Celebrating, Learning, and Inspiring Action

Summary Report of the Forum on Research-Inspired Social Innovation and Community Change in Waterloo Region, held Dec. 8th, 2008

This summary Report describes the sessions at this Forum, the key themes that were developed during this day long Forum, and possible follow-up activities.

Purpose of the Forum on Research-Inspired Social Innovation and Community Change

1. *To celebrate social innovation in Waterloo Region.* Since the 1980s, this Region has been a beacon of new ideas, whether in mental health, affordable housing, family violence prevention, collaborative partnering, or community based research. Recently, an influx of new ideas and approaches has become part of the Region. We have lots to celebrate.

2. *To share ideas and insights about research-inspired social innovation and community change.* The Forum was divided into four inter-related themes, that together help us gain insight into the process of social innovation and community based research.

3. *To inspire each other to expand and deepen our social innovation in Waterloo Region and elsewhere.* Despite progress, we know that we have much more to accomplish. Many organizations are just beginning the journey to understand how to make social innovation and community research a central part of their work.

Scope of the Forum

The Forum was designed for people in Waterloo Region who were interested in research-inspired social innovation and community change. To the surprise of the organizers, there was wide-spread interest in such an event. The 100 spaces available to participants quickly filled and we ended up with more then 30 people on the waiting list.

Forum participants included a wide variety of professionals and citizens. Local, regional and provincial government were all represented, along with staff from more then 20 non-profit organizations in Waterloo Region. Researchers, family leaders, disability and poverty activists, and university faculty were also in attendance. The diverse group made for very rich conversations in the Forum and in the hallways.

In addition, the Forum sponsors accepted more than 12 displays from a range of groups in the Region. These displays show-cased a wide range of social innovations in the Region and personified the insights being shared in the Forum.

Context for the Forum

Joanna Ochocka started the Forum by reminding us that Waterloo Region is well known as a centre for technological innovation. But, she emphasized, it is also a dynamic place of **social** innovation. There are many creative things happening in our community and many dynamic social innovators who work and live here. The level of interest and energy that this forum generated are the best indicators of that.

Joanna went on to note that the idea of this event was born over a year ago as part of the 25th anniversary of the Centre for Community Based Research. The Centre is a pioneer in community based approaches to research in Canada and internationally and is a strong player in social innovation in this Region.

Other sponsors of the Forum were Social Innovation Generation at the University of Waterloo, the Region of Waterloo, and Centre for International Goverance Innovation.

John Lord, Forum facilitator, began by reviewing the essence of social innovation. At one level, he noted, **social innovation** is about:

> 'generating new ideas.' At another level, social innovation is about transforming existing functions and structures. In many ways, social innovation is transformative because it demands new thinking and new forms of action. Frances Westley has noted that "social innovation is an initiative, product, or process that profoundly changes the basic routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of any social system."

To understand research-inspired social innovation and community change, we need to understand community based research. The definition from the Centre for Community Based Research says that:

Community based research is research that strives to be:

> *Community situated* – Begins with a research topic of practical relevance to the community (as opposed to individual scholars) and is carried out in community settings.

> *Collaborative* – Community members and researchers equitably share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the research design, implementation and dissemination.

Action-oriented – The process and results are useful to community members in making positive social change and to promote social equity.

John Lord also asked participants to reflect on what kind of community change they wanted. He noted that the community change we want is the vision of our social innovation. This vision needs to be grounded in the values and principles that make sense for building progressive initiatives.

Lessons from the Main Sessions at the Forum

Four themes guided the panel presentations and conversations. For each theme, the main lessons identified are outlined below. Graphics that were created during the Forum are also part of each theme.

Theme # 1 – Passion and Vision

Passion is often the foundation of social innovation because it begins with someone who has a belief in a new way of doing things. Community based research helps people and communities become intentional about their vision. Several elements of vision were identified – vision is grounded in legitimate claims, it is personally lived and collectively shared, and it is driven by values and principles. Community based research enables people to engage in a reflective process. Social innovation by its very nature requires that we reflect and ponder new possibilities. We know that social innovation takes time and energy. If people do not have passion and vision, it is unlikely that social innovation and community will take hold.

Graphic notes taken during the "Passion and Vision" panel discussion

Theme # 2 – Partnerships and Collaboration

Genuine partnerships require collaboration and an understanding of differences. Community based research enables people to take time to build trust and connections based on common interest and shared vision. Stories form a key part of partnerships. Partners learn to listen and to honour the stories of each other. Working together in a collaborative enterprise means being comfortable with complexity and being able to 'walk in the shoes of the other.' In many ways, collaboration is a strategy to move from passion and vision to action. Relationship building is central

Excerpt from graphic notes taken during the "Partnerships" panel discussion

to this process. The very nature of collaboration requires that people think 'outside the box' and notice and engage with other points of view. In this way, collaboration enhances social innovation. The reality is that genuine partnerships are challenging to develop and maintain because they require 'working across differences' and 'finding common ground.'

Theme # 3 – Spaces and Places

Social innovation is usually located in community. Spaces that enhance conversation and participation are often the key to community change. It is not just physical space, but also emotional space that enhances relationships and connections. Participation is central to community based research, which creates opportunities for people to learn and grow in personal and collective action. When communities have a commitment to social inclusion, they create places and spaces that are welcoming. Groups that have a commitment to social inclusion also create infrastructure support that enhances participation. This commitment also means becoming 'community driven' and

Graphic notes taken during the "Spaces and Places" panel discussion

'community led.' These ideas can be nurtured through community based research and serve as 'lenses' for facilitating social innovation.

