



# ARTICLE | IMPACT REPORTING: FROM ACTIVITIES TO OUTCOMES

NATASHA PEI

Tracking, counting, and reporting the number of hours spent on a program or project? It may be interesting data, but it's likely not indicating whether your initiative is having its intended result or moving the needle on a complex issue like poverty. With limited time and resources available to groups addressing major social changes, there is a deep desire to move away from reporting for reporting sake to undertaking an evaluation that furthers a collaborative's work by revealing its *outcomes*.

## WE COMPLETED A PROJECT OR PROGRAM, SO WHAT?

The simple dictionary definition of "impact" is: *to have a strong effect on someone or something*. In Vibrant Communities, we look at impact reporting as an alternative to the "activity" reporting that many programs and partnerships do. With limited resources and big – common agenda – goals, it is no longer desirable to simply summarize what happened. Funders, partners, and citizens want to know if these activities are moving progressively towards the end goal (short, medium, long-term outcomes).

Collaboratives are moving towards impact reporting for a number of reasons:

- To mark progress
- To celebrate success
- To sustain momentum at the table
- To increase the will to act
- To inspire more action
- To raise more funds

*The Getting to Impact coaching series provides members with a high-level framework to assist with organizing their understanding of poverty and poverty reduction, and to effectively measure and communicate the impacts of their poverty reduction efforts to local stakeholders.*

(Lisa Attygale, 2019)

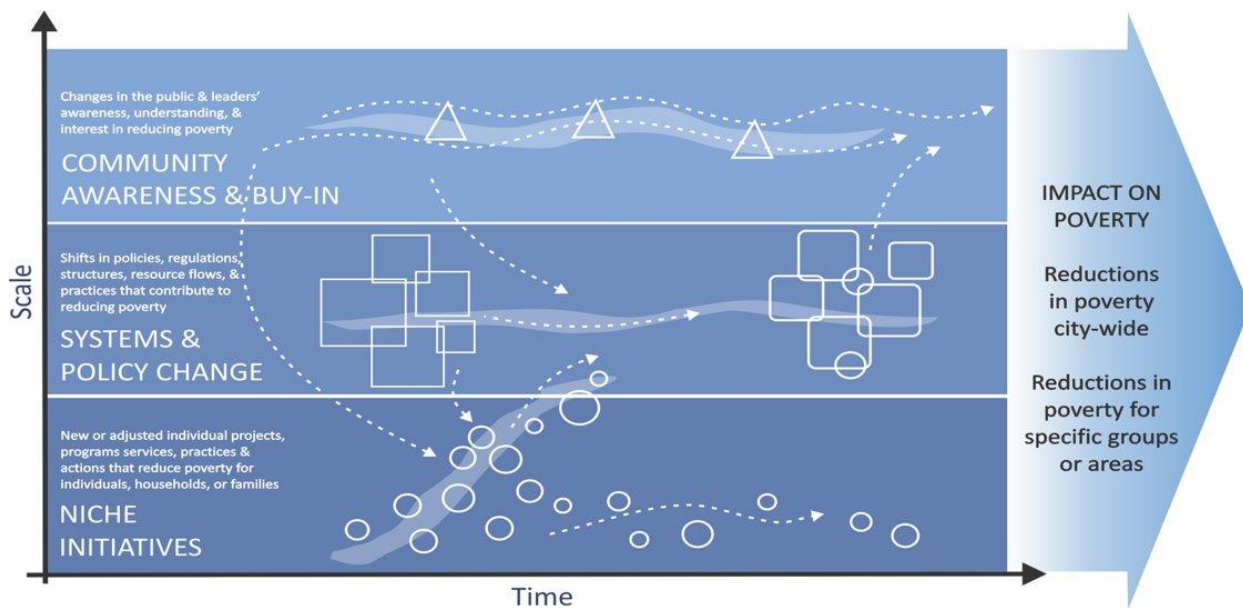
## A FRAMEWORK

In March 2019, Vibrant Communities – Cities Reducing Poverty embarked on its inaugural Getting to Impact year. Getting to Impact is an action-learning coaching program, guided by evaluator Mark Cabaj, President of [Here 2 There Consulting](#), to help improve the skill and ability of Cities Reducing Poverty members to track impact of their poverty reduction work, gather the data, and communicate it out.

