluation can be challenging regardless of whether it's the quantitative tracking of project attendee 'outputs', or the analysis of qualitative first-person responses to feedback forms, and the best-practices for data collection and analysis continues to evolve. Early administrators of NPI and Niagara Region staff worked with Tamarack Institute and others to select and develop the most appropriate measurement tools for the NPI program, which currently uses the Most Significant Change (MSC) testimonial within the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) framework for qualitative analysis, in addition to gathering actual numbers via a quantitative

tool. (These tools will be discussed below, and additional information can be found in *Connecting the Pieces: Appendices to the Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative*.)

Since launching the NPI in 2008, the Region has worked at various points with Brock University and several other agencies to explore additional ways to capture, measure and analyze the data NPI generates from service agencies and program users. In 2009, Niagara Region contracted the Niagara-based consulting firm Latis to develop surveys for the evaluation of 2009 projects; Brock University subsequently helped in the development of a new evaluation methodology. The implementation of the 2009 surveys proved difficult for agencies but yielded plenty of data. In order to simplify the requirements for agencies, a new method was developed in 2010 by Sinclair and Associates in consultation with Tamarack Institute, McMaster University, Niagara College and others. The NPI adopted the MSC testimonial format in 2010, and has since continued to use MSC (in conjunction with SL) as its primary qualitative data measurement tool. Most recently, Brock University's business department conducted a 'data mining' project experiment in 2017 to evaluate the scoring of testimonials via machine learning (counting is currently done manually). The test project revealed the new software model could potentially save time and financial resources while also reducing the risk of human error over time.

Historically, NPI-funded service agencies have been required to meet stringent reporting requirements that included quarterly and end-of-project reports. These compliance expectations have consistently been met by grant recipients, and their data has served as the foundation for this *Connecting the Pieces* evaluation. Reporting by grant recipients provides ample evidence of the effectiveness of individual projects in meeting their specific goals.

Service agency reports include an accounting of expenditures, and through its quantitative measuring tool, NPI also receives detailed records of projects' *outputs*, defined as how much the funded projects accomplished in terms of the number of unique people served and the types and quantity of units of service that were provided (e.g., drop-in sessions held, meals served, etc.).

NPI has also collected evidence of project *outcomes*, defined as the immediate effects projects had on the people or communities they served. Throughout years of using the MSC, outcomes were identified primarily via the qualitative analysis of service agency and user testimonials and, to a lesser extent, photographs about what the projects do. Our review of the outputs and outcomes of hundreds of projects was made possible through the quarterly and final reporting by recipient organizations.

Now we turn to our review of NPI's quantitative and qualitative tools and processes.

Observations & Suggestions

Quantitative Measurements

NPI has collected years of data that is representative of thousands of service users and agencies across the Niagara region. In his *Connecting the Pieces* phase report that analyzed NPI projects, economist Felice Martinello noted: "It is clear that a great deal of thought and effort has been devoted to developing

frameworks for classifying or characterizing the different types of projects funded by the NPI. One can see the evolution of the classification schemes by observing the changes in the application forms over the years."[80]

Expense reporting and quantitative progress reports may help to promote administrative accountability, but research has also shown they have limited utility for promoting improvement,[81] and accordingly, it is more difficult to determine if NPI-funded projects have been successful in meeting their intended objectives concerning poverty reduction.

> " Quantitative data tells us what people do; it doesn't tell us why.
>
> ~ Sarah Pennisi

We acknowledge that the NPI was developing and refining its measurement tools over the past decade, and we have attempted to account for those differences during our review of project and testimonial data since 2008. One significant challenge to our evaluation of quantitative data was that a system of standardization was not in place, which means our analysis was unable to accurately measure any longitudinal effects of programs over time. Since the units of service metric is not standardized, what constitutes a "unit of service" differs from project-to-project, even where projects have similar or symmetrical outputs. Comparing the numbers of persons served or the numbers of units of service delivered, unfortunately tells us little about which types of projects are most effective in reducing poverty, let alone how they do so; they merely tell us that individuals were interested in participating in such programs.

Despite this, Martinello says, "The reports of units actually served at the end of the project are useful for maintaining accountability and continuing to make the argument for continued funding of the program." Furthermore, he adds, the process of "developing the projected number to be served helps applicants work out what their project will actually be doing and helps adjudicators understand better what the project plans to accomplish."

The hard-numbers revealed through quantitative data analysis readily show that community members are taking advantage of the programs and services made available to them through the NPI and, as was shown earlier in *Connecting the Pieces*, demand has been increasing over time. However, counting attendance numbers does not provide a complete picture of individual project success, nor the success of the NPI program overall. As Pennisi reminded us in *Building a New Legacy*: "Quantitative data tells us what people do; it doesn't tell us why."[82]

Observations & Suggestions

Qualitative Measurements - Most Significant Change and Sustainable Livelihoods

The qualitative data collected both by the NPI and our research team helps to provide a clearer picture and understanding of that 'why', as well as the broader impact of NPI-funded projects on the lives of low-income Niagarans. Before we turn to that, we highlight the measurement tools NPI uses to collect and analyze this information – the **Most Significant Change** model and **Sustainable Livelihoods** framework.

NPI has used its own adaptation of the **Most Significant Change (MSC)** method to track project outcomes – a simple, open-ended four question prompt. MSC stories are qualitative testimonials, which service providers collect from service users. It is a form of participatory evaluation intended for program administrators "searching" (as opposed to measuring or tracking) for impacts. Once collected, the expectation is that "various people sit down together, read the stories aloud and have regular and often in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes."[83] There is merit to this approach in that it taps into the subjective experiences of particular service users, giving administrators who read and discuss MSC stories an opportunity to consider their program from another point of view.

In their 2005 publication, *The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use*, Rick Davies and Jess Dart describe "when and when not to use MSC". In their overview of the framework they note: "There are also some instances where the benefits may not justify the cost of MSC", such as those where the intention is to "capture expected change", "conduct retrospective evaluation of a program that is complete", "understand the average experience of participants", or to "produce an evaluation report for accountability purposes."[84]

The MSC testimonials are then evaluated within the **Sustainable Livelihoods (SL)** framework – a five-asset model used to help direct program focus. NPI has adopted the framework as a way to track progress and impact. It is a holistic, asset or capacity building framework for understanding poverty and the work of poverty reduction that looks to measure improvement in terms of individual and household assets. According to Olivier Serrat in *The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach* (2017), "A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future," and "assets are the building blocks of a sustainable livelihood."[85]

These frameworks help focus attention on the development of underlying resources and capacity needed by individuals to escape poverty in a sustained way.[86] NPI projects are expected to increase one or more of the five types of assets described below:

- **Personal Assets:** increase self-awareness; enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence; improved hope and motivation
- **Physical Assets:** emergency supports (shelter, security from violence, prevention of eviction or utility shut-off, emergency food assistance); food; housing; transportation; child and dependent care
- **Social Assets:** civic participation (community engagement through participation in community groups and activities, children and youth participate in activities that support growth and development, seniors participate in services that promote active, independent living); networks
- **Human Assets:** health; life skills; financial literacy; education; employment
- **Financial Assets:** employment and non-employment incomes; capital like a computer or car; financial health (reduced cost and/or debt)

Based on the five assets defined by the Sustainable Livelihoods model and an evaluation of NPI's projects and categories outlined previously, more than 90 percent of NPI's funded projects between 2013 and 2017 planned to increase personal, human, or social assets. In contrast, 72 percent of projects planned to increase

physical assets and two-thirds planned to increase financial assets. The percentage targeting financial assets increased steadily and sharply from 2013 to 2017, reaching more than 80 percent of projects in 2017. The percentage of projects targeting physical assets also trended upwards over the period, but less steadily. Just over 90 percent of projects in 2017 targeted physical assets.

