



Tackling Complex Community Issues Tour: Notes from New Zealand Trip 2007

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It's easy to stay in the light – our current ways of thinking, processes, institutional processes – but the answers to our complex issues – poverty, global warming, community safety ~ are in the dark side of the parking lot.

A Story

On a warm summer night on the back stairs of a country dance hall anywhere in the world, a young woman enjoying a cigarette was startled when a man on all fours crawled into a lighted area.

The man nodded a hello and continued on his search. He wondered around and around the well lit area near the dance hall and never moving beyond the unlit area of the parking lot.

Concerned that the person seemed unable to find what he was looking for, the young woman finished her cigarette, stood up and said, "I would like to help. What did you lose and where roughly did you lose them?"

The man calmly stood up, brushed the dirt off his slacks, stretched and with a yawn pointed out to the dark side of the parking lot 20-30 meters beyond the well lit area and reported "I lost my car keys and it was somewhere over there".

The confused woman asked "Then, why on earth are you looking over here?"

Contentedly, the man answered, "Because the light is so much better over here!"

About Tamarack

Tamarack is a dynamic organization that develops and supports collaborative strategies that engage citizens and institutions to solve major community challenges and to learn from and share these experiences. Tamarack believes that we can find a better path forward when different sectors work together strategically and comprehensively to build stronger communities. The Institute sponsors projects and provides learning resources, training, coaching and strategic consulting that enable people to collaborate and to learn with and from each other.

We believe that this is the right time to advance the work of communities collaborating to make a difference. Something has shifted in the collective ethos of those who search for a new way forward. We are bound together in place, in community, to overcome challenges that face us.

For more information on Tamarack, see [our website](#).



Special Thanks

When Mary-Jane Rivers asked if I would like to come to New Zealand in May of 2007 to share some of our observations about community change in Canada it was easy to say yes.

I had just spent time in Canada with her and four other remarkable people from across New Zealand – and, like everyone else in my organization, was impressed with their work and, more importantly, with them as people.

I arrived in New Zealand on May 14th. Over the next three weeks I reconnected with Mary-Jane and the other four adventurers from that trip to Canada, in the communities they work so resiliently to strengthen:

- Alfred Ngaro in Auckland
- Bruce Maden from Palmerston North
- Shona Hickey from Christchurch
- Trevor Gray across the country

This would have been reward enough. But there was more. I also had the privilege of meeting with many talented, driven and humane people who in turn introduced me to “community building” New Zealand style:

- Barbara MacLennan
- David Hanna
- Gael Surgenor
- Desiree Cull and Fiona Munro (Gisborne)
- Brandi Hudson (Rotorua)
- Paul Curry
- Roxanne Miller (Hamilton)
- Alison Broad
- Jennifer Gill
- Paul Prestidge

Your work is important and making a difference. I finished the trip inspired and refueled.

Of course, the trip would not have been possible without the financial contributions Mary-Jane was able to secure from The Tindall Foundation, Department of Internal Affairs, Families Commission and Wesley Com - Methodist Church. Thank you.

And finally, a very big thanks to Mary-Jane Rivers, her partner Patrick, and son Stephen, who were incomparable companions and were the grandest tour guides to Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Background

This document provides background information to the themes Mary Jane Rivers, I, and people from across New Zealand explored during a series of visits from May 14th to May 31st, 2007 in the following areas:

- Auckland
- Christchurch
- Gisborne
- Hamilton
- Long Beach
- Palmerston North
- Rotorua
- Waitakere
- Wellington

This resource is meant to accompany a set of PowerPoint presentations we used in each visit and to respond to questions or themes raised in each session.¹

I had originally hoped to develop more detailed answers to the questions or issues posed during each event. And there were a lot of questions! However, as I sat down to start on my first set of questions, I realized how difficult this is because in each instance I found myself starting my response with “It depends!”

¹ Mary-Jane gave these files to the local coordinator of each event. People interested in receiving a copy of that presentation should contact Mary-Jane directly [by e-mail](#).

For each question, I felt an overpowering urge to phone up the person who asked the question to better understand the context in which they were operating, and to jointly work through the many options and ultimately identify the most helpful way they might work through that question.

This captures the central theme of each of the workshops and meetings we had: there are no recipes to complex issues. Emerging patterns, principles and frameworks, yes – but no recipes. In fact, one of the greatest challenges and opportunities for all of us, who are interested in making this world a better place for ourselves and the many people who will follow, is to leave formulas and rules behind and accept the messiness, paradoxes and unpredictability of the world and trust our ability to work through issues as they emerge.