As there is no one right or agreed upon definition of poverty, nor agreed upon set of measures across Canada, we have developed a framework for local initiatives to use broadly as a sense-making tool.

The multi-level evaluation framework can be used by poverty reduction roundtables at any phase of development, pillars of work, with varying levels of capacity and influence, and is flexible to be adopted, adapted, and applied with local characteristics across the country.

**The framework is organized around the following outcomes:**  
 Building community awareness, will and action  
 +  
 Shifting systems and policy  
 +  
 Programmatic/project/program interventions for individuals and families  
 (Over time and with greater scale)  
 =  
 Targeted and population-level outcomes



**Outcome Area: Community Awareness and Will**

Priming the environment for people to support and act on poverty are important foundations for poverty reduction efforts. This includes generating community awareness, building the empathy and will to act, and changing behaviours so that people take appropriate action. Roundtables often work at three levels to advance the poverty reduction agenda – the general public, anchor institutions, and decision-makers.

By establishing targets and gauging opinions, and observed behaviours of these target groups, we can explain how the efforts of roundtables have helped or are getting people to do things differently.

Consider your own community awareness and will outcomes. Have you identified:

- Who are your target audiences?
- What are you doing to influence the behaviour of those audiences?
- How do you gauge whether your strategies are working?

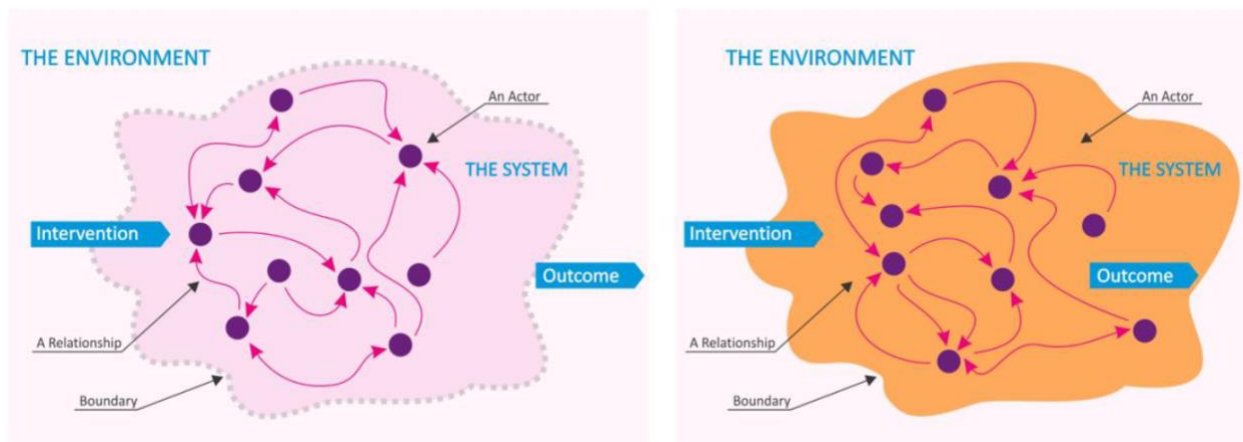
### Outcome Area: Systems and Policy Change

Because people are kept in poverty for systemic reasons, a community interested in deep and durable reductions in the overall level of poverty must adopt systems change as a central component of its strategy. The goal being to create systems and policies that increase wellbeing for people; for when they work, they have a disproportionately large-scale impact for individuals and families. The most common areas of systems change reported by CRP members in 2017 were coordination and streamlining services and supports, enhancing multi-sectoral partnerships and collaboratives, initiating action-oriented teams, creating opportunities for people with lived/living experience, and implementing funding reforms.