The chart below is from NPI records showing asset tracking of projects between 2010-17.
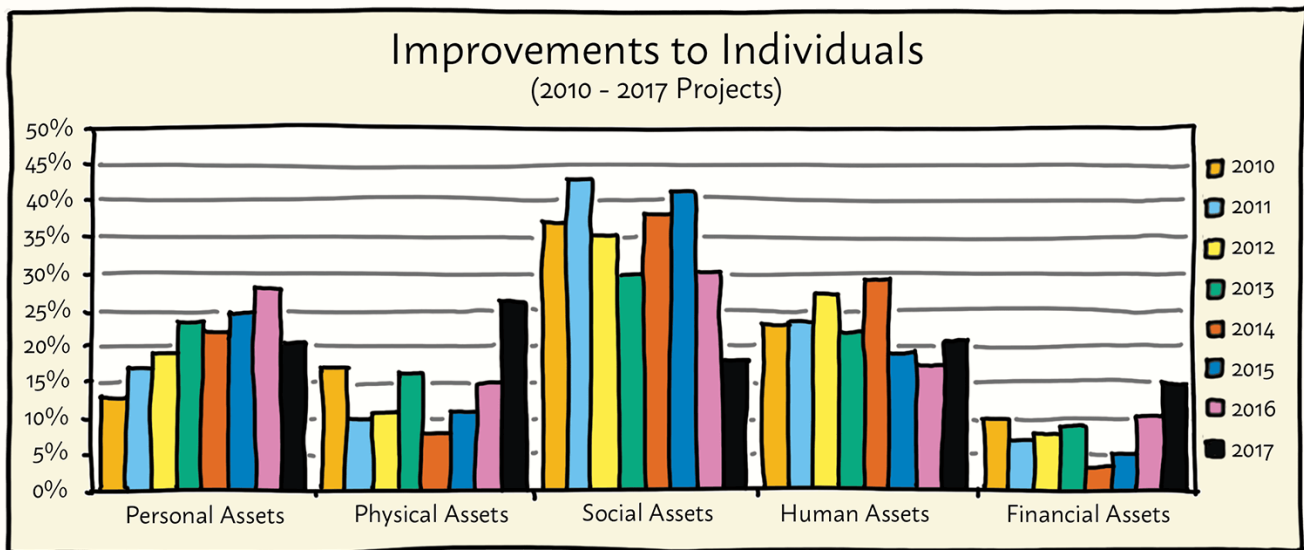
One issue noted with MSC measures is that the NPI deviates from its intended use, leveraging testimonials for quantitative outcome tracking. This is problematic for several reasons. First, the NPI has historically collected a large number of MSC stories. The number of MSC stories the NPI requires trended upwards from five percent of persons served in 2010-12, to 10 percent in 2013-14, to 50 percent for projects serving up to 40 persons and 10 percent for projects serving over 40 persons in 2015-19. NPI has since reduced the MSC quota to 1-2 stories per project in 2020, following the recommendation of our research team.

Another set of problems relate to the NPI's adaptation of MSC, which (as noted above) was not designed for quantitative outcome tracking. MSC prompts are *not* outcome measures. MSC prompts are open-ended questions intended to elicit stories about how service users became involved in projects and the best things/changes they attribute to participating in them. Such questions neither query expected outcomes, nor ask service users to list actual outcomes. Consider that a service user may write a story centered on the social experience of participating in a project, for example, and say nothing of their project's intended outcomes. This misalignment between the MSC instrument and the way NPI uses it introduces 'systematic measurement error' and distorts results. The NPI has also retained MSC's purposive, as opposed to random, sampling strategy, which is appropriate for exploratory qualitative studies, but is ill-suited to quantitative measurement.

A third set of problems issue from the way MSC story content is quantified. The NPI program hires temporary student workers to perform content analyses of each year's testimonials, where students manually count mentions of SL assets. Unfortunately, it is not regular practice to record the standards the students' developed

to determine what to include in and exclude from each asset category. This practice raises concerns about threats to *intercoder reliability* – the extent to which two different researchers agree on how to code the same content. If the NPI wishes to retain this framework to organize future outcome reporting, Brock researchers could work with NPI administrators to adjust the SL framework to account for systemic aspects of poverty and clearly define each asset category for easier coding.

Through our research and interviews, other issues were raised. NPI-funded service providers shared their experiences on using the measurement tools and many said the MSC stories and other program output measures were "onerous" to collect in the course of service delivery. Meeting the NPI's MSC requirement was especially difficult in drop-in style programs, where service users come and go, and when service users have intellectual, literacy, and language barriers. Our research revealed that one of the consequences of this process being seen as too labour-intensive for service providers meant that some admitted to completing the testimonials themselves later on. Furthermore, some agency leaders revealed that, when completing their final project reports, they would select the most favourable testimonials to include in order to show positive impact of their program.

Some service providers felt the MSC testimonial could be "intrusive." One remarked, "[w]e are often extremely sensitive and have a heightened awareness that the funders often don't have," and they were not comfortable asking low-income Niagarans for what they felt was personal information. While this was not a frequent response, it does raise questions on how NPI administrators may work with service providers to develop communications tools and strategies to engage with users on sometimes sensitive topics.

One additional observation was that questions posed in the MSC are all positively slanted and did not ask for any feedback that could be perceived as 'critical', or offer the opportunity for 'suggestions for improvement' – MSC's focus is on "the best thing/change that has happened to you as a result of this project". We conducted a sentiment analysis of all MSC stories the NPI collected between 2010 and 2018 and found no testimonials characterized by negative service user experiences. In the absence of any critical content, it is impossible to objectively review program strengths and weaknesses.

These observations are provided with the intention of strengthening the NPI's evaluative tools so it and the Region can have a more complete assessment of individual project successes. NPI administrators should revise the MSC form to include the opportunity for critical feedback as it could yield constructive insights into future program improvements. Related to this issue, is that continued NPI funding for service agencies is contingent upon providing qualitative evidence of service user satisfaction. With this expectation, a bias toward selecting positive feedback stories is created, so we recommend that balanced feedback be collected from service users, and that agencies are encouraged to use critical feedback to improve their programs.

Summary

Niagara Region is a leader for its efforts, initiative and commitment to taking action on poverty reduction. The Region and NPI's administrators have done a commendable job endeavouring to track progress with various measurement tools over the past 14 years. As we have expressed, much data has been collected and it has provided important insight into program operations and value to service users. Overall, this broad process

evaluation revealed the NPI's project outcome data do not support retroactive evaluation or estimating the broader impacts of local efforts. This is unfortunate because funding a myriad of social services projects is a tremendous opportunity to learn about which tactics are effective and how they work. Evaluation can be collaborative and reporting can be streamlined to reduce service interruptions.[87]

It is undeniably challenging to measure and evaluate place-based initiatives because the efforts are complex and multilevel, and they operate within an always-changing environment. Further, community change initiatives pose unique measurement problems because measures of community and systems-level changes aren't as well developed as individual-level change measures. But simply put, it's hard to evaluate place-based approaches without standardized longitudinal data. Our observations and concerns are less to do with measurement than interpretation of the qualitative data in particular and this, in our opinion, has been due to insufficient knowledge, training, and capacity of available staff in the areas of research methodology.

NPI program administrators are the front-line staff responsible for guiding the direction and focus areas of the NPI each year. Having skills to understand the fundamentals of measurement system design, data collection, representative sampling and interpretation would benefit them in their on-going activities and can readily be attained. We make this observation while understanding that acquiring this type of new training is over and above the capacity of current staff who have full portfolios. We recommend that Niagara Region direct the appropriate resources to the NPI program to ensure it has the capacity to deliver on the expectations held of it, whether that involves new skills for existing staff or retaining new staff with these areas of expertise.