Theme # 4 – Impact and Sustainability

There is no fixed state called social innovation. Rather, sustainability must be understood as an ongoing process of action-reflection-action. Community based research enables us to learn from mistakes and to search for insights underneath the stories we hear. Impact is related to people and processes that create positive outcomes. Social innovation is enhanced when we realize that reflection is an important form of action. 'Standing still' enables us to see possibilities and to notice how we need to change. As a result of 'learning as we go,' we may re-allocate resources or make new investments. Community based research contributes to sustainability with its array of questions and insights. Even as new knowledge is generated, new questions are created. We need to ask, "What are the problems that your success has generated?" In this way, social innovators are open to ongoing change and possibilities.

Summary of Key Themes from the Forum

Several themes were identified that were connected in some way to all four of the themes presented above.

1. *How change happens* – Panellists from all four theme areas emphasized the importance of community conversations. Communication was identified as a key component of change. Social innovation often begins when people decide to work together, but with a new condition -- slowing down enough to really listen and learn from each other. Social innovators and community researchers reported that the discernment often happens slowly. In this sense, figuring out the change we need requires us to be aware of the context and let it speak to us. Panellists reminded us of the importance of stories and the power of conversation. This often means listening to people whose observations and experiences are different than our own. Community based research was seen as one key tool to make this happen. It creates a context for people coming together in new ways and exploring questions in a new light.

2. *Centrality of values and principles* – Values and principles were seen as a strong underpinning of social innovation. When the principles are created by the people who are deeply invested in the change (such as service users), there is a strong sense of ownership and participation. In the innovations that were explored, the values and principles were applied to both individuals and the community. For example, recovery in mental health or family violence resolution can be seen as both a personal and a collective journey. The insight seems like a paradox, but may well be a key insight into social innovation that will benefit communities, especially vulnerable populations. Community based research was identified as a key approach for asking value type questions and engaging people in thinking intentionally about the principles that matter to them.

3. *Common purpose and agenda* – In several presentations, it was noted that common purpose was crucial to an innovation getting off the ground. Creating a common purpose takes time and requires that we are willing to trust the people with whom we are collaborating. Trust was seen as the glue that links passion and vision to action. Like the values and principles, trust in a common purpose can become a touchstone for an innovative initiative. Community based research can serve as a strategy for finding common purpose and building trust among diverse players. Some panellists noted that this process can be 'organic' and often occurs when social innovators 'notice' and build on strengths, capacities, and possibilities.

4. *Importance of relationships* – Relationships were often identified as fundamental to social innovation and community change. Several initiatives built capacity through relationships. Typically in social innovation, these relationships enable people to 'stretch' their thinking as trust among key players deepens. Some presenters noted that the key is to find balance between tasks and relationships.

5. *When to 'scale-up'* – 'Scaling-up' refers to the idea that local innovations can be broadened and become more systemic and wide-spread over time. We learned from the panels that this process is seldom linear and takes a lot of strategic thinking. Scaling-up is important and multi-dimensional. An actual project could scale up or in some cases just the idea gets scaled-up. An idea might take hold and become part of provincial or even national policy. Participants explored the question, 'when to scale-up,' and it was noted that sometimes it makes more sense to keep a project local. Community based research was seen as a process that enables us to get into a strategic mode that can help with discernment on the scaling-up question.

6. *Power of community* – Social innovation and community change take place in 'community.' Several panellists stressed the power of community. Community based research begins with the premise that research is community situated; this means that research is always of practical relevance to the community (as opposed to individual scholars) and is carried out in community settings. Some presenters reminded us that community is understood as the neighbourhoods and networks of people that exist 'beyond agency structures.' Social innovators who believe in the power of community understand that they must engage community, understand its strengths and assets, and constantly learn 'with' people who are impacted by community programs.

7. *Living with tension* – It was agreed that creating possibilities for social innovation is not an easy task and that 'tension' may often be part of the change journey. Since collaboration is such an important part of research-inspired social innovation, people need to learn to become comfortable with challenging questions and even diverse world views. This insight reiterates the power of conversation, as people working for change listen and learn from each other. 'Living with tension' becomes part and parcel of

innovative collaborative enterprises. One key to 'living with tension' seems to be the ability to maintain mutual respect and ongoing participation.

8. *The 'blurring' of roles* – Social innovators reported that they often see some 'blurring of roles' as they embark on a process of community change. As trust builds in community based research, for example, researchers and practitioners are both able to 'risk' and become comfortable with 'uncertainty.' As people work together, energy, trust, and honesty begin to deepen. This enables people to suspend judgements and move from expert roles to roles as citizens and collaborators. The process of change also recognizes that leadership can emerge from various people and places.

Follow-up Possibilities

Participants at the Forum expressed a strong desire to continue holding conversations about research-inspired social innovation and community change. The Steering Committee agreed to create a Forum Report and to convene one more gathering.

Hope was expressed that other players in the community might take the lead on convening future conversations. Since many of us are interested in learning how to facilitate social innovation, this would be a very positive development for our community.

> **Forum and follow-up were sponsored by the Centre for Community Based Research (communitybasedresearch.ca) and its partners, Social Innovation Generation / University of Waterloo and the Region of Waterloo**
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> **John Lord was the chair of the event and the writer of the Report**