An Anti-Poverty Strategy:
A Reflective Review of an Anti-Poverty Organizing Practicum with the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers

A Field Practicum Report
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by
Kirk Englot
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Abstract

The intention of this report is to serve as a reflective review of an eight-month part-time Master of Social Work field practicum, which I competed with the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers (SASW) between the months of May and December 2009. My practicum activity drew from community development theory and was informed by a trend emerging across Canada towards the incorporation of anti-poverty strategies. I contributed to an organizing effort to draw together anti-poverty and social justice activists and organizations into a provincial network that has adopted the title Action for a Poverty Free Saskatchewan. The pages of this report outline the ideological and theoretical tenants that underpinned my work. I also reflect upon my fieldwork experiences through an evaluation of values, ethics, strategies, skills and future visions for my career and the profession of social work. I conclude that an anti-poverty strategy can assist in collective anti-poverty organizing.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ii  
Acknowledgement iii  
Table of Contents iv  
Introduction 1  
Organizational Overview 3  
Ideology 5  
Theory 12  
What is an Anti-Poverty Strategy? 16  
Community Development Theory 19  
Collaboration Theory 25  
Values 28  
Ethics 31  
Relationships 33  
Worker-Agency 34  
Worker-Community 36  
Strategies 39  
Pre-Entry 40  
Contact and Entry 43  
Community Analysis 44  
Organization Development 45  
Popular Action 46  
Evaluation 50  
Ending 53  
Skills 55  
Visions 57  
Conclusion 61  
References 64  
Appendix 59
Introduction

Poverty is a corrosive and debilitating experience for those who are subjected to it (Burman, 1996; Cassiman, 2008; Laurie, 2008). Laurie states, “Canadians who look at poverty through the eyes of those it afflicts know the poor bear huge costs from having to live with deprivation and the stresses it imposes” (Laurie, 2008, p. 7). While deprivation takes a great toll on the individuals and families subjected to it, society bears the social costs from increased social spending on health care and other services, as well as from the lost economic and social contributions of those who are excluded (Laurie, 2008). Loosing poor children into the cycle of poverty and ghettoizing poor families into slum housing and under-resourced communities has a great cost for everyone. Despite poverty’s great cost, stagnating and deepening levels of poverty continue to persist as a social reality in Saskatchewan even with relative economic success over the past decade (Douglas & Gingrich, 2009; Gingrich, 2009; Holden, Chapin, Dyck, & Frasier, 2009). Prevailing neo-liberal social policy discourse implies economic growth, and the inclusion of an increasing number of people into casualized and low paying employment, will solve poverty and social exclusion (August, 2007). Such dominant social policies are harmful and regressive and anti-poverty activists within Saskatchewan have attempted to halt and reverse these trends.

One option that has emerged, and which has offered possibilities for a re-organizing and re-energizing of the Saskatchewan anti-poverty movement, has been the consideration of a Saskatchewan focused anti-poverty strategy. This idea is consistent with an emerging trend that advocates for comprehensive, integrated, coordinated, and accountable anti-poverty strategies (National Council of Welfare (NCW), 2007). Over the past several years anti-poverty organizers have been evaluating the benefit of pursuing an anti-poverty strategy. This evaluation has led to
the identification that a provincial anti-poverty network is needed for Saskatchewan to link the local efforts that have been underway.

I was involved in a practicum that focused on organizing a provincial anti-poverty group that has adopted the name Poverty-Free Saskatchewan. This group has intended to engage in strategic and collaborative anti-poverty policy development through establishing a diverse and cross-sectoral effort. I proposed a practicum placement to the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers (SASW) who had a strategic priority to explore an anti-poverty strategy. I saw an opportunity to extend and enhance my own skills as they relate to social justice and community organizing, while also supporting the organization to complete a work plan goal.

I developed four learning objectives for my practicum, which were built around the SASW’s plan to pursue the collective development of a provincial anti-poverty strategy:

1. To enhance skills in organizational development to support SASW to increase its capacity for social justice work.
2. To gain social justice skills as they relate to social work practice.
3. To build upon my research and writing skills.
4. To explore effective practices for collective organizing and social change.

I wanted to gain community development skills through engaging stakeholders, facilitating and organizing meetings, and developing coalition goals and work plans. I intended to develop practice skills that lead to collaborative action that enhance opportunities for positive social change.

This report will begin with an organizational overview that describes the work context of the SASW. I will then explore the ideological underpinnings and observations that guided, or challenged me, within my practicum work. Following this, I will describe the theoretical
frameworks that directed my work, which includes an overview of an anti-poverty strategy, community development theory, and a discussion about collaboration-based organizing. A discussion on values and ethical issues will follow, prior to a discussion about the role of relationships within my work. Finally, the last sections will discuss the strategies and skills I utilized and acquired as a result of my work. The paper will conclude with a discussion about future hopes and visions I hold as a social worker.

Organizational Overview

The SASW was established as a professional association and regulatory body in 1967 when the first provincial legislation regulating the Social Work profession was introduced. SASW has two main organizational purposes:

1. To act as a professional association to advance the role of social work in Saskatchewan through supporting the development of good practice, promoting the profession and pursuing social justice.

2. To regulate social work practice through the development and enforcement of regulatory standards.

These two purposes of the association coexist in a dynamic and interrelated way. Other jurisdictions, such as Ontario, have split these two functions into separate organizations; however, the SASW believes these two functions can compliment each other.

The inter-relational nature of the two sides of SASW is best identified through its four foundational pillars. These four pillars include; (a) regulating the profession, (b) supporting practice, (c) promoting the profession, and (d) pursuing social justice. The SASW’s mission statement suggests that,
The Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers is a member based organization that supports, promotes and regulates the competent, ethical practice of social work to protect the public, strengthen the profession and serve the public interest. SASW advocates for social justice and contributes to social policy. (SASW, 2009)

The values and ethics of social work practice are reflected in the SASW’s vision statement which articulates a hope for Saskatchewan where social policies reflect the values and principles of social justice, where all social work practiced in the province is accountable through regulation, where all social workers are supported in their practice, and where the profession is regarded by the public as an important contributor to human and social well-being (SASW, 2009). The association is guided by value principles that root SASW in ideals of respect for inclusivity, ethical conduct, and social justice.

An elected Council comprised of a president, president-elect, secretary, treasurer, and several members at large, including a CASW board member, oversee the association’s work. This elected Council has the decision-making authority and overall responsibility of operations. An Executive Director assists Council in these operational responsibilities. Under the Executive Director’s supervision is an office administrator and registrar. These three positions are the only paid positions within the association.

Council is supported in its decision making and planning responsibilities by meeting four times a year with an advisory board. This advisory board is comprised of about twenty members that include each member of the elected Council, committee chairpersons, and branch chairpersons. This advisory board facilitates communication between Council and the association’s members and volunteers. Council may seek advice on certain matters and may use advisory board as a way to disseminate information to the membership. The SASW’s work is supported through a number of committees that range in activity and purpose.
Since there are currently only three staff positions within the SASW, my practicum work was situated within the organizational structure as a program position. While no such position exists, this practicum was organized around the possibility that such a position might be possible in the future. My field supervisor thought it would be helpful to base the practicum on a program position model to pilot how it might work if there is a time in the future where having such a position could be financially possible. The following sections describe my practicum work within the context of this organizational structure beginning with a discussion about ideological underpinnings, and reflections that guided and challenged me, in my fieldwork.

I ideology

The experiences I had during my MSW fieldwork suggest that poverty is a very ideologically charged social justice topic. How poverty is conceptualized, defined, measured, and addressed or ignored, depends upon the ideological and theoretical lens one adopts. There is a growing body of literature suggesting that poverty results in complex and multi-dimensional social issues (Cabaj, 2009; Cassiman, 2008; Klein, Griffin Cohen, Iglika, Lee, Wallace & Young, 2009; Silver, 2009). Framing poverty as a complex issue implies there is no simple way to solve poverty. This differs from framing it as complicated, because, while complexity implies there are no simple solutions, viewing poverty as complicated implies that trying to fix it is impossible. If poverty is framed as complex this opens space for the kind of solutions that rely on integrated and comprehensive responses, and shifts away from oversimplified or uncoordinated efforts (Holden et al., 2009; Hunter, Douglas & Pederson, 2008; Klein et al., 2009). Attending to poverty and its harm is made even more complex by the ideological and discursive conceptualizations that hinder or help its profile as a relevant social issue (Cassiman, 2008). In this section, I will explore the dominant ideological conceptualizations of poverty, and
the counter-perspective put forward by social work and social justice perspectives. Following this, I will consider my own ideological underpinnings to this topic and the ideological challenges and reflections to which my fieldwork has contributed.

Dominant views of poverty are loaded with value assumptions, constraining beliefs, and judgment. Simply framed, the ideological dichotomy surrounding poverty consists of two opposing views. The first is that poverty is the result of poor choice, low motivation, and dysfunction. Burman (1996) explains that this ideology constructs poor people as paupers and is a perspective that locates poverty within the confines of an individual. Such a perspective implies that the poor lack moral development, social refinement, or have limited cognitive and behavioral functioning, rather than drawing the link between an individual’s social location and prevailing social structures. This perspective relies on structural functionalist’s (George & Wilding, 1985) assumptions that imply the makeup of capitalist society is basically rational and well organized. Those who fail within such a structure do so because of their own volition.