In place of cookie-cutter answers, I have chosen instead to introduce you to the many important people, stories and resources that inspire and inform our work at Tamarack. We are not experts. We are witnesses, supporters and story-tellers of the community building work of people in Canada and – as we get to know more people like you – in places people call home like your beautiful and gentle New Zealand.

This sharing is just a start. I invite you to treat this resource as invitation to go to the [Tamarack website](#) and connect with the stories and people – your fellow citizens from across the planet – who are also trying to shape, not simply endure, our future.

Complex Community Issues

What is the case for collaborative and comprehensive action?

It's simple: joined up quality of life issues – such as economic well being, community safety, a strong environment – require joined up responses, and that means working across artificial sectoral and institutional boundaries.

The Stacey Matrix is a very useful framework for describing three types of community situations: simple, complicated and complex – and hints at some implications for how we should approach each type of issue. The Stacey Matrix has been very important in helping me better understand why we need to organize ourselves differently when up against complex issues – and why we have struggled for so long when we treated them like simple issues.

The original Stacey Matrix is nicely described at [the Edgware website at the plexus institute](#). Tamarack has adapted the matrix slightly by making an important distinction between “socially complicated” (many diverse stakeholders) and “technically complicated” (inter-related root causes) situations. The Tamarack adaptation is presented in the generic PowerPoint made available to all workshop participants.

Leadership in Complex Situations

What are the leadership requirements when tackling complex issues? It's not necessarily "more" command and control, nor is it leadership by a charismatic and heroic individual.

Brenda Zimmerman explores [nine leadership principles](#) for "leading in complexity" which fundamentally reshape how might work together in our communities. I find these principles – and the tools found [elsewhere on this site](#) – very helpful, and think you might as well.

People interested in jumping into the deep end of the complexity pool will already know and/or appreciate the work of [Margaret Wheatley](#) who has been working in this area for quite some time. Her books include: *Leadership and the New Science*, *A Simpler Way*, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope*, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*, and more recently *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. These books are well written, at times eclectic, and a mix of science, management and spiritual exploration.

While I sometimes struggle through Margaret's books – there are some very big ideas here – I always leave inspired and thinking differently. You can find or order her books at any major bookstore.

Social Innovation

Coming up with innovative responses is a real chore at the best of times. It is particularly demanding – and lonely – when trying to "turn the curve" on complex issues.

The journey by social innovators is explored in depth by Brenda Zimmerman, Frances Westley and Michael Quinn Patton in their book [Getting to Maybe](#) (Random House Canada) which was launched only last year and is now in its fourth printing. I have watched these three people working with communities on the ground, and after each time I leave more confident and energized about community building work. Individually they are powerful: together they are amazing.

This book is a goldmine for people who feel like the "odd duck" in their community or workplace as they try to do something new. While it explores social innovation from the perspective of individual or small groups of innovators, the ideas, processes and experiences are just as relevant for larger groups or collaborators. I find myself going back to it time and time again.

Governance, Planning & Implementation

Our conventional approach to governance, planning, and implementing change efforts works quite well when dealing with relatively simple or mildly technically complicated issues, when few stakeholders are involved and the issues relatively straightforward. These same approaches work poorly – even counterproductively – when tackling complex issues.

There is a lot of experimenting going on right now in these areas and several great resources that try to make sense of it all. Here are the ones that I return to again and again:

- David C. Chrislip. *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook: A Guide for Citizens and Civic Leaders*. 2002. Jossey-Bass.
- Russell M. Linden. *Working Across Boundaries: Making Collaborations Work in Government and Non Profit Organizations*. 2002. Jossey-Bass.
- Jeffrey S. Luke. *Catalytic Leadership: Strategies for an Interconnected World*. 1998. Jossey-Bass.
- Karen Ray. *The Nimble Collaboration*. The Fieldstone Alliance.
- Linda Hoskins and Emil Angelica. *Forming Alliances: Working Together to Achieve Mutual Goals*. The Fieldstone Alliance.

These resources are my “old stand-bys.” But I am finding some other good stuff as well.

One new idea I love is the “[eco-cycle framework](#)” that describes the different life cycles of any human effort – a project, an organization, a collaboration or even industry. Don’t let the name scare you. It’s a great resource and suggests that different priorities and tasks – and management and leadership styles – are appropriate at different stages. I strongly recommend you take a look.

The other is a document I found here in New Zealand, written by Megan Courtney, called [Pen to Paper](#). She wrote it to capture the learning of her Council and community around partnerships. She and David Craig also just finished writing [The Potential of Partnerships](#), which is also a great document

Like everything these are not a one-size-fits-all package, but each provides a very accessible and thorough way to think about and work around collaborative work with local government in New Zealand. I will be going back to the Waitakere experience to get inspired.