Wherever possible, evaluation and research functions should be performed by staff who are trained to perform applied research methods so the Region can get the most out of the data it collects. Outcome measures should be selected with input from service providers, but also for their ability to answer research questions that look beyond singular projects. To be most effective and helpful for NPI's future analyses, these measures should be differentiated enough to allow for diversity in services and service users, but standardized so projects with similar outcomes may be compared.

The Region should use the findings from *Connecting the Pieces* as baseline measures for the NPI program's performance, and use this opportunity to design a standardized system of measure for projects that can be more consistently tracked and evaluated going forward. Niagara Region finds itself at an opportune time to be evaluating the NPI program at the same time as it plans to develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. That this also coincides with the coronavirus pandemic and its evolving implications for our communities, strikes us as timely and the community receptive for deeper collaboration.

Our team members engaged regularly with the Research Team Consultants regarding possible alternative evaluation tools and models. The Region might want to explore these and others mentioned below as it considers next steps for the NPI and the role the program will play in its long-term poverty reduction strategy.

A variety of methodologies can be used to help social innovators and evaluators become more systematic in their strategic learning efforts. Here are some of the more popular, as summarized by the Tamarack Institute in *Evaluating Systems Change Results*:[88]

Evaluating Systems Drivers	
Social Network Analysis	Tracking the change in the number, intensity, and type of relationships between actors in a system (e.g., between employers and training organizations in the development of workforce development programs).
Advocacy Evaluation	A variety of frameworks and methods that track the extent to which advocates are creating the conditions for policy change and nudging a policy change through the policy development process.
Public Awareness	Tracking the evolution of the awareness, opinion, and support for action on a complex issue in the general public, specific constituencies, or select influential leaders. This is achieved by monitoring traditional and social media, as well as by interviews with key or bellwether informants.
Behaviour Change of System Actors	
Outcome Mapping	A comprehensive planning, monitoring, and evaluation methodology organized to track subtle and long-term changes in the behaviours of system actors.
Outcome Harvesting	A methodology for tracking the multiple and cumulative changes that emerge in the course of complex change initiatives involving diverse actors.
Most Significant Change	(Already in use with the NPI) A narrative-based approach to capturing change through the stories and assessments of those deeply involved and affected by change initiatives.

Impact Evaluation

In this section of *Connecting the Pieces*, we evaluate the legacy of the NPI funding program by looking at the cumulative impact of more than a decade of grant funding directed toward poverty alleviation in the Niagara Region. Questions that guide our evaluation include: *How has the annual investment of $1.5 million for poverty alleviation changed people's lives? How has it affected the incidence and severity of poverty? How has it influenced the capacity of organizations and neighbourhoods to respond to poverty?*

> " The data collected by the NPI reveals positive direct results of the projects' immediate effects on the people or communities they served.

Evaluating NPI-Funded Project Outcomes

As stated previously, the reporting completed by NPI grant recipients has been consistent and rigorous, and the results show evidence of the effectiveness of individual projects in meeting their goals. Even though some service users may have benefited from more than one project in a given year, or contributed to several projects over the decade, our research shows that NPI funding on the whole has had a wide reach across Niagara's diverse communities.

The data collected by the NPI reveals positive direct results of the projects' immediate effects on the people or communities they served. These outcomes have been identified primarily through **testimonials** by service users and, to a lesser extent, **photographs** about what the projects do. To supplement these methods and to provide a more quantitative measure to the evaluation, our researchers also designed and conducted a **two-part survey** for program participants during the 2019-2020 grant cycle. As in the previous section, "Observations & Suggestions" follow.

Photography

Some project leaders visually documented their projects through **mobile photography**. To the extent that service users have access to cell phones with digital cameras, potential exists within some (though not all) projects for more participatory photo-documentation as a method of outcome evaluation.[89]

Observations & Suggestions

To realize this potential, we would like to see the NPI develop less intimidating and more culturally appropriate consent forms. However, due to legal requirements from the Niagara Region, alternatives to the formal consent form in use are currently not possible, which means better photography practices are not likely to happen. For those project leaders who see potential in photography for evaluation and advocacy related to their projects,[90] NPI should encourage more time for photography at the early stage of project design.

Most Significant Change (MSC) Testimonials

The main way project leaders collect service user feedback and 'capture outcomes' is through a short **testimonial** questionnaire. With the MSC model,[91] testimonials follow a story-telling template with four prompts: *Tell me how you first became involved with the project and how you are currently involved; What is the best thing/change that has happened to you as a result of this project?; Why was this significant?; and, Additional information*. The same questions have been in place since 2010.

Observations & Suggestions

NPI provided our research team with 3,494 MSC testimonials from 77 agencies submitted between 2011 to 2018. Testimonials were completed by staff, volunteers and individuals who had participated in one or more of NPI's funded programs. Most were short (two to five sentences) and all were positive, as we would expect from prompts that did not include any questions about project shortcomings. Project leaders had the opportunity to guide participants' responses and select testimonials that best demonstrated their project's effectiveness. For these reasons, the testimonials cannot tell us about service users' overall satisfaction with programs, but they are a good source of data about the specific ways in which participants found the programs made a positive difference in their lives.

Participant Surveys

Evaluators were also interested in how satisfied participants were with various aspects of the projects in which they took part, and which of those aspects brought about the most satisfaction. For NPI's 2019 projects, all service users were invited to take part in a **two-part survey** before and after their participation in their program.

It's important to note participation in the post-test survey was carried out during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This is notable because increased levels of anxiety and hopelessness are common during traumatic and stressful life events, and this likely impacted the survey results. Considering this fact, the outcomes reported here may be conservative compared to what they might have been without a catastrophic interruption to business, health care, and recreational services for many people, and even more so to people living in poverty.

Using a random sample of low-income Niagara residents (738 individuals) and program participants from 15 different NPI portfolio projects, researchers compared reported levels of *current satisfaction* and *hopefulness*. What emerged tells an interesting story.

A total of 394 NPI service users were given a *pre-test* survey within the first two weeks of participating in the program. This served as a baseline sample of their life satisfaction and hopefulness. A *post-test* was given to 87 NPI service users who had maintained continuous participation in the program. In the end, 84 participants participated in both the pre- and post-surveys. The post-survey allowed for a comparison between the service-

users feelings of life-satisfaction and hopefulness *after* their involvement, but within the project's funding window. A random sample of low-income Niagara residents served as a control group.

Overall, these participants indicated high levels of satisfaction with NPI-funded projects.

More than 70 percent of participants felt satisfied or very satisfied with how projects were delivered and their content. The highest result of 84 percent satisfied was expressed by those participants who felt their program brought them closer to achieving a personal goal.

The following chart summarizes various levels of satisfaction among survey respondents.