Such ideological assumptions run deep in the makeup of the Canadian Welfare State and appear regularly within the popular media, social policy perspectives (August, 2007), and government decision-making (Burman, 1996; Raphael, 2007). Such assumptions link back to the historical legacies of the British Poor Law (Burman, 1996; Mulvale, 1999; George & Wilding, 1985). These perspectives also make their appearance in the day-to-day discourse within communities (Cassiman, 2008; Raphael, 2007). The tendency to locate poverty within the realm of poor decision-making, individual dysfunction, and race (Silver, 2009), has achieved such popularity that to suggest otherwise can result in an immediate and heated argument.

The opposing perspective to the individualization of poverty is that poverty is inherently the byproduct of capitalism and that it has a structural source within the makeup of society.
(George & Wilding, 1985). This perspective implies that poverty is the result of social inequality, exclusion, marginalization, exploitation, and racism (Burman, 1996; George & Wilding, 1985; Silver, 2009). One way of framing these opposing perspectives is to view poverty as a private trouble as opposed to a public issue (Mills, 1959). Where people fall ideologically impacts how they relate to the issue of poverty and what solutions they might see. Thus, the concept of ideology has been important to my reflection and action during my practicum.

My personal ideological perspective is rooted in values of equity, fairness, and inclusively. I think of poverty as an ethical and moral issue. Raphael (2007) argues, “The presence of poverty among so many citizens of a wealthy industrialized nation such as Canada is not an inevitable aspect of modern life” (p. 85). He goes on to suggest there are actions and policies that can lead to real and lasting positive change in reducing or eliminating poverty. Given that poverty is not inevitable and that there are solutions available, I believe that the persistent and enduring reality of poverty is morally unacceptable. Poverty could be solved given the appropriate level of social commitment, political will, and effective policy design. There are resources enough in our country and province to ensure an adequate economic base for all families if poverty was recognized for the harm it causes individuals, and the great economic and social cost it has for society (Laurie, 2008).

Despite poverty’s chronic and stagnating persistence there are possibilities for solving it. Society has a moral obligation to address the structural conditions that lead to poverty. Conceptualizing poverty as a public issue, as opposed to an individual problem, provides the groundwork for social workers and communities to “call the political community to a sense of its
proper social responsibility to reduce the inequality of opportunity and condition that produces poverty for so many of its citizens” (Burman, 1996, p. 144).

It has become very apparent during my fieldwork that very few discussions relating to poverty are separate from the ideological conceptualizations that underpin it. Ideology can be an effective frame within which to organize like-minded people, and to identify commonalities and partnerships. It can also be a way of identifying opponents to an organizing cause. In this way ideology is constitutive as it helps conceptualize an issue and potential goals; however, ideology can also be constraining by polarizing people and preventing collective effort. It can emphasize difference rather than similarity, and it can stall action. A particular influence for my reflection on this matter has been Sterba (2001) who presents an analysis of philosophical and ideological positioning that underpins current intellectual exercise. He suggests that too often the engagement around ideological and philosophical topics is “modeled after fighting a battle or making war. Arguments are attacked, shot down (like a plane) or sunk (like a ship). Theses are defended, defeated, or demolished (like the walls of a city). Ideas (like people) are killed or destroyed” (p. 3).

Such positioning can quickly become unproductive and harmful for collective decision-making and problem solving. It can also create a barrier to organizing across differences. While it is vital to know one’s own ideological preferences, and to be aware of ideologies that have contributed to the dismantling of essential social policies that redistribute income and services, it seems that social policy makers and organizers can get caught in unhelpful ideological debate and divisions that can prevent pragmatic action. Thus, while my ideology is one that locates poverty within a social and economic, rather than psychological space, and that leads me to interpret it as an ethical and moral issue, it is also an ideology that promotes pragmatism and of
finding practical ways of moving forward. It is important that ideology not constrain possibilities for organizing, nor limit the ability to develop relationships across difference that might be helpful in effectively moving forward (Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001). However, it is also crucial that pragmatism not overtake principle. Task focused organizing that is overly interested in goal achievement has been criticized by organizers that insist on inclusive processes, making room for marginalized voice, and highlighting privilege and power imbalances (Chambers, 1983; Hardina, 2002; Rothman, 2001). In this way ideology can have a helpful role to strengthen and build important relationships and guide processes for effective organizing.

One of the most enduring organizing challenges during my fieldwork has been the engagement of people who hold significant ideological differences. One ideological challenge related to differences in viewpoint about the concept of an anti-poverty strategy. Early on in this effort there were discussions about language and about the merit of poverty reduction strategies as they exist elsewhere. There was considerable concern that adopting a poverty reduction strategy implies that some level of poverty is acceptable. Criticisms of this approach draw on concern about neo-liberal and third-way approaches that underpin current social policy (Craig & Porter, 2003). On the other hand, a perspective emerged that, while no level of poverty is acceptable, it is essential to begin somewhere. Canada has a social policy history of expanding social policy incrementally in stages over time. Several coalition members argued that engaging policy decision makers around the idea of taking manageable and measurable steps towards reducing poverty, with a goal of improvements over time, was a more realistic approach than calling for the immediate elimination of poverty.
Another example relates to discussions about how the process of adopting a strategy should occur. Some of the ideological underpinnings of organizing theory relate to social activism and lobbying efforts that draw on traditions of pressure tactics, speaking out and protest, as opposed to a collaborative and cooperative approach that engages partners from various sectors within a process of dialogue and discussion, of joint planning, and collaborative social policy development. Some people thought engaging government early and developing a dialogue was strategically compromised by giving away too much influence in the process, and watering it down. Others thought that the only way to effectively animate the development of a strategy was to engage early in a relationship with those who drive policy and make decisions, and to avoid contention and positioning.

Other times where I noticed the role of ideology at play were when I was in discussion with government employees and political leaders. Ideological divides can be very apparent, I discovered, while in conversation with a provincial cabinet minister. I was in the midst of explaining the SASW’s social policy principles that are underpinned by a human rights perspective that calls for a basic standard of living for every Saskatchewan resident. The Minister responded with clear disagreement and challenged this perspective with an ideological position that people would lose motivation, and make poor choices, if they were not compelled to participate in paid labour out of financial need and incentive. She cited examples from her own experience and observations to support her position that significantly contradicted my own perspective.

At this time, it felt to me that an ideological chasm had presented itself in our discussion dividing our relative positions so greatly that I did not know how to proceed. I heard these comments as an expression of moralistic and individualizing discourses which:
views poverty as reflecting the motivational and moral failings of those who are poor. Poverty is a cultural phenomenon whereby people living in poverty come to be so by virtue of lacking skills and adopting deviant habits…Related to this discourse is concern about overly generous welfare and…creating dependency and precluding motivation to join the active workforce. (Raphael, 2007, p. 14)

Being faced with such a clear example of this discourse, which represents current social policy and welfare reform, I was challenged to find an effective way to address the minister’s comments in a constructive way. I responded with arguments to counter this perspective that draw from human rights and social exclusion perspectives. However, upon reflection, I think effective ways to address such a blatant and unproductive ideological position might also be found in arguments and ways of talking about poverty that are more closely aligned with their way of thinking. If those who influence social policy are strongly influenced by moralistic and individualized views about poverty, then perhaps a more strategic approach could be developing an economic argument for solving poverty drawing on the economic and social costs of poverty. Finding ways to diminish the ideological polarization between differing groups is an essential strategy for generating joint solutions, however, anti-poverty groups also need to find ways to shift the prevailing moralistic discourses.

Sometimes, those who make policy decisions rely heavily on their own experience-near perspectives and this closes off space for discussion. It is necessary to spend some time in this terrain because at some point the solutions that we want to develop do rely on narrowing the gap in our mutual ideological approach to poverty. Such experiences have led me to wonder how to avoid ideological landmines so that we can move towards a proactive direction rather than being stuck on either side of an ideological divide. This has been a source of frustration and reflection within my fieldwork, and a topic I think is important in all organizing work.
Now that I have explored the role of ideology in (a) framing the issue of poverty as either a personal or social construct, (b) perspectives about its solutions that rely on either reforming individuals or society, and (c) the challenges ideological differences have in organizing, I will move on to placing my practicum fieldwork within a theoretical context.

Theory

Across the country, poverty remains a persistent social concern. Similar to other provinces, poverty in Saskatchewan has continued at chronic rates despite our relative prosperity and economic growth (Douglas & Gingrich, 2009; CCPA-MB, 2009; Klein et al., 2009). A recent report by Douglas and Gingrich (2009) argues that when it comes to children’s poverty “no deep or consistent improvement is evident over time” (p. 1). In particular, poverty in Saskatchewan is highly over represented by Aboriginal families with 45.1% of Aboriginal children being poor (Douglas & Gingrich, 2009). Similarly, immigrant families and lone parent, female-headed households are over-represented within poverty (Douglas & Gingrich, 2009). The gap between the rich and poor is also growing in Saskatchewan suggesting that redistributive mechanisms, and other social policy efforts, traditional to the Canadian welfare state have been significantly downgraded, or are no longer adequate in maintaining even a relative balance between those who have and those who do not. (Gingrich, 2009). Gingrich’s (2009) study also points to a deepening of poverty for those who are the very poorest, thus, the rich are getting richer while, literally, the poor are becoming poorer. Clearly, current trends suggest that poverty is worsening and has remained stubbornly persistent despite governmental rhetoric that Saskatchewan residents are better off than ever before.