Learning & Evaluation

Traditional approaches to evaluation are often externally, scientifically and expert driven and can often be too blunt and unwieldy for collaborative work.

The [Aspen Institute](#) has found that traditional evaluation approaches are often too blunt and unwieldy for comprehensive change efforts in their report, [Building Knowledge About Community Change](#).

Utilization and developmentally focused evaluations put change makers in the front seat with approaches and methodologies suited to the nature of complex, collaborative work. Michael Quinn Patton is one of North America's leading evaluation experts and has inspired Tamarack and our colleagues to embrace evaluation as a productive part of a community building work. His recent work on developmental evaluation appears to be breaking ground on the evaluation front, and [we have embraced it wholeheartedly](#) for our work in our Vibrant Communities initiative.

Those interested in improving the likelihood that evaluation findings will be used rather than just sit on a shelf will be interested another book by Michael: *Utilization Focused Evaluation*. Check out his [evaluation design tool](#) to help ensure just that.

Funding & Investment

Collaborative local action also requires collaborative funding arrangements that can run against the grain of current funding practices: short term funding cycles, project oriented and focused on only one or two issues.

There are two pieces of work that shape and capture our thinking and experience with how to invest in collaborative approaches to tough community issues.

[Jay Connor](#) makes an excellent case for funding a “community support organization” – a mechanism to support and fuel collaborative change efforts – as well as inviting funders to play a more active role that moves beyond providing money and using their influence and knowledge to be full participants in the change effort. His book, *Community Visions, Community Solutions: Grantmaking for Comprehensive Impact*, can be purchased at the [Fieldstone Alliance](#). The Tamarack website also has podcasts of [a series of excellent interviews](#) with Jay on the topic.

Funding a core support organization is one thing. Moving beyond funding silos to collaboratively investing in joined up responses is quite another. The people at the [Finance Project](#) in the United States have done a nice job of describing different ways that funders can work together to co-invest in change efforts that cross over their individual mandates or concerns. [Their site](#) includes a variety of useful resources.

Policy & Systems Change

Good public policy is critical to moving the needle on complex issues. Yet even well-intended top-down government policies struggle to reflect the unique circumstance of each community, build on the unique knowledge of multiple voices on the ground, or unleash and mobilize the resources.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation in the United States is a leader in thinking about how to mobilize communities to shape more productive policies and systems. Their [website](#) explores their experience with this theme with efforts community safety, education and human services, neighborhood renewal. Their work on the [Jobs Initiative](#) was particularly influential to me, and I strongly recommend their [Labour Market Systems Reform framework](#) as a way of thinking about systems reform.

The communities involved in the Tamarack-supported [Vibrant Communities](#) initiative have also demonstrated their ability to shape public policies and administration at the local, provincial and national level. The resources and podcasts from the [Policy-Change From the Bottom Up learning series](#) provide some great stories, tools and reflections on their experience.

Engaging Business in Complex Issues

Leaders and organizations from the private sector must be involved – sooner or later – in any community change effort. They have skills, knowledge and networks to contribute and the very way they go about their day to day work directly effects – positively and negatively – the quality of life in community.

There is no recipe for engaging business. Small businesses are different than large businesses. Owner-operated enterprises are different than publicly owned ones. Retail ventures are different than energy companies. Businesses motivated by charitable reasons must be approached differently than those motivated by a sense of social responsibility.

There is no recipe, but there are principles patterns. The communities involved in the Vibrant Communities initiative explored the task of involving business in just one complex issue: poverty. The [webpage for that learning project](#) contains a large variety of resources on how to engage business and [podcasts of four interviews](#) with people with first hand experience with the issue.

It often appears that its leaders from the non-profit or public sector that have to find clever ways to engage the private sector in community issues. Happily, there are cases of the opposite. The [Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative](#) (BCAPI) is a leader in the larger poverty reduction campaign in Saint John, New Brunswick.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Strong neighbourhoods are the building blocks of strong communities. Yet they often seem forgotten places as economies become global, governments become preoccupied with regional and national questions, and local residents often spend only a few hours a day in or around their home.

There is nearly 100 years of effort to revitalize struggling communities. The practice and lessons learned have co-evolved alongside the rapidly changing nature of our communities and societies.

The Aspen Institute has prepared a very good summary and lessons learned from the American experience – which is quite advanced and well researched – with neighborhood renewal in the two books: *Voices from the Field I* and *II*. These books can be [downloaded](#) for free.