Service User Level of Satisfaction with NPI-Funded Projects

Percentage of NPI service users

Legend: Very dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neither dissatisfied or satisfied, Satisfied, Very satisfied
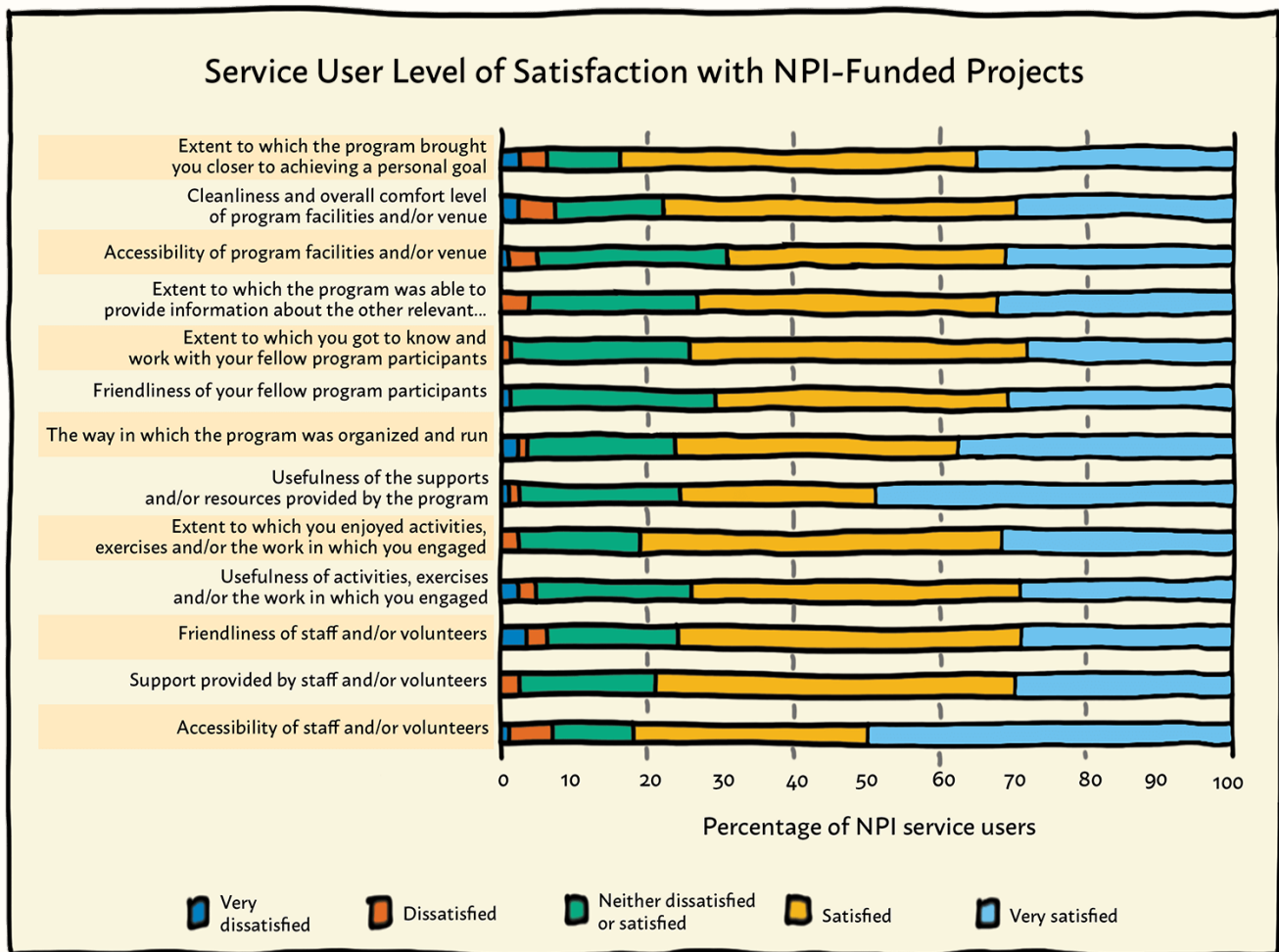
These results are indicative of satisfaction with a general approach to service provision known as "relational work," which runs through many of the NPI's funded projects and involves project leaders working one-on-one with individuals on personally relevant goals.[92] Participants were also invited to state whether they would recommend the project to a friend or family member and 74 percent said "yes".

Evaluating the NPI's Impacts

NPI program outputs and outcomes have been consistently captured through reporting by recipient organizations. However, the greater challenge is in determining how and to what degree the NPI has had an impact, which refers to the long-term or systemic difference the program makes.[93] In other words – *How effective has the NPI been in its goal to alleviate and prevent poverty when viewed as a unified program? What commonalities exist between projects' long-term benefits? In what ways is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?*

To show impact over time is not straightforward, and there is no natural experiment that could allow us to show what the Niagara region would be like if we did not have the NPI's annual investment. The survey we conducted to evaluate the 2019 projects gives us a snapshot of how participants experienced those projects at one point in time.

We looked to former project leaders to share their perspectives as they are best positioned to observe results that lasted beyond the duration of the projects. Forty-six individuals were interviewed in 2018 and 2019 about their perceptions of their projects' long-term impacts. They were chosen from the complete listing of projects based on how long it had been since their funding expired, and represented large and small agencies across a range of geographical locations. Their projects served distinctive groups in Niagara, such as Indigenous peoples and people with disabilities, and all nine of the NPI's categories of social needs prior to 2017 (assistance with shelter, community gardens, direct services, education, access to food, community development and engagement, job specific skills, life skills and transportation initiatives).

What follows is a summary of the impacts across several groups and indicators. By connecting the dots across the set of interviews, we bring into view a picture of the various ways the NPI has made a long-term difference. The project leaders shared evocative stories about how their work affected people, their communities, nonprofit service providers and their workers. What they reveal is how the field of poverty reduction in Niagara as a whole became better resourced and resourceful over time. (Note: All interview participants have been given a first name pseudonym.)

Impact: On Individuals and Families

The NPI's strongest impact was achieved through supportive interventions that changed the lives of individuals and families (in contrast to projects aimed at communities or neighbourhoods). This finding is to be expected as at least one-third of NPI funded projects within the first decade targeted outcomes at the level of the individual. Also, most projects, including those aimed at community level outcomes, allowed project leaders and volunteers to get to know service users personally and engage them in caring, respectful interpersonal relationships that generate psycho-social wellbeing.

Critics of individualized projects, programs and policies suggest that such approaches sometimes succeed in lifting specific people out of poverty but do little to change overall rates of poverty.[94] In fact, many of the NPI project leaders we spoke with held this critique and admitted that their work felt more like a "stop gap

measure" than a lasting solution, or more like a "band-aid" than effective medicine to cure a major social malady.

Social work scholars Michael Jindra and Ines Jindra suggest the dilemma between "transforming society vs transforming the self" is unnecessary and unproductive as "both are important."[95] They prescribe a diverse set of approaches by nonprofits, which they characterize as "relational work." The concept of relational work describes many of the NPI-funded projects that achieve impact by making a long-term difference in people's quality of life. According to our interviews with project leaders, individual-level interventions have mainly supported people in the following four ways: employment and self-employment, education and training, social integration and compassionate responses to chronic poverty.

Employment and Self-employment

Several NPI project leaders indicated participants had been helped to find paid work, in some cases, their first job. Success stories on the theme of employment were not limited to projects that provided job training, skills matching, interview practice or resumé preparation; leaders of many different projects could point to a participant who had moved on to find work after participating in a project.

Gaining employment is often presumed to be the most promising pathway out of poverty. However, some project leaders downplayed employment-related impacts in order to underscore their mission to help all clients, not only those with the best job prospects. For example, Michelle, who led an NPI-funded project that combined upcycling of donated goods with labour market preparation, reported participants gained a sense of inclusion as a lasting outcome of her project:

> " It is all about people engaging in society, in the community, in some way. We really have to build a community that is inclusive…
>
> ~ Michelle

There have been so many people through so many years that have success stories… People sort of move along. It is all about people engaging in society, in the community, in some way. We really have to build a community that is inclusive, and we see success in smaller ways too. Maybe that you actually came back the next day, maybe you sat down and started to engage with staff.

Michelle affirmed her project's success in terms of helping people attain paid work, but she also placed importance on relational work with all participants, including those who are a long way from job readiness.