There are multiple ways to define poverty that range from absolute to relative conceptualizations. Some definitions of poverty rely solely on income measurement, while
others take social exclusion aspects into account. Raphael (2007) argues “Poverty is about experiencing material and social deprivation that leads to the inability to participate in the activities assumed to be customary in a modern industrialized nation” (p. 47). Thus, harm caused by poverty includes both the deprivation of resources to access basic needs such as food and housing, but also results from exclusion and marginalization from participation in social and political aspects of community life (Raphael, 2007). This understanding of poverty requires a more holistic solution that relies on a level of coordination and comprehensiveness that addresses both the material and social dimensions of poverty (Silver, 2009).

Over the past several years, there has been an increasing interest in pursuing a more comprehensive and integrated approach to anti-poverty organizing by groups and organizations working on poverty in Saskatchewan. It is becoming increasingly clear that a strategic and coordinated response is crucial if there is any hope to shift poverty rates out of their current stagnation, which ultimately requires a significant turn in thinking and commitment from governments and communities. In this way, Saskatchewan anti-poverty organizers have become interested in what Leviten-Reid (2009) describes as, “comprehensive community initiatives intentionally set out to address a wide range of issues and their relationship to one another” (p. 2). Across the globe the trend towards integrated and comprehensive anti-poverty initiatives have been emerging over the past ten years (NCW, 2007; Craig and Porter, 2003). The anti-poverty strategy model has presented itself as a social policy framework to consider by anti-poverty groups, and in 2007 the exploration of an anti-poverty strategy appeared on the strategic plan of the SASW.

The trend of stagnating poverty rates, increases in the gap between wealthy and poor families, and the growing depth of poverty of marginalized groups is a trend across the whole
country. This is particularly startling given an all-party resolution by the House of Commons in 1989 (Campaign 2000, 2009). This resolution committed to eliminate child poverty by 2000. Despite this unanimous, all party commitment and the economic growth of the past two decades, poverty rates continue at dramatic and chronic rates. As an anti-poverty strategy is considered for Saskatchewan, the Campaign 2000 experience should be noted and factored into the provincial planning to take place. Campaign 2000 (2009) continues to call on governments to address the unmet commitments from 1989 through lobbying for:

A comprehensive plan to make Canada poverty-free including public policy and labour market strategies to prevent families from falling into poverty. The plan needs to have a clear timetable, transparent accountability that can show progress, and describe a role for community participation, particularly with low-income people. (p. 1)

There is little or no evidence to suggest governments committing to new strategies will produce lasting results when after two decades the federal government has not lived up to its 1989 commitment. However, there is a trend by Canadian provinces towards adopting provincial strategies, and a perspective that properly constructed and implemented, they could have an impact on poverty rates (NCW, 2007).

While there has been some contention and disagreement around anti-poverty strategies, there are a number of recent research documents that recommend comprehensive and collaborative social policy efforts. For example, the National Council of Welfare prepared a survey report entitled Solving Poverty (2007) that suggests, “if there is no long-term vision, no plan, no one accountable for carrying out the plan, no resources assigned and no accepted measure of results, we will continue to be mired in poverty for generations” (NCW, p. 17). This national report is supplemented by a number of Saskatchewan research documents recommending comprehensive and strategic action. For instance, Hunter, Douglas and Pederson (2007) outline the increasing depth of poverty within Saskatchewan despite the normative
measures of economic prosperity over the last decade. They suggest one important step in addressing poverty is through the development of a strategic and cross-sectoral action plan:

The development of a comprehensive strategic action plan would involve governments, community-based organizations, business, labour and the poor themselves. It would be a long term, persistent plan with well-defined goals and responsibilities, and it would demonstrate that poverty is not inevitable or the fault of the individual but a deep-seated structural issue requiring collective action. (Hunter et al., 2008, p. 9)

Other Saskatchewan reports have pointed to a need for a comprehensive strategy including Holden, Chapin, Dyck, and Fraser’s (2009) report published through the Canadian Council on Social Development, which argues that Saskatchewan is missing a “comprehensive plan to provide focus for the effort to eliminate poverty. Innovative research, organizations, programming and collaboration…could be tied into a provincial plan to address poverty that would include specific targets and monitor progress over the long term” (p. 22). Two recent Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Saskatchewan research reports (Gingrich, 2009; Weimer, 2009) argue for the development of a coordinated and strategic effort mirroring other jurisdictions, but specifically designed to the Saskatchewan context.

Finally, and most thoroughly, is the example of the detailed and comprehensive health disparity report published by the Saskatoon Health Region (Lemstra & Neudorf, 2007) which makes an unequivocal link between health outcomes and poverty, and suggests the most important policy matter to decrease health disparities is through the development of a multi-year targeted plan to address poverty that includes goals and targets, outcome measurement and accountability mechanisms (Lemstra & Neudorf, 2007). Lemstra and Neudorf’s report includes forty-six evidenced-based policy options that pave a possible roadmap for policy implementation. These various research studies are among the many influences that have led
interest in Saskatchewan to consider whether it is time to pursue a more comprehensive and targeted anti-poverty framework.

*What is an Anti-Poverty Strategy?*

Various groups connected to social policy advocacy and anti-poverty organizing across Saskatchewan have discussed the merits and drawbacks of an anti-poverty strategy over the past several years. What has been confirmed for me during my practicum work is that the province does not have a clear direction or plan for addressing poverty. There are a number of social policy mechanisms and programs in place that either help or hinder those who experience poverty; for example, programs and services such as the Social Assistance Program, social housing programs, and public healthcare versus corporate tax cuts and decreased public spending (Holden et al., 2009). However, what is missing is a firm commitment to end poverty, and in this way, ideological and political motivations become apparent. The government has extremely limited motivation to end poverty because poverty serves a functional purpose within the current market driven economy as it relates to unemployment rates and inflation, the generation of a friendly investment climate, and the subsidization of big business. Government responds to business and market interests, over the interests of marginalized and disenfranchised people, because it is strongly informed by neo-liberal and free-market discourses and the interests of the wealthy business class. This commitment to a neo-liberal hegemony (George, 1997) makes it hard to motivate governments to take action on poverty. However, I believe one way to mobilize new energy by anti-poverty activists to challenge regressive and inadequate social policy is to pursue the development of a strategy that is based upon effective social policy mechanisms which are inter-linked and coordinated. Work on such a strategy could help anti-poverty
activists be clear about what they are calling for and could aide in discussion and debate with government policy makers.

An important feature of an anti-poverty strategy is that it be designed with attention to effective social policy mechanisms, accountability structures and measurement, as opposed to it serving as a government marketing tool. There are a number of necessary features required for the establishment of an effective anti-poverty strategy that ensure effective social policy. These features are primarily based on the four cornerstones that the National Council of Welfare (2007) has promoted based on their research of common factors of effective anti-poverty strategies:

1. The establishment of a long-term vision and measurable targets and timelines.
2. A plan of action and budget that coordinates initiatives within and across government and other partners.
3. A government accountability structure to ensure results, and for consulting in the design, implementation, and evaluation by those who are affected by social policy.
4. The establishment of widely agreed upon poverty indicators that will be used to plan, monitor change and assess progress.

An anti-poverty strategy is a comprehensive social policy plan to address the complex structural and multi-dimensional contributors to poverty through implementing a coordinated and cross-governmental effort to eliminate poverty. This approach is different from other policy approaches because it links together the often-complex framework, and broad scope of essential policies, programs and services meant to address poverty, for example, access to adequate financial benefits, affordable and adequate housing, living wages, community health and social services. Torjman (2008) suggests that “Because there is no single measure that fully addresses the problem, a robust poverty strategy involves a combination of safety net elements that help
offset the impact of low income and springboard components that create opportunities for success over the longer term” (p. 2). An anti-poverty strategy differs from other poverty initiatives through its establishment of poverty reduction targets (a goal to reduce poverty by a pre-set amount) and timelines (by a pre-set date) (CCPA-MB, 2009). It also requires the commitment to measure whether or not progress is being made towards the goals and timelines.

An important component of an anti-poverty strategy is accountability to make sure it is working. Once goals are set, progress is measured to ensure that people are being positively affected by the social policy initiatives. If positive progress is not demonstrated, the government is responsible to address this with a more aggressive response. An effective anti-poverty strategy can only be established, and adequately monitored, through the collaborations of multiple ministries and through the engagement of multiple sectors, including community groups. For this to work a shift would need to occur in the priority poverty holds for governments. The current trend is for poverty to worsen rather than improve and, thus, a key strategic question is how to get accountability and follow through from governments. For example, the 1989 House of Commons unanimous all-party resolution, which committed to eliminating poverty by the year 2000, was a clear commitment that produced severely limited results (Campaign 2000, 2009).