The experience of five communities who have been working hard to strengthen themselves over decades – periodically with outside financial and technical support – is well documented by the Annie E. Casey through its [Rebuilding Community Initiatives](#).

Anyone interested in getting glimpse of the Canadian experience with neighbourhood renewal should look at the [Action for Neighborhood Change](#) initiative, which was a two-year action-learning project to encourage neighbourhood revitalization in five Canadian cities.

Social Enterprise

If traditional private sector businesses prove unable or willing to create sufficient jobs, training, services or employment opportunities, then non-profit organizations can fill the gap by starting their own businesses that mix social and economic goals. We have focused our attention on both the Canadian and American experience in social enterprise and are impressed by the work of the following organizations.

The [Roberts Enterprise Fund](#) is deeply committed to non-profit owned training enterprise for people who are homeless or with few job skills. Their website is comprehensive, offers many examples of social enterprises, and describes their experience with “social return on investment” (SROI).

[Social Capital Partners](#) in Toronto was founded by a private sector philanthropist that was interested in bringing business principles to non-profit commercial ventures and has since found that social enterprise is a little tougher than “straight business” because of the ongoing tension between economic and social goals.

The [Centre for Community Enterprise](#) has a great newsletter and resources on the topic, while a number of groups in British Columbia, Canada have started the [Enterprising Non-Profit program](#) to assist non-profits generate revenues.

Appendix: Links

The following is the list of resources mentioned in each section, with their full URLs. If you have an electronic copy of the report, you can simply click on the blue links throughout; however, if you are using a paper copy, you can enter these addresses in your internet browser to access the resources.

Background:

Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement:

<http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>

Mary-Jane Rivers (e-mail): mjriders@delta.net.nz

Complex Community Issues:

Edgware site at Plexus Insitute:

http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgware/archive/think/main_aides3.html

Leadership in Complex Situations:

Nine Leadership Principles:

http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgware/archive/think/main_prin1.html

Edgware site map:

<http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgware/archive/edgeplace/map.html>

Margaret Wheatley: <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/>

Social Innovation:

Getting to Maybe:

<http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780679314431>

Governance, Planning & Implementation:

Eco-cycle framework:

http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgware/archive/think/main_aides9.html

Pen to Paper:

[http://www.dia.govt.nz/COPwebsite.nsf/Files/PentoPaper/\\$file/Pen%20to%20Paper.pdf](http://www.dia.govt.nz/COPwebsite.nsf/Files/PentoPaper/$file/Pen%20to%20Paper.pdf)

The Potential of Partnerships:

<http://www.waitakere.govt.nz/OurPar/pdf/potentialofpartnership.pdf>

Learning & Evaluation:

Aspen Institute:

http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.huLWJeMRKpH/b.612045/k.4BA8/Roundtable_on_Community_Change.htm

Building Knowledge about Community Change:

http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.huLWJeMRKpH/b.612045/k.4BA8/Roundtable_on_Community_Change.htm

Vibrant Communities' work with developmental evaluation:

http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_CC4I5.html

Michael Quinn Patton's evaluation design tool:

<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/ufo.pdf>

Funding & Investment:

Jay Connor: <http://thecollaboratory.us/collaboratorycs/index.html>

Fieldstone Alliance: <http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/>

Finance Project:

http://www.financeproject.org/pubs/all_pub.asp?c=11&pageid=1

Policy & Systems Change:

Annie E. Casey Foundation: <http://www.aecf.org/>

Jobs Initiative:

<http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/FamilyEconomicSuccess/TheJobsInitiative.aspx>

Labour Market Systems Reform Framework:

<http://www.aecf.org/searchresults.aspx?keywords=plastrik&source=refinerearch>

Vibrant Communities: <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2.php>

Policy-Change from the Bottom Up:

<http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2s327.html>

Engaging Business in Complex Issues:

Vibrant Communities: <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2.php>

Podcasts: <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2s325.html>

Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative:

<http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2s28.html>

Neighbourhood Renewal:

Voices from the Field:

http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.huLWJeMRKpH/b.612045/k.4BA8/Roundtable_on_Community_Change.htm

Rebuilding Community Initiatives:

<http://www.aecf.org/OurWork/CommunityChange.aspx>

Action for Neighbourhood Change:

<http://www.anccommunity.ca/>

Social Enterprise:

Roberts Enterprise Fund: <http://www.redf.org/>

Social Capital Partners: <http://www.socialcapitalpartners.ca/>

Centre for Community Enterprise: <http://www.cedworks.com/>

Enterprising Non-profit program:

<http://www.enterprisingnonprofits.ca/>