Education and Skills Training

A second type of lasting impact for individuals came from education and training where benefits are thought to be gained over a lifetime. Given that social disadvantage, especially deficits in education, accumulate over time and generation, projects for new parents, children and youth potentially have the largest impact of all educational projects.[96]

NPI-funded projects have delivered education and skill development in many areas: literacy skills, academic skills for children and youth, gardening and food preparation, parenting, personal finance, conflict resolution, and other life skills. These educational projects also aimed to teach less tangible social skills and foster psycho-emotional well-being. For example, Lindsay, the project leader of a summer camp for low-income children, who came to know the same children over a two-year period, commented on the long-term impact of fostering children's self-confidence and hope for their future selves:[97]

Conversations shifted over the couple of years. You could start seeing the kids being able to articulate the difference [in their self-concept]. For example, there was one little boy who always said he was going to deliver pizzas when he grew up, but he changed his story because now he knew he could deliver pizzas to pay for university, then after university do something else.

Project leaders recognized that teaching skills was not enough in itself to make a difference in people's lives. The benefits of educational projects could be realized only when new skills or know-how stimulated self-efficacy, the perception that one is capable of meeting challenges. As project leader Eva explained,

You definitely need to have skills with cooking, skills with budgeting, or whatever, those are all important skills, but our project was [also] about people seeing and finding some inner strength and being able to start to take some control in their lives where things didn't ever feel like they had control.

For Eva, who led a life skills project, self-efficacy and agentic behaviour was the most important outgrowth of learning to apply the skills she taught. Many project leaders saw self-efficacy as a foundation for further

learning. Considering the damage poverty does to self-efficacy, achieving psychosocial change in this area can have long-term benefits – one very important outcome from a short-term project.[98]

Inclusion and Belonging

Many NPI-funded projects have a lasting impact on lives through counteracting the dynamics of shame and loneliness by drawing people into interpersonal relationships and fostering positive emotions. Rachel, a project leader of a community garden, described how people left group gardening sessions feeling happier than when they came. While Rachel described these impacts as somewhat "nebulous," she was convinced that contributing to the garden was a way of growing a sense of belonging.

Another community garden project leader, Julie, described the primary impact of her work in terms of bringing people into connection with a broader community:

Clearly, [community gardens] are not going to put them in a different housing situation, nor are they going to provide them with an income, which is something that granters are looking for. It's not going to do that. But what [this project] is going to do is that it helps with food security, it helps with mental health and isolation. People in poverty are so isolated because they don't have money to go out and do things. We found that people who come here often have said that they haven't talked to anybody in four to five weeks, and they often stay for the day because it's their first outing, and they are connecting with people, so it has a lot of different benefits.

The benefits to being engaged in casual social relationships, which Julie observed, are well supported in the scholarly poverty-reduction literature and include reduced stress, improved health, and a bundle of resources that are often conveyed under the rubric of "social capital": interpersonal interactions that generate understanding, trust, mutual aid, and a sense of belonging.[99]

On social inclusion, the relational work within poverty-reduction programs can help people move, not necessarily out of poverty, but out of crisis and toward a sense of normalcy, connection, recovery, and emotional well-being. Maria, whose project provided housing supports, used the metaphor of a bridge to describe the work of accompanying and guiding people transitioning from acute vulnerability to more stable emotional states and situations.

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> The risk taking to move out of that survival mode to thriving, you're asking for a large leap of faith, and it's wide.
>
> ~ Maria

The risk taking to move out of that survival mode to thriving, you're asking for a large leap of faith, and it's wide. While we are asking for [risk-taking], we're trying to build those supports and safety nets to help them get across. And we're maybe only here and there is still a gap (gestures with space between palms), a next step they maybe don't see, or a next step after that. So we are trying to create that [faith] while we are all still on that bridge together.

The experience of increased social safety, acceptance, and support, as indicated by Maria among others, can be impactful by giving people forward momentum toward better ways of coping with and recovering from the social-emotional injuries of poverty.

Compassionate Responses to Chronic Poverty

We cannot assume that all beneficiaries of poverty-reduction projects can overcome their severely limiting circumstances, especially as many live with chronic health conditions at various stages of progression. For these service users, sustained compassionate responses are called for. Some health care practitioners recognize that people experiencing both poverty and debilitating health conditions need appropriate forms of long-term, community-based palliative care.[100, 101]

Consistent with the primary goal of end-of-life palliative care, to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life, several NPI-funded agencies and projects take this compassionate approach. Their projects work to create safety, enhance dignity, relieve symptoms, and prevent harm, especially through drop-in programs, homeless outreach, and efforts to maintain people in livable housing. However, these types of interventions are a challenge to show long-term impact: palliative outcomes are difficult to define, the need for care extends beyond project timelines, and the gains of some projects may be reversed when funding runs out.

Interpreting impact in the context of chronic poverty, Barbara, who led an NPI-funded housing project reframed her expired project as a "building block" rather than an aborted mission:

You can't undo good. If somebody has been in this project and has been supported for a while, and they've done well, you have to celebrate. That is two whole years that they've done well. If things kind of go apart, then you have to think that those two years were building blocks, and that maybe things can come together again.

Nevertheless, setbacks such as loss of housing can ravage vulnerable people's sense of hope, as Barbara went on to explain:

The whole challenge was to increase the amount of time people were successfully housed, so that we could break the cycle of people getting housed, losing housing, and getting housed again. Because every time you get housed you have this hope that this is going to be okay and without these skills, it's not okay. Then you lose it and sink further into a hole and it takes a lot to get you back out. So that's the gist of the project and I think that it's been extremely successful.

Observations & Suggestions

When the work of poverty alleviation takes the form of holistic palliative care, the long-term impact should not be evaluated merely in terms of reducing poverty but also in terms of fulfilling social responsibility. Compassionate responses to poverty are necessary and impactful from the perspective of enabling regional and city governments and their publics to live up to collective ideals. Niagara Region could consider joining with other municipalities and communities around the world, including Brock University, who have signed onto the "Compassionate Communities" charter of Public Health Palliative Care International.

Impact: On Neighbourhoods and Communities

NPI should also celebrate the multi-faceted impacts its projects have had on neighbourhoods and communities. NPI-funded projects occasionally generated amenities that people continued to make use of after the project had wrapped up, such as educational materials and community garden plots, garden boxes and tools. But project leaders reported more frequently on the lasting impact of bringing people together and cultivating supportive networks among service users and between project leaders and service users.

Neighbourhood-based friendship networks emerged through a number of projects and became an ongoing source of material and social support. Project leaders spoke of former participants offering each other advice about jobs and parenting, getting together to celebrate life transitions such as weddings, births and deaths, helping each other with moves and childcare, and checking in to offer help when people were sick.

Recognizing the "community cultural wealth" that exists to some degree in low-income communities, particularly racialized communities, many of the NPI-funded projects seek to widen the circle of supportive social relationships.[102] Such relationships often live on beyond the project's duration.

Impact: On Organizations

A secondary area of NPI impact is on nonprofit organizations and their workers who have received grants. Client and agency impacts are intertwined, as good projects draw new clients to agencies and strengthen agencies' relationships with existing clients, and improve the effectiveness of other programs. Successful NPI-funded projects seed ideas for new projects and also enable agencies to demonstrate the effectiveness of their pilots when seeking funding from other sources. While receiving grant funding to carry out a program was never a bad thing, in some ways the NPI's impact on recipient organizations was mixed.

Almost all grant recipients were grateful for the funding and affirmed their projects helped them further their mission. Funding also gave agencies positive exposure in Niagara, with many former leaders saying their funding catalyzed new professional networks or working partnerships with other parties, including: government, legal clinics and lawyers, private business, educational institutions, First Nations and labour organizations, farms and farmers markets, charities and foundations, media, and many others.

Many project leaders also noted that receiving an NPI grant enhanced their agency's reputation or gave them credibility when they took on a new type of initiative or a project that broadened the scope of their work.