In this way, an anti-poverty strategy has possible merit as a social policy option through linking measurements, accountability, targets, and collaboration between ministries and sectors. A good anti-poverty strategy would be an integrated, cross-ministerial and cross-sectoral response. It might include anti-poverty legislation such as Quebec’s (Noel, 2002), and it should prove early and lasting success. However, my practicum was primarily based around community and anti-poverty organizing strategies. I was interested in using the interest community groups
and anti-poverty organizers expressed about an anti-poverty strategy as a catalyst for organizing a provincial network. Using an anti-poverty strategy as a concrete and tangible project helped engage a diverse group of anti-poverty organizers around a meeting table, and acted as a way to tie together the diverse work and voice of the Saskatchewan anti-poverty movement. Questions about the potential benefits and drawbacks of pursuing an anti-poverty strategy have become a central focus for Poverty-Free Saskatchewan. My role was to support the organization of this group so that the group can make a clear determination about whether or not an anti-poverty strategy should be pursued, and how it should be constructed.

Utilizing an anti-poverty strategy as a way to explore new possibilities for effective anti-poverty organizing was a primary focus of my practicum. Community development theory helped frame this community engagement goal and supported the development of a new community-based coalition. Advocacy theory and collaboration theory helped frame discussions with government and supported the development of relationships across differences. The next section outlines the theory I utilized to support the organizing work I engaged in within my fieldwork.

*Community Development Theory*

Social work has a long history of basing its interventions within a theoretical context and recognizing the environmental, cultural, and political context of the problems experienced by those who access social work services. Many social work interventions draw on theories of community organizing. Community organizing has a distinct theoretical base of its own (Hardina, 2002), even though it has a strong affiliation to social work. For the purpose of this section, the terms community development and community organizing will be used interchangeably.
Hardina (2002) suggests that “in community practice we utilize practice models to link theories about how society functions to our intervention plans” (p. 45). She suggests that “In community organization, we use theories to understand how communities function, how residents adapt to change, how to influence government policy decisions, and how people can be organized to take power” (Hardina, 2002, p. 45). Burman (1996) argues that the intention of community development is fundamentally different in its anti-poverty work than models are based on anti-pauperism, which encourage interventions to reform individuals. Solutions and strategies for poverty center on communities accessing greater power and influence in re-shaping the social structures that create poverty and inequality. Lee (1999) defines community organizing as “a social intervention which seeks to maximize the ability of disadvantaged people to influence their environment, by developing the power to: acquire resources; change inadequate institutions and laws; or build new ones, more responsive to their needs and those of all human beings” (p. 55). He goes on to explain that community organization is carried on in a social and political world with a goal to shift power to those who traditionally have less influence and to reclaim power from those whom traditionally hold more influence (Lee, 1999).

Rothman (2001) outlines three conceptualizations of community development practice models: (a) locality development, (b) social planning, and (c) social action. Locality development “presupposes that community change should be pursued through broad participation by a spectrum of people at the local community level” (Rothman, 2001, p. 29). This approach to community development engages a clearly defined community in matters that are particular to their demographic and geographic location. An example might be an urban core neighborhood or a city block. Rothman (2001) argues that locality development should foster community building through promoting internal leadership and capacity development, as well as
pursuing social integration. Locality development is “humanistic and strongly people-oriented, with the aim of ‘helping people to help themselves’” (Rothman, 2001, p. 30). A key aspect of this approach relates to the organizer engaging community members in relationship development amongst diverse groups.

The second method of community development is social planning, which differs from locality development by taking a more top down approach. Social planning relies on “expert knowledge”, research data is prioritized, and the organizer is centered as an expert. Rothman (2001) suggests social planning “emphasizes a technical process of problem solving regarding substantive social problems…This particular orientation to planning is data-driven and conceives of carefully calibrated change being rooted in social science thinking and empirical objectivity” (p. 31). This model relies on the planner having a considerable amount of time and resources to do the work. The planner also interacts directly with the policy decision makers on behalf of the community. Very little attention is given to engaging local members other than as potential research subjects or participants in the broader process initiated by the planning agency.

The third mode of community development is referred to as social action. Rothman (2001) suggests that this approach “presupposes the existence of an aggrieved or disadvantaged segment of the population that needs to be organized in order to make demands on the larger community for increased resources or equal treatment” (p. 33). The organizer’s role here is to empower the poor and the oppressed (Rothman, 2001). This approach is ultimately interested in achieving goals or accomplishments, and might diminish the importance of process matters such as relationship development, building consensus, engaging diversity and managing differences. Hardina argues “One of the limitations of this model is that some practitioners may limit their practice activities to those that require confrontation in all situations. This may result in further
polarization of all parties involved and make it very difficult for the desired outcome to be achieved” (Hardina, 2002, p. 70). However, Rothman (2001) points to an emerging diversity in the strategies that organizers might employ when planning for social action. Organizers “have expanded their strategy bent beyond the confrontational style, and ‘new wave’ organizing now employs a wider range of adversarial tactics” (Rothman, 2001, p. 34).

Rothman reflects upon various revisions to these three models over time, claiming “there is more complexity and variation than I had first perceived” (p. 27). He goes on to say:

I thought of the three approaches, or models, as ideal-types. They did not exist to a large extent in pristine, full-blown form in the real world, but were useful mental tools...Over time I have come to deemphasize or soften the notion of ‘models’...and to accent the overlap and intermixture among the approaches. (Rothman, 2001, p. 28)

Hardina (2002) also suggests that it is possible to utilize a mixed approach that draws on elements of each community organizing modality, while Lee (1999) utilizes a pragmatic approach. It is clear that each modality has its merits and potential drawbacks, and the organizer’s task is to find ways to engage in relationship development and be process oriented, while also having planning skills and expertise to support the problem and solution identification necessary for the group. In addition, finding strategies to influence change at a social action level is also important with an eye to what is effective given the issue and group in question. One way that these modalities can be distinguished from each other is the ways in which they engage the community in question and how participatory the organizer is in bringing voice, or engaging voice from the grassroots. Rothman (2001) suggests that a practitioner should take care to assess which models might appropriate given the intervention context. He suggests, “the practitioner takes an analytical, problem-solving stand and does not become the rigidified captive of a particular ideological or methodological approach to practice” (Rothman, 2001, p. 44).
At various times during my practicum I felt confused about where my work fit into these three modalities. My intention was to take a pragmatic approach, to engage a group of people with similarities, and at times differences, around a joint project of influencing policy. There were features of each of these approaches in the work I did. Clearly my work was influenced by the social planning modality. The community with which I engaged wanted to organize an effort in a way that might have some credibility in influencing policy. This took research and engagement with policy decision makers. Thus, the anti-poverty strategy concept was largely initiated by a professional group of advocates and researchers.

However, there have also been aspects of locality development. A lot of my time and energy has been directed to establishing relationships, and bringing and keeping people together around this issue. At times I was spending so much more time on relationship development and process matters, such as establishing organizational structure and terms of reference, that I worried we were loosing sight of the goal we wanted to achieve. At other times it was clear that our efforts were solidly located within the social action approach. We were organizing a group to leverage increased credibility and power and planning for ways to directly influence government. There were many times of tension between these three approaches as well.

At times members of the group had a strong interest in the social action strategies of applying pressure on government to act on poverty. This contrasted with social planning needs that require a more cooperative and engaged process with government to attempt to find ways of talking about poverty issues and launching our ideas about solutions. At other times locality development principles were very clear in our attempts to engage people with lived experience of poverty into the process. These very same people expressed frustration about wanting to move towards goals, while also focusing on process matters. It has been a very insightful process to
watch this initiative unfold, and to experience the dynamic nature of organizing and the interconnection and synergy between these various modalities.

Community development has strong roots in social change movements and often relies on tactics of pressure and opposition. Traditional tactics and strategies of community development have proven to have their place in resisting oppression and marginalization. Hardina (2002) describes several values that underpin community-organizing practice. She suggests social transformation is a primary goal, raising critical consciousness about social and economic conditions is vital, and community organizing practice is focused on increasing the power of marginalized groups. Alinsky (1971) is a social action strategist who provides tools for organizers that place pressure and discomfort upon those who have power in order to influence positive change. Hardina (2002) argues “Working with people to gain power requires the use of confrontation tactics, targeting powerful groups in society” (p. 18). The community organizer has a range of strategies to choose from, and this requires forethought and assessment to determine what the community and issues require.

The SASW has affirmed a position of relationship-based advocacy and collaborative approaches to guide its social justice mandate. In this way, the organizational context of my practicum influenced the strategies and modalities that informed my practice in the field. Their preference for collaborative social policy development and partnership was important to pay attention to if increased capacity for social justice work was going to be successful. I intended to assist SASW in exploring options for engaging around issues relating to their social justice mandate in ways that coordinate with their other mandates. In this way SASW would only be willing to find ways to influence social policy that fit their values of collaboration and relationship building. I felt that this type of contribution to the anti-poverty strategy work was
something that could be helpful in leading collaboration and partnership with community groups and government. However, questions remain about whether or not these tactics will produce results from the government to address poverty, given the long history of government commitments that have failed to produce any meaningful change to poverty rates (Campaign 2000, 2009). However, if other tactics beyond a collaborative approach are required, Poverty-Free Saskatchewan will be able to take the lead and organize this over time. The following section will explore collaboration theory as it relates to community development, social policy development and advocacy.

