

THE *VALUES ADDED*
COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY RESEARCH
ALLIANCE (CURA)

Background paper for planning event

November 2002

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Introduction

The *Values Added* Community University Research Alliance (CURA) is a SSHRC-funded research partnership involving the Community Services Council, academics from Memorial University of Newfoundland, and representatives from other organizations (SSP Unit, ACOA, HRDC) and the community. Its primary focus is the province's Strategic Social Plan (SSP), an experiment being undertaken by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. The SSP, released in 1998, represents a deliberate shift in government's approach to social policy development and implementation. It is a place-based model for development that emphasizes decentralized decision-making; integrated, evidence-based policies and programs; the linkages between social and economic issues; and the importance of the broad determinants of health. As a result, on-going implementation of the plan provides a unique opportunity for research in social policy, collaborative relationships, and new models of governance.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the *Values Added* CURA are:

- to explore the processes related to, and themes emanating from the Strategic Social Plan;
- to examine the role and contributions of the voluntary, community-based sector (VCBS) in the unique environment created by the SSP; and
- to create a framework for research, knowledge generation, and analysis of related effects.

The preliminary themes, which have been identified as a framework for CURA research, include:

- the VCBS's role in building community capacity, encouraging socially inclusive citizen engagement, and fostering a climate for growth and development;
- the barriers and bridges to involving communities and the VCBS in multi-sectoral partnerships; and
- the exploration of the research needs of community organizations and the opportunities for encouraging the development of collaborative research partnerships among community groups, students and academics.

In order to achieve these objectives and to ensure the widespread relevance and dissemination of our research findings, CURA will:

- consult with individuals and organizations involved in the SSP implementation process in order to develop and support our research objectives;
- expand the base of people and groups involved in the research process;
- support and encourage evidenced-based decision-making through our research; and

- contribute to the knowledge base about both the objectives of the SSP and the role to be played by the voluntary, community-based sector in the implementation process.

Research to Date

During our first year the CURA team and staff have been working to lay a foundation for academic and community collaboration, developing preliminary research plans and collecting baseline data on some of the themes and issues outlined in our original project proposal. The research conducted to date includes:

- a retrospective of the SSP – by examining available historical documents, interviewing key informants, and devising a critical path for the development of the SSP, we have sought to trace the origins of and impetuses for the plan. By learning where the plan came from and what issues it was intended to address, we can better understand its aims and determine whether it is accomplishing the goals envisioned by its authors.
- a study of the voluntary, community-based sector and the SSP – through an examination of the briefs presented to the Social Policy Advisory Committee (SPAC) during the SSP consultation process and discussion groups and surveys conducted with representatives from the sector, we are attempting to trace the VCBS's awareness, understanding and perceptions of the SSP from their early visions of a plan that would address social issues in the province as revealed in their briefs to SPAC, to their current levels of awareness and involvement in the implementation process.

Future Research

In addition to periodically following up on the research activities discussed above, the CURA team would like to work towards fulfilling the remaining objectives as outlined on the previous page. Of particular interest and importance is furthering our understanding of the concepts of collaborative government and governance as they relate to the SSP. CURA researchers would also like to cooperate with others having an interest in the Strategic Social Plan in exploring these themes while also working together to identify other issues and future activities which might be of mutual interest and value.

Aims of the Planning Event

To this point CURA researchers have looked at the origins of the SSP and have begun collecting baseline data on levels of awareness and understanding of the Plan in the voluntary, community-based sector. We now wish to move beyond these foundational research activities to work more closely with those involved at many levels of the

implementation process. This event has been organized to bring together researchers, stakeholders and policy shapers to identify new avenues of exploration and to help shape our research agenda with the longer term view of increasing the understanding of the SSP and what the plan means for the province as a whole.

Our primary objectives, therefore, are:

- to bring together people involved with or interested in the Strategic Social Plan to discuss and contribute to CURA's research agenda;
- to identify key questions and research themes for exploration;
- to strengthen our networks and to formulate joint approaches to undertaking research initiatives; and
- to share results of our preliminary research.

Among the themes to be explored by CURA and which we hope to discuss during the planning event are:

- the SSP as a model for collaborative government;
- the role of specific groups and organizations in the implementation process (for example, the Premier's Council on Social Development, the SSP Unit, the regional steering committees, community groups)
- the SSP's contribution to fostering social cohesion, community capacity, inclusive citizen engagement, and a climate of growth and development; and
- the barriers and bridges to collaborative, public-voluntary sector partnerships.

Some questions you may wish to consider in preparation for the day include:

- What questions fascinate you about the SSP?
- What are some of the themes/topics you consider important to an exploration of the SSP?
- What are some of the practical or conceptual issues associated with the SSP?
- Are there particular concerns or issues relevant to specific SSP regions?
- How might we work together in exploring these issues?

During the event, presentations and discussions will be recorded so that a comprehensive report can be prepared to ensure that ideas and suggestions for research and collaboration are captured and followed up. Copies of the report will be made available to all planning event participants.

The *Values Added* CURA Team

As a multi-disciplinary partnership between the Community Services Council and Memorial University of Newfoundland, the *Values Added* CURA combines the strengths of academic and community-based researchers in creating a framework for research, knowledge generation, and analysis. It also provides a foundation to encourage future collaborative research efforts to allow community organizations to benefit from the skills and expertise of academics working in the field and for academics to learn from the hands-on experience and knowledge of community researchers and activists.

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