On the other hand, former project leaders also spoke of significant work associated with applying for and reporting on grants within the short funding cycle of one to two years. Short-term contract funding tied up staff in administration, placed demands on organizations to recruit, train and retain skilled workers, and detracted from agencies' core work with clients.[103] Small and medium sized organizations experienced higher opportunity costs and risks with short-term grant programs than did large organizations with full-time professional administrative staff on board.[104]

Several respondents disclosed that the NPI's application and reporting requirements imposed a drag on what they could accomplish, and two former project leaders had concluded their participation in the NPI was not worth their time.

The short-term nature of NPI contracts led some agencies to express uncertainty about whether their projects would continue to align with the NPI's future funding priorities. Not knowing from year to year if they would be able to rehire staff into short-term contracts led some project leaders to feel discouraged. As Julia put it, "Once a program is running well, why wouldn't they just continue to support it?" For nonprofit staff steeped in the distress of their clients and knowing they provide vital services on which the Niagara region depends, short-term contract funding generates a climate of precarity within organizations and a sense among leaders of their work being undervalued.

Impact: On Poverty Workers

Agency staff and volunteers were often secondary beneficiaries of NPI funding, especially in terms of their learning. Project leaders expressed how they and other staff honed professional office skills (computer software, writing policy and procedures, scheduling, and tracking), project management skills (volunteer coordination, communication, grant writing, networking, legal and procedural know-how, and evaluation), and skills in conducting trauma-informed, relational anti-poverty work.

We heard expressions of gratitude for "priceless" moments, "when you change someone's life" (said Lucy about the direct services she provided), for performing the work of "giving back" (said Gloria about her service to newcomers), and for doing work that "opened my eyes" (said Jeremy about his housing help). We also heard that the work could be emotionally painful, frustrating, and stressful.

Most interviews were with poverty workers who remained in Niagara, so we did not hear from anyone who had quit due to the low wages, poor work-life balance, or the difficult working conditions for which the sector is known.[105] Several former project leaders had already moved to a different organization by the time of the interview, so we heard second-hand accounts of high job turnover, which one person referred to as the "revolving door" of nonprofit social service work.

Despite the risk of emotional burnout, some of the seasoned poverty workers spoke with us about how working on their NPI project deepened their ethical and political commitments to combatting poverty and increased their courage to act in an advocacy role. Natasha explained how her work on an NPI project in community development prepared her to transition toward her present work in advocacy and community organizing by teaching her about leadership:

> **"**
>
> It made me fearless in a leadership role… It strengthened my understanding of what good leadership is…
>
> ~ Natasha

It made me fearless in a leadership role… It strengthened my understanding of what good leadership is: that you're sensitive to people and respectful to people and that you're not just someone walking around with stilts compared to everybody else. You really have to have a relationship with the people who honour you [and] you have to honour them. So that, for me, will benefit me for the future.

Another outcome of several NPI projects was to recruit former service users into staff positions where their lived experience could be indispensable to outreach and trust-building with people with similar social backgrounds or life experiences. Mark, who worked in a housing project, described "an individual who had been homeless and worked his way through the system and is now employed full-time [in homelessness prevention]."

And this individual comes to our sector with a different perspective because he is coming with the experience which balances his professional side. Even though people might have a masters [degree], lived experience has a lot of value and just reinforces to people who struggle that good things can happen in their life.

Several interviewees were former service users who had gone on to a paid position involving leadership of an NPI-funded project, and they considered their opportunity to work in poverty-reduction deeply meaningful. As Anna said of the personal impact of her NPI project in the area of community development — "It's changed my entire life."

Impact: On the Field

NPI-funded projects make a difference to the Niagara region overall by reducing social and economic costs associated with poverty.[106] This cost-saving effect is true of a variety of types of NPI-funded projects. Shauna, who led a parenting program, said:

We're raising children and giving knowledge to parents to become more successful. So, the strain on our judicial system, on our health system, all of that is kind of being alleviated when you're in a better place.

Similarly, Mark explained his project's supportive housing averted problems that would ultimately require greater levels of social spending:

We've created stability. We have provided support that allows people to stay housed in their homes. They're not getting hospitalized on a regular basis, they're not getting incarcerated, so there's a lot of cost savings that we provide.

Most NPI-funded projects have not continued beyond the end of the funding term, and this result is not uncommon among nonprofits. Some project leaders argued more time would have reduced this tendency. Stacey, who led a food security project, made the case most forcefully that poverty-reduction efforts tend to become "inconsequential" if projects are not given enough time to operate. "If you're looking for impact," she said, "impact doesn't happen in eighteen months." Several other former leaders appealed for longer funding periods to increase the potential of projects achieving a lifespan beyond NPI-funding.

Our interviews suggest that for some project leaders, the experience of working on poverty alleviation inspired them to take up advocacy work, which has the potential to make a difference through more political and systemic channels of change. Eva was challenged by her life skills education project into a new awareness of poverty and developed the motivation to educate change-makers:

… recognizing that the participants' struggles are complex and [I] to try to get that across whenever I'm in a meeting with a politician… I tell you that's what's carried forward with me [and] strengthened and deepened my work, my understanding of other people's issues and lives.

This motivation was also true of Carol, who led a project in community development but explained that she and others she knew were doing advocacy "off the side of their desk."

In this qualitative evaluation based on former project leaders' accounts, we've illustrated a number of ways in which NPI projects' many approaches to poverty reduction multiply over time to make a difference in the lives of individuals and families, neighbourhoods, agencies, workers, and the Niagara region as a whole. We have also suggested some limitations on impact primarily stemming from projects' short duration.

Coming Full Circle on Poverty in Niagara

Through the NPI and other community initiatives, the Niagara Region has invested significant attention, time and resources to improve the lives of low-income Niagarans. The results of our process review, surveys and interviews have revealed the sustained engagement and commitment of community members, advocates, and service providers, and more importantly the positive impact the NPI program has had on the life satisfaction and sense of hope of Niagara residents. But we return to reflect on a key question – *Has the work of the NPI reduced poverty in the Niagara Region?*

As we discussed at the beginning of *Connecting the Pieces*, there are many dimensions to poverty and the NPI has strived to both alleviate its effects on the lives of individuals and families and, where possible, broadly reduce it in the community. To find a definitive number of some kind is impossible. The causes and effects of poverty are complex, and yet we have heard how the NPI has helped to change lives for the better. This evaluation process serves as a reminder of the importance of creating systems and designing measurements that are suitable to the goals the Niagara Region wants to achieve.

The Region already has an understanding of the different dimensions of poverty – elimination, reduction and alleviation. As the following chart shows, depending on where we start from, there are different ways of looking at the resulting impact – financial, quality of life, and participation in the community.

		Financial	Quality of Life	Participation In Community
Poverty Elimination	Macro – no poverty everyone	No one lives below LIM-AT	Everyone has high quality of life	Everyone is able to fully participate in community
	Micro – no poverty for one person or family	Some no longer live below LIM-AT	Some have seen an increase in quality of life	Some are participating more in their community
Poverty Reduction	Macro – reduced poverty for everyone	Everyone has seen an increase to their income, but still remain in poverty	Everyone has seen an increase to their quality of life due to increase income	Everyone is better able to participate in their community
	Micro – reduced poverty for one person or family	Some have seen an increase to their income, but still remain in poverty	Some have seen an increase to their quality of life due to increased income	Some are better able to participate in their community
Poverty Alleviation	Macro – effects of poverty is less severe for everyone	The effects of low-income is mitigated for everyone	Quality of life has improved for everyone due to supports	Increased supports have allowed for everyone to better participate
	Micro – effects of poverty is less severe for one person or family	The effects of low-income is mitigated for some	Quality of life has improved for some due to supports	Increased supports have allowed some to better participate in their community

The projects the NPI funds are primarily small but can lead to individuals either exiting from poverty, reducing their poverty, or alleviating the effects of poverty. It is difficult to pin one of these classifications on any specific type of project.