**Collaboration Theory**

The use of an anti-poverty strategy as a catalyst for anti-poverty organizing during my practicum was based on a social policy framework drawing on anti-poverty strategies as they exist in other Canadian regions. Establishing a strategy for Saskatchewan could be modeled after a collaborative social policy development process where community members would have the opportunity to guide and inform anti-poverty social policy (Caledon Institute on Social Policy, 2009). There is a growing trend towards collaborative engagement as it relates to community organizing and social policy development and, “Working collaboratively across organizational, sectoral, and even national boundaries is now a popular component of organizational life” (Vangen & Huxam, 2003, p. 5).

Collaborative responses often refer to inter-organizational approaches. One type of inter-organizational response is coalition building. Vangen and Huxam (2003) suggest “The aim is usually to deal more effectively with major issues that sit in the organizations; ‘inter-organizational domain and that cannot be tackled by any organization acting alone. Increasingly, therefore, the cooperation between public, private, and voluntary sector organizations for the
benefit of the public at large is demanded” (p. 5-6). Barlow (2007) argues that an increased level of sophistication is required within strategic and effective community organization:

To accomplish any meaningful goal, social justice advocates must develop the capacity to formulate, influence, and implement government policies, often, the policy questions are complex and highly technical issues, requiring advocates to master specialized skills. And, just as important, advocates must master the art of politics, seeking the most effective ways to bring pressure to bear on government agencies and corporations. Social justice advocacy thus requires far more than protest politics – it requires the acquisition of considerable knowledge, power, and access to institutionalized resources. (p. 2)

He questions how community-based advocates can significantly increase their capacity to impact social policy and government decision making on issues that affect their communities at a time of growing hostility towards social justice issues (Barlow, 2007). He argues that the answer to this question “lies in the development of a sophisticated notion of collaborative social justice work, based on community empowerment in which professionals play an integral part” (Barlow, 2007, p. 5). Such perspectives imply that for complex and multi-dimensional issues, such as poverty, the strategies and tactics utilized require a level of forethought and strategic approach that go beyond protest and pressure.

However, framing both poverty and advocacy as sophisticated and complex risks minimizing the participation and involvement of the groups and individuals most affected by poverty. Anti-poverty organizers need to be mindful that they do not produce a complexity and technicality of approach to organizing that marginalizes the poor from identifying the issues and experiences of their own concern. However, the requirement for strategic and coordinated organizing seems even more important in the face of entrenching neo-liberal discourses and the normalizing of ideologies manufactured through a very organized and strategic right-wing movement (George, 1997).
Organizing strategies that privilege collaborative approaches also need to be unpacked. Authentic and meaningful consultation with government is hard to achieve because they privilege the perspective of business communities over the perspectives of the poor. Arnstein (1969) draws a distinction between citizen control and manipulation and argues “There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process” (p. 2). Organizers interested in engaging in collaborative relationships with government need to be aware that participating in such partnerships can be highly unproductive. Arnstein (1969) describes a framework for citizen participation that draws a distinction between nonparticipation, tokenism and citizen power. She cautions that government consultation can often result in placation and restrict citizen participation from engagement in real change because of significant power imbalances. Arnstein (1969) argues that true citizen partnership is based on leveraging power and making mutual tradeoffs. True collaboration requires the redistribution of power from those with the most influence to less powerful groups and requires authentic negotiation with citizens. For this citizen groups require bargaining power. Ultimately this is a challenge that persists within community-government relationships, and it seems often community groups compromise most within a collaborative relationship.

This section has explored the role of an anti-poverty strategy as both a social policy and community organizing tool. I have outlined the aspects of community development and collaboration theory that have contributed to the approach I used in my practicum fieldwork. In later sections, the strategies that these theoretical frameworks led to will be discussed further, but first I will explore the role of values and values conflicts within my practicum fieldwork.
Values

The purpose of this section is to explore the role of values within social work practice and to reflect upon the role of my personal and professional value base within my fieldwork at SASW. Social work is fundamentally rooted in a value base that has historically positioned itself as unique and committed to making the world a fairer and more equitable place. As Hardina (2002) suggests “Social work is built around a value base that makes it distinct from other professions” (p. 17). While most professions that follow a code of ethics will articulate a value base upon which to establish ethical behaviour, social work is unique in its explicit endorsement of social justice principles. Hardina (2002), referencing Reamer (1999), suggests that this endorsement of the value for social justice unites all fields of social work practice. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005) is the frame within which ethical practice is based within Saskatchewan. The CASW Code of Ethics “is consistent with the International Federation of Social Workers (ISIF) International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work (1994, 2004), which requires members of the CASW to uphold the values and principles established by both the CASW and the IFSW” (2005, p. 2). The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) outlines four overarching values that include; respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, and integrity of professional practice.

Ethical social work practice relies upon the social worker to be fully aware of her or his values as they relate to social location. At times in my fieldwork when I was aligning with the social work value that “Social workers uphold the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic human needs…[and]…Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits” (CASW, 2005), I have found it critically important to have awareness
about my own social position. My social location is one that privileges me as a white, middle-
class, professional male. When I speak on the issue of poverty, I am aware that I belong to a
privileged group. I have power and benefit as a result of my social location. Ethically, I feel I
have an obligation to acknowledge my social location and do what I can to diminish the social
distance between me and those who are situated in a less privileged social location. At various
times, particularly in consultation with those who live within or experience poverty, I was
acutely aware of my own position within society and felt very uneasy about it. I knew, and
received feedback, about “professionals and their ideas” and of the importance of hearing
directly from those whom are experts about the topic of poverty, which, are those who
experience poverty everyday.

At other times, in tracing my own value system, while acknowledging the cultural and
socio-political underpinnings that drive it, I have noticed that ultimately my value system is also
influenced beyond my white, middle-class and male social location. I grew up on a farm in rural
Saskatchewan. My upbringing was one that consisted of clear value systems of hard-work and
rural austerity within the context of a large, and interconnected, family and community. I know
that these values and experiences contribute greatly to how I see the world, social work and
myself. My experiences in rural Saskatchewan drive two significant values-based reflections.
One is that my place of privilege as a middle-class male is a significantly different social location
because of my rural heritage than it would be had I been the son of a banker or oil tycoon. The
rural experience has traditionally been one of hardship, independence, and community
interdependence, and this ultimately informs my second observation about my values as they
relate to community. This observation helps me identify my intrinsic value for interconnected
community, a value that proposes that as individuals we all have responsibility to those with
whom we share our neighborhood, town or city, province and country. We have responsibility to help and support and take care of each other. Reflection on my own value system helps me better locate my practice within the context and value system of the social work profession.

The third point that must be made about my personal experience, in navigating values and values conflict within the context of my fieldwork, relates to the topic of collaboration. Hardina (2002) suggests that the ultimate goal of community organizing practice is to address the unequal access to power that marginalized groups have, suggesting that community organizing should never sustain oppressive systems. She argues “Working with people to gain power requires the use of confrontation tactics, targeting powerful groups in society. Gaining recognition from the public and access to decision making often requires tactics that make the targets uncomfortable” (p. 18).

For me, this conceptualization of practice for community organizing engages a value conflict and dilemma. On the one hand, I recognize the systems of oppression and control, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism, that perpetuate marginalization, discrimination and unequal access to power and opportunity. There is a long history of organizing and social movements that bravely stood up to those who possess power to reclaim self-determination and autonomy over their experience of marginalization. However, on the other hand, I have a strong value for cooperation, relationship building, and collaboration. My personal style tends towards ways of working together rather than towards conflict. I recognize that this personal preference relates to my relatively privileged social location.

A crucial aspect of anti-oppressive social work is to be aware of ones own influences by their social location and to act with the oppressed to stand up to their oppressor. One aspect of such an anti-oppressive approach is to recognize “that poverty erodes people’s energy and hope
to mobilize and protest” (Burman, 1996, p. 152). This knowledge requires the organizer to act as a catalyst to help the “massive mobilization of people to win economic, political and social opportunities for the poor” (Burman, 1996, p. 152) required for true poverty reform. Here Burman (1996) draws a distinction between two conceptualizations of anti-poverty activism. He suggests that anti-poverty organizing fundamentally recognizes the need for structural change, however, the approaches to achieve this range from moderate to more radical. Burman (1996) suggests that the moderate anti-poverty activist maintains a more positive approach “about dialogue and collaboration than the radicals. The vision here is a broad coalition of the poor and those in the middle class and positions of influence in order to improve societal conditions” (Burman, 1996, p. 152). I notice my values, and the values of the SASW, align more closely with a moderate approach, which anticipates possibilities for a reorganization and redistribution of wealth and power through leveraging changes to social policies and systems in the favour of the oppressed. The diversity of Poverty-Free Saskatchewan makes room for members to consider options from a spectrum of possibilities, ranging form moderate to radical, and a successful anti-oppressive movement would ensure that both sides of the spectrum are represented.

Ethics

Values and ethics have a close relationship whereby values underpin ethical behaviour, drive ethical decision-making, and possibly cloud objectiveness in ethical judgment. I frequently reflected upon professional and personal ethics during my practicum. Such ethical exploration and reflection had me considering my own ethical role in doing practicum fieldwork on such a broad issue as poverty. Since my intention was to assist in the exploration and decision making around moving forward with a provincial anti-poverty strategy, I have had to reflect upon my
own ethical role within this. Academically, there are several requirements that the University of Regina and Faculty of Social Work expect me to meet. Organizationally, there were a number of priorities that the SASW holds. In addition the broader community-based network also holds priorities and expectations about the anti-poverty initiative. At times I noticed contradicting needs as a result of my relationship to these various organizations and have had to make decisions in the most ethical way possible.