While tracking exact cause-and-effect relationships between roundtables and systems changes is near impossible, there are various methods that can be used to track a roundtable's [contributions](#), backwards from the policy or system change, to their actions. For example:

- [Most Significant Instances of Policy & Systems Improvement](#)
- [Outcome Harvesting](#)
- [Social Network Mapping](#)
- [Causal Loop Diagrams](#)

“Programmatic interventions help people beat the odds. Systems interventions *change* the odds for people.”



Example of a System Map

Consider your own systems and policy change outcomes. Have you identified:

- What your system looks like? What the boundaries are, who is a part of it, and what the dynamics are?

- How to keep track of each interaction is very small, but important outcomes as-you-go?
- Who should participate in validating the roundtable's contributions to systems changes?

### **Outcome Area: Niche Initiatives – Programs, projects, and services**

Programs, projects and services provide immediate tangible benefits to families, and offer the opportunity to influence population-level targets if they are scaled up, out and deep over time. Often times a poverty reduction roundtable will undertake, support, or coordinate many programs, services and/or innovative pilot projects as part of their work.

Due to the wide diversity of innovations and beneficiaries amongst poverty reduction collaboratives, there are no common sets of indicators and methods used to report these types of outcomes. However, a good practice for roundtable or working group leads, is to create a Theory of Change or logic model that traces each of the individual program/project/service's intended impacts to the group's medium and long-term outcome goals. Then, have program/project/service provider partners share roughly similar data that feeds into the whole.

Consider your own niche initiatives. Have you identified:

1. How the table's interventions will help you collectively reach your medium and long-term goals?
2. A plan for gathering quantitative and qualitative data on each niche initiative?
3. How to cobble together all of the niche initiative data with little capacity and control over the partners' reporting?
4. How to capture the ripple effects that result from scaling an initiative?

### **“Impact” Outcomes: Population and targeted-level**

Question: LIM? LICO? MBM? What is the correct measure of poverty in Canada?

Answer: There is no perfect measure.

[They are all imperfect indicators of poverty.](#) Each roundtable must determine for themselves, based on their own understanding of poverty, access to data and reporting needs, which prox(ies) are best to gauge the level of poverty in their community.

Describing a poverty reduction roundtable's contribution to population-level and targeted outcomes should be a combination of:

- a) A framework – definitions of poverty and poverty reduction, your domains of work (income, health, housing, transportation, etc.), a set of indicators for each domain, and threshold(s),
- b) A narrative aligning your outcomes from niche initiative to population-level
- c) An estimate of the collective contributions within a system full of actors and overlapping efforts
- d) A proxy threshold for determining whether someone is living in or out of poverty

## CITIES REDUCING POVERTY EXAMPLES

Several poverty reduction collaboratives throughout Canada have already begun tracking and reporting their poverty reduction outcomes and impact. If you are looking for examples of what your own impact report may look like, do a scan of the following sample reports and identify aspects of the framework, data, and narrative that you like and could adapt for your own community.

- [Living SJ Spring 2018 Community Impact Report](#)
- [Wood Buffalo Homelessness Year 7 Community Impact Report](#)
- [Iowa 2019 Community Impact Report](#)
- [Halton 2017 Community Report](#)

## FURTHER READING

- [A Comparison of LICO, LIM and MBM](#), by Statistics Canada
- [Tool: Developing Evaluations that are Used](#), by Tamarack Institute
- [Article: Outcome Harvesting – Principles, Steps and Evaluation Applications](#), with Mark Cabaj
- [Webinar: The Systems Change Evaluation Canvas – A tool for planning to evaluate systems](#), with Mark Cabaj and Galen MacLusky
- [Evaluating Collective Impact: Five Simple Rules](#), by Mark Cabaj

Funded by the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnership Program.

Canada

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.