A project can be funded that addresses social isolation and lack of transportation. It could be classified as 'poverty alleviation' – where the effects of poverty are mitigated. However, some individuals who take part in this project may experience less isolation and improved access to transportation. They may make connections that lead to employment and ultimately be lifted out of poverty. In this scenario, for this individual, the project had the effect of 'poverty elimination'. So, it isn't really the project that is classified – it's the outcomes for those who have participated in the project. To ensure the priorities of poverty reduction and alleviation are consciously balanced, the NPI could formally institutionalize poverty alleviation as a goal, alongside poverty reduction, in its RFP, reviewer orientation, and project reporting framework.

Some service users will exit poverty having only needed short-term assistance. Many low-income Niagarans, though, require sustained assistance to achieve self-sufficiency and others will need ongoing care and support throughout their lives. While alleviation projects alone are not designed to lift people out of poverty, they do provide supports and relief that can facilitate positive changes for those who need more than a helping hand, albeit still for short periods. And with that view, the NPI has been a success.
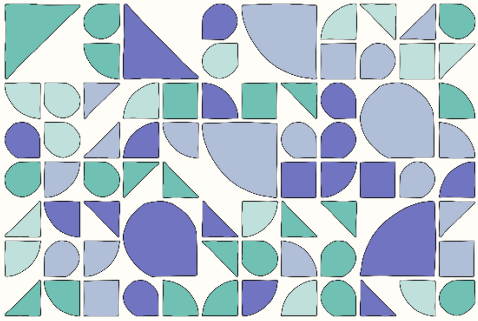
Conclusion and Recommendations

The Niagara Region should be commended for its vision, commitment and sustained effort to supporting innovative community projects that attempt to motivate, educate and empower community members, while also trying to create sustainable improvements in the lives of individuals and families most at risk from the long-term effects of poverty. Addressing the multi-dimensional challenge of poverty and overcoming the legacy of its effects is no small feat, and the Niagara Region's signature contribution to a community and national conversation is the Niagara Prosperity Initiative.

Connecting the Pieces is the result of a comprehensive three-year assessment process that has involved reviewing documentation and listening to community members, service users and providers, and program administrators. Each process and group brings unique perspectives to the findings and has provided valuable insights.

Through this evaluation of the NPI program, we were tasked with assessing the efficacy and long-term impact of it on poverty alleviation. We've introduced information about poverty in Niagara, the NPI program's processes and impacts, and along the way we highlighted opportunities to enhance the Niagara Region's response to poverty and potentially improve the program.

We heard broad support for the NPI, but that more must be done to support people living in poverty through longer term program funding, as well as reducing the application workload experienced by many program service providers. We heard that service providers increasingly feel empowered to become stronger leaders who advocate for solutions on behalf of those who are marginalized — but often that is in addition their regular program tasks. We also heard that trust, accountability and transparency are critically important to engendering confidence and respect between service providers, program administrators and government. As a result, we could expect to see increased collaboration and likely even greater innovation.

The coronavirus pandemic brought many challenges to the Niagara region, and it has also provided us with new impetus for action. With this in mind, we present our main findings and make the following recommendations:

1. **Develop a comprehensive Niagara Region poverty reduction strategy**
2. **Increase investment in poverty reduction**
3. **Make deliberate investments and provide longer funding terms**
4. **Guide investments with enhanced research**
5. **Design all services for social inclusion aligned with poverty reduction priorities**

Recommendation 1:
Develop a comprehensive Niagara Region poverty reduction strategy

Rationale

To realize the full potential of the NPI, as envisioned by those who contributed to its initial design, the Niagara Region must commit to resituating it as one component of a larger comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. The NPI itself has long used the following diagram to acknowledge the limits of its own ability to impact larger systemic issues relating to poverty:
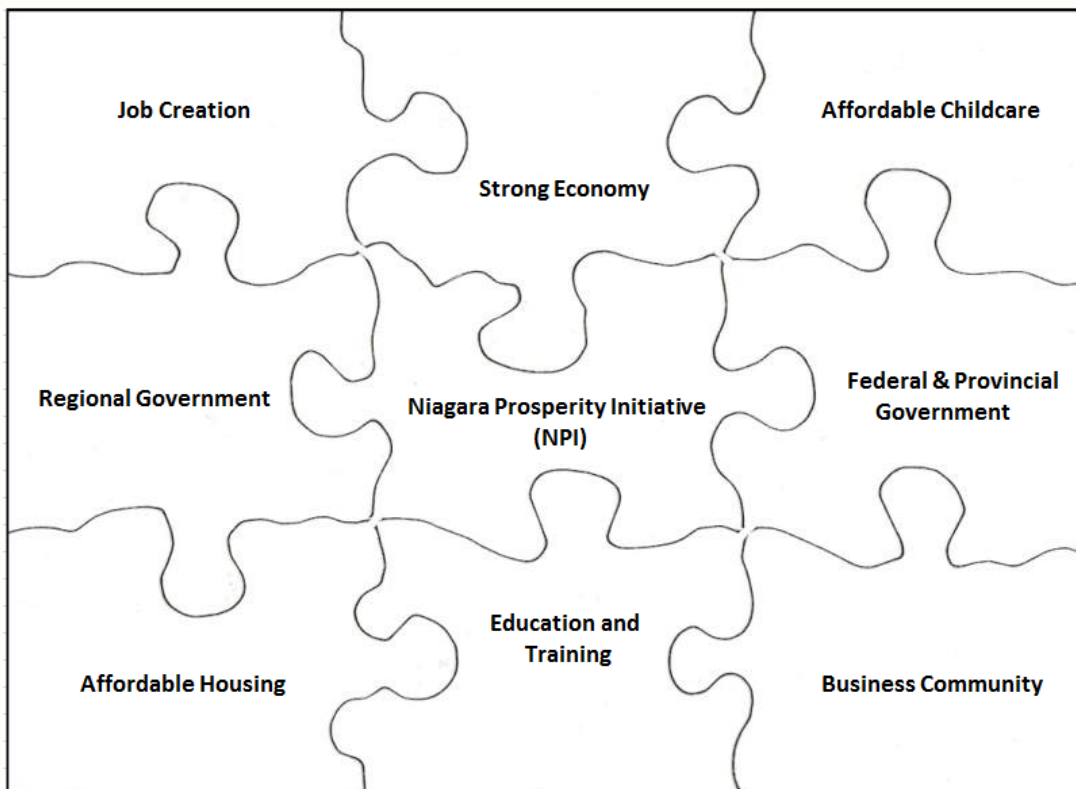
As this diagram suggests, NPI is merely one piece of the puzzle embedded in a wider range of actors, services and strategies required to affect meaningful and lasting change. While short-term programmatic interventions can help individuals with their immediate struggles and mitigate some of the worst effects of poverty, poverty reduction at a community level requires stable services, system change, conscious coordination and sustained collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders.

Under the broad umbrella of recently released federal (August 2018) and provincial (December 2020) poverty plans, the Regional Government's own comprehensive anti-poverty strategy can be crafted so as to optimize multi-sectoral coordination and alignment, leverage resources and address gaps.

Recommendation 2:
Increase investment in poverty reduction

Rationale

The NPI is just one part of the Niagara Region's response to poverty and there are non-governmental actors serving the region, as well. Unfortunately, needs of Niagarans affected by poverty are still going unmet, with tragic and, too often, fatal consequences. The situation is worsening and we have yet to fully appreciate the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable members of our community.