First, I had to explore my ethical role within this initiative as a practicum student with a clear end date to my fieldwork. As I mentioned earlier, I came to this initiative through a long involvement with several groups and through my direct social work practice experiences. When I began the practicum, I was to facilitate an exploration and dialogue to extend discussions that have occurred over the past few years. It was immediately apparent and important to me that I needed to ensure that the process the SASW and I were engaging in was not “my process”, even though I did have an academic process that the university required of me, nor for it to be an “SASW process”, even though the SASW had interest in having a meaningful role to play in the development of a comprehensive anti-poverty initiative. Ethically, I believed that the process needed to be a collective one. It needed to be a community-based effort with a diverse voice, collective ownership and participation, and rooted in accountability to people who are marginalized and living in poverty. Thus, I found it necessary to be very clear that the end goal of my engagement in this effort was not simply so that I can take advantage of an opportunity that would help me pass my practicum and acquire my degree. My intention, rather, was to engage in a process of learning and reflection, and to contribute to the development of something that might exist beyond the confines of my practicum and perhaps make a difference over the
long run. Thus, an essential ethical matter was to contribute to the development of a capacity within the community-based initiative that could exist beyond December 2009.

In order to support the capacity development I have described, I had to reflect upon and balance the requirements of fulfilling my learning objectives and requirements of the practicum in a way that supported capacity development. I soon selected a practice strategy that helped me to consider my positioning in relation to the work. This positioning derives from the work of White and Epston (1990) in their reflection about power dynamics and influence within practice. They describe a quadrant of professional positioning that includes being centred and de-centred and influential and non-influential. I have selected a de-centred and influential position for my community work. This position represents a practice approach that contributed to ways in which I could have a positive influence in supporting the development of an initiative, without centering my interests, opinions, ideology or belief. This ethical positioning encouraged me to distance myself from assuming too much influence on the direction of the group, or doing all the work on behalf of the group. Rather, I attempted to utilize skills of listening and supporting, rather than directing and informing. While attempting to de-center my own interests and beliefs, I also found ways to be influential through facilitating collective exploration and participation and to animate community discussions that engaged the knowledge and skills of the participants. This de-centered and influential positioning reflects Hardina’s (2002) perspective that “The primary purpose of community organization practice is empowerment” (p. 18).

Relationships

Social work practice is fundamentally built upon the importance of effective relationship building skills. The SASW values a relationship-based approach and has worked with care and attention over the years to establish strong alliances with policy decision makers. These
alliances have been nurtured based on a perspective by the SASW that its role is best expressed through engaging in discussing and promoting social policy to reflect social work principles. The challenge has been to move these consultations with government beyond tokenism (Arnstein, 1969) to actual change. My practicum supervisor and I had a number of conversations about the role of good relationships within social change work, and I had an opportunity to think about relationship-based advocacy in a new and deeper way. I know from my other professional experiences, primarily direct-practice social work, that nothing of merit is possible without the development of strong relationships. It is this direct-practice experience that enabled me to reflect upon the role of relationship within community development work. My role required the effective relationship development across differences and diversity. I also had to develop a relationship with my host organization. Beyond that it was necessary to develop relationships with the multiple stakeholders and community members for the initiative. The following section will look at the topic of relationships in two sections; worker-agency and worker-community.

Worker-Agency

The relationship I spent most time reflecting upon and attending to was my relationship with SASW. In some ways, the work of developing a relationship with SASW, and my supervisor, had already been well established. I have been an actively involved member of the SASW for a number of years, and have been a member of the Social Justice Committee within the association. I also had met and attended meetings with the president and Council members and advisory board members. Thus, I was not a stranger to the association. However, my relationship to the organization as a practicum student required attention to a number of factors that I did not have to consider as a volunteer member. As a practicum student I assumed a new role similar to a staff person with responsibilities to the organization’s policies and procedures.
This increased level of accountability required a level of consultation and a change within our relationship. I was very aware of this at the beginning of the practicum, and my supervisor and I spoke of this. In particular we explored my volunteer role as the co-chair person of the social justice committee, and clarified the parameters of the work within these various roles, and set clear boundaries for my practicum work to be completed within.

I found it very interesting to be developing a different kind of relationship with the Executive Director. We previously worked fairly closely, but suddenly I found myself being supervised by a person who was previously a colleague. I found this transition happened in a way that was quite comfortable, but I made sure to prepare myself for the implications of this change. I was always treated as a skilled colleague who had something meaningful to contribute, however, I was very aware of my place within an organizational structure that required me to place my work and activity within the context of decision making processes and hierarchy.

Thus, I spent considerable energy in being aware of my relationship to SASW. I regularly updated and consulted with my supervisor, who provided very experienced and thoughtful direction and advice. He listened and asked questions to help elicit my own knowledge and skills, and expressed his commitment in a way that showed me he understood that the practicum experience was about advancing and developing my skills. He was extremely generous in supporting me through granting freedom and autonomy, while also being available to help out when I needed some direction or focus. I was able to determine that establishing an effective relationship with my supervisor was one way to establish an effective relationship with the organization.

However, I also considered it important to develop good relationships to Council and advisory board. I wanted to share my work and experiences with them and gain feedback. I did
this by attending several meetings, presenting my work, and engaging in discussions about poverty and effective change. I found the association’s membership and leaders very positive about what I was doing and have felt very lucky to have this opportunity. However, my relationship to the SASW was not always easy to identify. Because I have been actively involved amongst several groups, it could sometimes be difficult to articulate whom my work was most responsible to. In this next section I will explore my relationship to community and how I could feel, at times, like I needed to hold multiple positions in relationship to the work I was doing.

Worker-Community

On the first day of my practicum I attended a Regina Anti-Poverty Network meeting (RAPN), of which I have been a member for the past several years. One of my colleagues shared that I was starting a practicum that day with the SASW and that one of my intentions was to organize a provincial coalition. The development of a provincial group had long been of interest to RAPN and the network members were very enthusiastic. However, their enthusiasm soon created one of my first relationship-based dilemmas. I immediately began to feel very pressured. Everyone had ideas about what I should spend my practicum time doing. There were lots of very good ideas about compiling research and statistics, about doing all kinds of writing and document preparation and of possibilities for driving all over the province. I began to feel that RAPN members thought that I was “their very own” practicum student. I could relate to this enthusiasm, because as a volunteer I had often thought how nice it would be to have some staff support. However, I was feeling a squeeze between their expectations of my practicum and my own, and between SASW’s expectations and theirs’. I noticed that I had to be quite assertive about my relationship to my practicum organization, and to clarify my relationship as a
practicum student and organizer within this initiative to RAPN. I used that as an opportunity to engage this network in generating ideas about how to move forward in a collective way to establish the provincial network that had been of interest for so long. I clarified that my work was accountable to SASW, but also that my work would be amongst multiple groups, that I would do whatever I could to support the development of capacity and direction, and, while my practicum work was situated within SASW, the initiative was situated amongst multiple groups.

Later, as the provincial network, Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, became established I felt similar pressures. As an organizer I felt that many members looked at me to do work on behalf of the provincial network. I also felt a clear influence from SASW that my work was on behalf of them. This is a frequent dilemma for organizers (Lee, 1999) and I had to maintain clear boundaries with a commitment to the community group as a key stakeholder I was accountable to. However, my supervisor was housed out of SASW and ultimately my work was accountable to that organization’s interest and direction. I found it interesting to navigate these dilemmas and found that through the development of professional, open, and supportive relationships, any differences were easily resolved. I also found that as Poverty-Free Saskatchewan was established, the groups capacity increased rapidly and this dilemma began to dissolve. I found that when I redirected the focus back to the capacity of the group, and my role and relationship to that role and the organizations involved became increasingly clear. I also found that as a good community organizer, doing everything for the group was not helpful. By animating, encouraging, and facilitating, things could happen by and for the group much more effectively than if I were to just step in and take over the tasks that needed to be done.

A topic of interest in the community development literature is the strategies that a community organizer employs to enter a community project, and her or his relationship to that
community as either an insider or outsider (Chambers, 1983; Cruikshank, 1990; Hardina, 2002; Lee, 1999). There are various strategies for consideration as it relates to entering a community, and it is implied that those who organize as an outsider to the community in question are required to take extra care and reflection upon entry. The thoughtful and effective development of relationships when entering a community is a crucial first step, and can be disastrous if done inappropriately. This prompted a considerable amount of forethought upon beginning my field placement with SASW. I had to clarify my own location in relation to the potential community with which I was going to engage.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been active in anti-poverty organizing with local and provincial organizations throughout my professional career. I personally know many of the individuals and organizations with whom I was going to engage. The anti-poverty strategy and provincial coalition building exercise I was setting out to accomplish in May was intending to result in a diverse collaboration of multiple groups and multiple communities across Saskatchewan. Amongst Regina-based anti-poverty organizations, and within the SASW, I would consider myself an insider given my professional history. However, my intention was to engage a broad range of individuals, organizations, and communities across the province therefore, I found myself balancing an insider/outsider role as an organizer. In particular, I was very aware of my outsider role when I was engaging in conversation and planning with people from the “community” of first voice. First voice participation refers to those who have direct experience, or a history, of living within poverty and marginalization. At times when I was in conversation with people who have lived experience of poverty, such as during a low-income consultation that I presented at for the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry, I felt very clearly that I had to take extra consideration as a “professional” and “outsider” to that community.
Primarily I would say that my organizing work has been as an insider and this made a considerable difference for how I engaged with the main stakeholders of the organizing project. Since this organizing project grew out of an evolutionary process of provincial anti-poverty advocates and community groups, there was already a considerable capacity and energy in place. I had an opportunity to support the development of an idea that had already been in circulation and, thus, was not left with the task of having to generate buy-in of the initial core group of leadership that was previously organized.