The NPI's budget for funding social services has remained flat, at $1.5 million annually, since its inception in 2008. The year 2020 was an exception, when $250,000 of the poverty reduction fund was temporarily reallocated in response to budget pressures. For comparison, nearby Halton Region operates a social services funding program called the Halton Region Community Investment Fund, much like the NPI, which saw its budget grow from $3 million Regional tax base dollars per year to $3.5 million in 2021. While such direct comparisons often require more detailed explication, it is important to note that the low-income population in Niagara is actually 42.5 percent higher than that of Halton. Another way for Niagara to increase its investment, following the lead of poverty reduction administrators in other regions, would be for the NPI to research and leverage opportunities to bring more resources to Niagara. For these and other initiatives to succeed, the Region needs to ensure that its ongoing anti-poverty efforts are supported by an appropriate level of staffing, comparable with those of ambitious and successful anti-poverty programs elsewhere.

Recommendation 3:
Make deliberate investments and provide longer funding terms

Rationale

While short-term funding allocated through competitions can foster community-led innovation in some cases, the NPI places service-providers on a treadmill of designing innovative short-term solutions to longstanding problems, requiring frequent cycles of grant writing and reporting, which tends to divert resources away from service provisioning. Fragmentation of services and lack of service continuity can also impede the progress of those trying to exit poverty. Deliberate investments and longer funding terms promise to allay these kinds of problems.

A deliberate investment model will afford the Niagara Region's Community Services department opportunities to coordinate its services with those purchased from third-party providers—even to select or design complementary services to fill gaps between or address the limitations of established programs. The Region may solidify existing relationships and cultivate new ones with service providers who do not engage with the NPI by enlisting their support to execute its broader strategic vision. Repositioning the NPI granting program as a component of the deliberate investment model also leaves the door open for local agencies to continue proposing pilots of novel services (i.e., new to Niagara) that may warrant incorporation into the deliberate strategy. Such a repositioning would call for changes to the NPI's structure, particularly its application procedure, and may involve innovative measures such as research development bursaries to applicants whose proposals show promise for augmenting the poverty reduction strategy.

A model based on deliberate investment and longer funding terms has the additional benefit of mitigating the unpredictability and fragmentary nature of services provided through time-limited contracts. Short-term contract-based funding models, while widespread today, can inadvertently lead to service precarity, redundancy, lower-quality services, increased insecurity for service provider agencies, over-reliance on volunteers and unpaid staff labour, advocacy chill, and more. By contrast, regional poverty reduction programs that have adopted funding models that emphasize collaborative, reciprocal relationships with stakeholders, such as those inspired by Collective Impact and coalition building frameworks, avoid these consequences and reap many benefits. Such possibilities include: coordinating with other government departments and local funders to create a shared pot of funding and single point of contact for third-party providers, increased inclusion of persons with lived experience in advocacy and policymaking, a division of labour that reflects the distribution of expertise and resources within the field, and increased service provider well-being and service quality.

Recommendation 4:
Guide investments with enhanced research

Rationale

A deliberate approach to funding makes it possible to select and distribute services in the most efficient and rational manner. The identification of priorities, tactics, and points of service should be obviously guided by strong, up-to-date and finely grained research. Developing a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy will require enhancing the Region's capacity for ongoing, advanced research to guide and support its poverty reduction strategy.

Of course, research requires technical skills and must be guided by subject matter expertise. To perform this kind of work, investing in staff training and recruitment will be crucial in order to make the best use of the recommendations being put forward. It will be necessary for Niagara Region to invest in increased staffing levels and training for these goals to be realized.

> "
> We need to build stronger communities to mitigate the enduring impacts of poverty and the stigma and stress associated with living in poverty. Stronger and healthier communities will provide individuals with social supports and access to the broader determinants of health.
>
> ~ Susan Arai & Rishia Burke

While insufficient to meet these ends by itself, the NPI's mapping tool can continue to play a useful role as part of the Regional Government's broader approach to poverty-related research. If a particular problem affects a neighbourhood, as opposed to a demographic segment, spatial analysis will inevitably be part of a valid process for allocating poverty reduction funds. Accordingly, place-based strategies should continue to be a part of the deliberate investment model, but not all needs are organized geographically. Deliberate investment should be guided by subject matter expertise, as well as transparent spatial and demographic analyses developed from the Canadian Income Survey and a variety of other timely and relevant data sources.

To accommodate a deliberate approach to funding, investment is needed to collect, develop and share data and strategies with stakeholders and providers in a way that is transparent, responsive and receptive to community feedback. To cultivate shared understandings among local stakeholders, data and findings should be broadly shared (e.g., through community data sharing sessions and other means) to elevate conversations around poverty and ensure that service providers can use them to optimize their offerings and in grant applications that may bring more monies into Niagara. Service providers have their own expertise and front-line insights into local poverty that should be respected, synthesized, and contextualized within meso- and macro-level analyses. Service providers are also gatekeepers to research sites and participants, making them invaluable partners for refining strategies by testing alternative tactics and exploring what works best, for whom, and why.

As the Niagara Region sets out to define its new long-term poverty reduction strategy, it will be important to return to Arai and Burke's reminder that not everyone faces the same challenges, and that we need detailed information about the demographics of poverty to develop effective responses. In order to understand the local composition and distribution of poverty, we need information gleaned through comprehensive research that looks at poverty from multiple perspectives. We need to understand the nature and distribution of hardships locally, and what groups in particular need targeted supports.

As Arai and Burke wrote in 2007: "We need to build stronger communities to mitigate the enduring impacts of poverty and the stigma and stress associated with living in poverty. Stronger and healthier communities will provide individuals with social supports and access to the broader determinants of health."[107] By reflecting on local need through a lens such as the social determinants of health (income, employment and working conditions, housing, education, food security, social inclusion and the environment), the Niagara Region can better understand these disparities, focus its efforts, and begin to address some systemic disadvantages.

The research undertaken for *Connecting the Pieces* will continue to warrant analysis for a long time, and Brock University's NPI Evaluation website could perhaps serve as a repository for publications or other research materials and raw data that may benefit from deeper analysis.


Recommendation 5:
Design all services for social inclusion aligned with poverty reduction priorities

Rationale

The Niagara Region's various departments design and implement public services. Making such services optimally accessible and functional for vulnerable citizens is itself a form of poverty reduction. The City of Toronto demonstrates this, prioritizing building inclusivity for low-income residents into municipal services, even before contracting third-parties to deliver services on its behalf. In order to achieve this, Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office convenes regular meetings of the leadership from all government departments to ensure inclusivity is a priority, not just for those staff tasked with poverty reduction, but for the government as a whole. Further, at least one councillor acts as a 'poverty reduction champion', questioning representatives from all departments on how the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged citizens are accounted for in new and existing programs.

This approach has yielded systems change in areas like transit, social procurement, and more, and the Niagara Region should likewise pursue such a systems approach. At the same time, as one of eight two-tier regional governments in Ontario, Niagara Region should be open to considering when and how lower tier governments could play a greater role in the delivery of targeted poverty alleviation efforts.
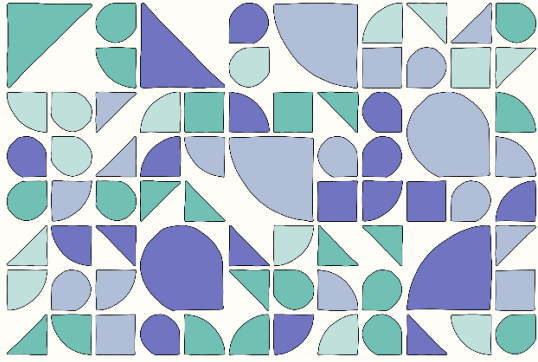
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Recommended Report Citation

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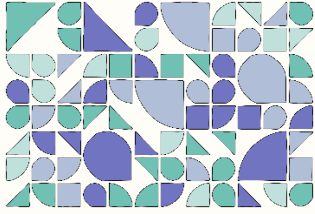
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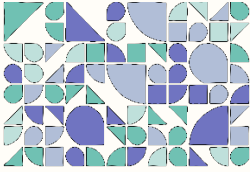
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