Strategies

Throughout the duration of my practicum there were a number of strategies I utilized to support the achievement of my goals and learning objectives. The strategy of my practicum was the development of a collaborative anti-poverty strategy. I have arrived at the conclusion that the pursuit of an anti-poverty strategy is worth exploring as an option. While the SASW had an interest in pursuing the development of an anti-poverty strategy, there was also a sound recognition that it would not be useful, or effective, to attempt this effort alone. There was recognition that multiple and diverse partnerships needed to be developed in order to establish a momentum and voice around the issue of poverty, and the need for a coordinated, comprehensive, and strategic approach to solving poverty. This recognition led to a community development approach in order to build a provincial community-based capacity in partnership with policy decision makers. Thus, the strategies that I employed to achieve the objectives set out by the SASW draw from community development theory.

I have attempted to situate my strategies within Lee’s (1999) seven phases of community organizing. I have used these phases to assist in the identification and labeling of strategies I used during my fieldwork. Lee (1999) outlines the phases of community organizing as pre-entry,
contact and entry, community analysis, organization development, popular action, evaluation, and ending. I will explore the strategies I used within my work by considering my activities during each of these phases.

*Pre-entry*

The pre-entry stage relates to the organizer situating her/himself within her/his professional role within the host organization and target community. It is highly important for the organizer’s role and plan to be well negotiated in how it is organized between the hosting organization and the community in question (Lee, 1999). My own reflection and forethought as it relates to this matter, was a priority in arranging my practicum and planning for pre-entry. One matter of consideration was how to find my way within multiple groups as an organizer. My role as a practicum student was situated and supervised out of the SASW office. In this way, despite the fact that this project had no funding, I considered the SASW as the sponsoring agency. As Lee (1999) states “Most of the time, community organizers are not hired directly by the people they are supposed to help organize” (p. 71). The SASW had clearly established interests and goals as they relate to the anti-poverty strategy initiative.

This perspective had similarities and differences from other groups that I was in dialogue with, and it was difficult at times to clarify my own place within multiple organization organizing. As Lee (1999) points out, it is highly important for the organizer to gain a very clear contract with the employer of the organizing project. It is crucial for the organizer to work effectively within the organizational structure to ensure that the organization is in a position to support and back the worker, and that they clearly understand the context within which the organizer is working (Lee, 1999). I was very careful to spend time with my supervisor to ensure that he and I had a shared vision about the direction of my work, both as it relates to my learning
objectives and what I wanted out of the practicum experience, but also to ensure that I could simultaneously achieve something worthwhile for the organization and community. It was important for me to keep in perspective the organization’s needs, but also that I was engaging in this work for a broader purpose of supporting a larger scale effort to develop and exist beyond myself or the SASW.

In addition to working closely with my supervisor, I also gave several presentations to SASW Council and Advisory Board so that the leadership of the organization would also have input and engagement in my work. The approach I took in presenting my work was as a reporting role to discuss activities, as well as an educational role to help everyone in the organization be fully briefed about current research and strategies relating to poverty as a social issue, and potential social policy and organizing tools to consider. I found the discussion that resulted from my reports and presentations was very positive, and I always felt that the organization was solidly behind me.

While there are essential internal considerations to be made to minimize risk to the organizing project, there are also considerations to be made in relation to the sponsoring organization and its location and relationship to the target community (Lee, 1999). SASW is a provincially based organization, and as a sponsoring agency, it has both strengths and limitations. To start, SASW is not a community-based advocacy organization. It is a membership driven association that functions within provincial legislation and is accountable to its own by-laws and priorities. As an organization, its focus is not primarily social action and advocacy, nor is its primary function social policy research. That is not to say, however, that it cannot be influential around these matters. I found during that my role as an organizer hosted through SASW was very well received. In particular the SASW has established a relationship of
credibility with the provincial government. This previously established relationship made it much easier to arrange meetings with government officials, policy bureaucrats, and assistant deputy ministers. As sponsor, the SASW added to the effectiveness of this organizing process due to its connection to social justice efforts initiated through the social justice committee. In this way my selection of SASW as the host organization proved to be an effective strategy.

Lee (1999) states that it is important to know about the sponsoring agencies ultimate goal in seeing a community organizing effort take place. In the SASW’s case a very clear priority in seeing the anti-poverty strategy project move forward was that it had articulated an interest and motivation for seeing a collaborative strategy emerge through the development of community-based and government partnerships. In many ways the organization knew that it could profile and expand its social justice work, achieve goals it had set out, and be influential around an important issue. This made it an ideal host because of the many benefits that could be achieved by undertaking the project.

Another important strategy was the establishment of a timeline and work plan (see Appendix A). I proposed to the SASW a part-time eight-month practicum, instead of the usual four month timeframe, to allow for a longer period of time as the project is a long term one. Thus, the organizing project was to be completed after eight months. I submitted a work plan to my supervisor and we set timelines and goals to ensure that the work would be completed at the end of my practicum. These strategies established a successful pre-entry plan and we were then able to move forward into the contact and entry stage (Lee, 1999).

Contact and Entry

After considering strategies for pre-entry, I consulted with colleagues in planning for the contact and entry phase (Lee, 1999). To facilitate this I developed a stakeholder map that
included all the groups and individuals that might begin to form a provincial coalition or network to begin the work. This was also an experience where my “insider role” was helpful. While I certainly did not know everyone who I initially contacted, I knew many anti-poverty advocates and had a clear picture of which groups were already engaging around the idea of an anti-poverty strategy. I started with people whom I knew and grew out my contacts from there. This task was made easier because the anti-poverty strategy concept had already been circulating for some time. I was able to engage people by suggesting that it was time that we began to talk about a strategy around a provincial table, and to explore whether or not it was time to pursue this, or to determine if there was another model or plan that we would like to consider in establishing a provincial approach to anti-poverty work in Saskatchewan. The initial group that several colleagues and I identified was carefully chosen as most easy to engage and with a lot to contribute (Lee, 1999). We could then grow the group more broadly later. In this way I began entry through connections to the already established leaders in the community (Lee, 1999).

Upon establishing early interest and engagement, I invited participants to attend an initial conference call meeting. The agenda allowed for the group to share what they are working on in their local communities and organizations, and I asked that participants to talk about their own group’s recent explorations of an anti-poverty strategy. People were very enthusiastic to share what they were working on and to connect around a provincial table because the policy that they were attempting to influence was of a provincial nature. One disappointment that I had was that the attendance of this initial meeting reflected mainly Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. I had hoped that we would have participation from rural areas and other diverse communities such as the North as well as from First Nations groups. This first meeting established an organized group of participants that would make up a new provincial organization to pursue the further
analysis of an anti-poverty strategy, and to pursue strategies for deeper engagement and participation by a broader community in relation to government and policy makers.

Community Analysis

It was during this stage that the group began to develop itself as a new entity and began to explore whether or not pursuing an anti-poverty strategy was a joint venture that all the members around the table might consider. There was a lot of dialogue and information sharing with research documents and expertise distributed. Discussions about the feasibility about pursuing this plan were had, and potential drawbacks and pitfalls were discussed. Realistic expectations were shared. Lee (1999) suggests that a community consensus is an essential step, and attention to processes and relationship development is crucial. He suggests it is necessary to develop a strategy that includes clearly defining the problem, making space for discussions that lead to disagreements and consensus, the development of a community image, and developing an organizational base.

Various strategies were operationalized in the first few meetings of the provincial network. Once it was decided that an anti-poverty strategy for Saskatchewan was of interest to the initial key members, consensus building began to emerge. The longer term strategy and research around the social policy and political mechanisms was regarded as essential, but there was a recognition that this work would have to come later once we had organized ourselves as an organization.

Organization Development

It was the organization development stage that consumed much of my time and efforts during my practicum. Essentially the intention of my work was to develop a provincial organization. As well, it had been established by the SASW and other local groups that a
provincial anti-poverty network was needed to develop a stronger influence for anti-poverty focused social policy. Lee (1999) argues that “we can only act if we are organized – that is, if we have structures and process to marshall community resources over time…Activity should become less diffuse and more concentrated on particular issues and associated tasks” (p. 113). The group of individuals and organizations clearly understood this need and much of my efforts included keeping people connected, forwarding relevant research documents and communications, organizing people into committees and working groups, making phone calls, building relationships and generally keeping the momentum going between meetings.

Keeping the momentum going was a key need defined by the SASW as it relates to organizing efforts. It has long been identified that very effective conversation and planning can occur during committee meetings, but the work that needs to happen between meetings is often a challenge. My ability as a practicum student to do some of the organizing and developmental work between meetings resulted in a momentum and capacity that enabled the group to keep moving forward. These tasks were not always glamorous and consisted mainly of returning phone calls and e-mails, organizing meetings, booking rooms, and passing along updates and reminders.

The development of the community group was quickly identified as something to work on. For instance, members wanted to know how we might best organize ourselves and around what terms. There was also a lot of interest in what to call the group. A colleague and I developed some initial terms of reference. These were brought back to the second and third meetings for discussion. At times it seemed we were stuck in collective wordsmithing and that we would never be able to get anything done, however, I recognize that this initial work was critical in establishing a community identity. There were also a number of initiatives to establish
a solid organizational base. The group was expanding and working groups were established to share the workload. Leadership was emerging and I found myself in constant contact with eight or ten community members/network participants.

*Popular Action*

Much is written in the community development literature about strategies for change that draw on the traditions of advocacy, social action, pressure tactics, dissemination, and protest (Barlow, 2007; Burman, 1996; Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001; Hardina, 2002; Hoefer, 2006, Lee, 1999). Lee (1999) states that “The nature of community development – the attempt to reorder power and alter the pattern on resource allocation – tells us, that as well as mobilizing like minded friends, community groups will find themselves facing serious resistance on any number of occasions” (p. 146). Given that the very nature of poverty is rooted in exploitation, marginalization, and unequal resource distribution, the ultimate solution lies in reclaiming of power by those who are marginalized from privileged groups. Such efforts traditionally draw on pressure tactics (Hardina, 2002) and resistance (Lee, 1999); however, these were not strategies I drew on during my practicum with SASW.

The SASW has clearly articulated a preference towards collaboration and relationship-based advocacy. The intention of the SASW in its social justice work is to develop opportunities for cooperation and to add to social policy discourse and decision-making in a way that might place the issues on the government’s agenda. My practicum was focused, because of my connection to SASW, on collaborative social policy development, partnering, and advocacy. However, these are not the only organizing options available, and perhaps not always the most effective. A strategic and mixed approach to organizing is required if poverty rates are going to change. Thus, I believe we have to consider a diversity of responses and actions that range from
more moderate strategies, such as coalition building and addressing redistributive mechanisms through social policy and funding reforms, to the more radical strategies of mobilization and structural change that fundamentally shifts power from the privileged and exploitative to the marginalized and poor (Burman, 1996). The approach selected by the SASW to collaborate on the exploration of an anti-poverty strategy has its place within the context of a larger anti-poverty movement. This approach to social policy reform may have a meaningful, if small, role in making change, while groups within the anti-poverty movement might look at other options.

A significant aspect of organizing in this phase of community development is the determination of levels of support about the issue at hand (Lee, 1999). Lee (1999) argues that there are typically two broad groups, those for and against, which can be analyzed through considering levels of support:

Social issues are complex, and the terrain in which we are working will have an array of groups that take various positions about the issue we are attempting to deal with – we need to be able to analyze the landscape. (Lee, 1999, p. 146)

Lee (1999) suggests that there are four categories of support and opposition if we “loosely divide the field into five groups: those who are committed to the cause; those who are sympathetic; those neutral; those tending to be unsympathetic to our cause, or those committed to opposing our cause” (p. 148). When considering any strategy, identifying those individuals and groups that are more committed, and determining those who might outright oppose the issue, is essential. This is particularly true if the preferred strategy is one of relationship building, partnering and collaborating.

I found Lee’s model useful in establishing the core group that became the coalition, but it was just as essential to the later work of animating discussion and momentum about a strategy with those outside of the core group. For example, I organized meetings between the group and
the two Assistant Deputy Ministers of Social Services. I also organized meetings with the Ministry of Education and the Provincial Regional Intersectoral Committees. I also had discussions with other community groups, organizations, and with the Opposition Critic to Social Services. Within these various interactions the perspectives ranged from tending positive to neutral (Lee, 1999, p. 146). I found that approaching discussions with openness and with a cooperative approach, we were able to have very productive conversations where we could explore differences in perspectives, disagreement, and often the result of the conversation was increased awareness and buy-in to what we were trying to achieve. I think that because the organizing effort started out with an exploratory approach, even though we had a clear position, we were able to engage in discussions that would not have been possible had we taken a pressure tactic or lobbying approach. The outcome of these discussions has not been a commitment to raising social assistance rates or a commitment to increased social spending. Rather, the outcome has been a small shift towards recognition by social policy makers that solutions are required that are inter-linked to increase the chance that poverty will be addressed adequately. However, other strategies to garner increased public attention and pressure for commitment from governments may be required as those who live in poverty remain in a deep and damaging experience of poverty which has worsened instead of improved.

In time, I think the position of Poverty-Free Saskatchewan will become stronger and clarified, and much negotiation will be required to maintain productive relationships across difference. However, at this early stage I think the strategy of exploratory discussion, collaborative approaches, open dialogue, and cooperation were important steps. The anti-poverty strategy concept shifted those who were neutral or tending negative towards openness to discuss poverty. We achieved increased new engagement, support, and participation from
groups, and government officials that might not have otherwise considered poverty issues important to their agenda.

Concern was expressed that taking a collaborative approach could result in the initiative being watered down, and the group might lose ownership over the initiative. These concerns are valid and I think collaborative approaches require caution and thoughtfulness. If the group feels that it is losing control there are many popular action strategies at their disposal to use at any time. However, if Poverty-Free Saskatchewan plans on having an active role in contributing to the development of an effective anti-poverty, and if a strategy is to reflect the values and principles of the group, then finding ways to ensure effective policy making relationships is crucial. For example, at a meeting with the Minister of Social Services it was clear that increased pressure could just result in the announcement of an anti-poverty strategy that did not include any community input, nor reflect the NCW’s (2007) four cornerstones. The minister argued that she in fact had a plan and was starting to suggest that she could market what her ministry was doing as a strategy. This has been an issue with pursuing anti-poverty strategies. While it might assist a more strategic response to poverty and provide a structure around which goals can be set, it can also be used as a marketing tool by governments to allow them to profile the social policy and program efforts underway without actually making any changes or introducing new interventions. Poverty-Free Saskatchewan will have to consider its options if the current strategy is not one that is working. The SASW can contribute to a collaborative approach to aid in social planning, however, other groups and individuals might find opportunity to connect to these efforts through alternative strategies. Remembering Arnstein (1969) it will be crucial to ensure the anti-poverty work that has been emerging does not get stunted by tokenism, false consultation, and distraction. Other strategies that address the political,
discursive, and ideological dimensions of poverty will have to be considered by the provincial network.

Evaluation

A necessary component of any community development project or initiative is evaluation. Evaluating an initiative can be very important at the end of a project, but in fact, it is likely to occur regularly throughout the process. For instance, I was supported by my supervisor in constantly reflecting upon actions and steps that were taken through the eight-month process. Also the core group of Poverty-Free Saskatchewan regularly paused to take stock and evaluate its progress and next steps. However, at the completion of my practicum evaluation became a necessary phase to consider. It was important to pause and look back over the past eight months to determine if I had achieved the goals that I set out to achieve, and to consider whether or not the initiative was effective and in a position to continue on without my work at the centre of it.

Lee (1999) suggests that evaluation is largely about accountability:

In one aspect, evaluation seeks to discover the degree to which the community organizer was able to actualize the goals and objectives of the funding body. However, this should not be the sole purpose; it is rare that a sponsor can specify objectives that are sufficiently concrete and measurable. As well…it is not in a strategic (or moral) position to develop objectives that are sure to be relevant to community members. (p. 186)

Thus, evaluation has a dual role in measuring accountability. Evaluation can demonstrate to the sponsor that goals were met and good outcomes were achieved, but it is also an opportunity for accountability for the target community to determine if positive outcomes were achieved regardless of the sponsoring bodies objectives.

In my case, there was no funding body to which to be accountable. However, SASW was the sponsoring or hosting organization of my practicum and my work was largely accountable to the objectives set out by that organization. I was fortunate to have my organizing work hosted
by SASW because they largely recognized that they had little control over the direction of the work. While there were several objectives that they expected might be met through this effort, they did not set out goals that would interfere with the fluid and flexible nature of community organizing work. I will first outline several evaluation outcomes as they relate to the SASW’s objectives. Following that I will discuss several outcomes for the community group.

The goals that SASW had set out as it relates to the development of an anti-poverty strategy related to exploration and engagement. At the completion of my practicum I had the opportunity to present an evaluation report to Council on the action plan goals. I reported that the action plan item to explore the development of an anti-poverty strategy was completed. Outcomes for SASW were (a) increased clarity about potential benefits and drawbacks of an anti-poverty strategy as an option, (b) a survey of what has been happening in other jurisdictions, and (c) early partnership establishment and animation of discussion around comprehensive and strategic responses to poverty. Also, evaluation outcomes suggested that a clearer role has been established for SASW in social justice initiatives with learning about how to be effective.

Findings from the evaluation suggest that the SASW’s goals were surpassed. In many ways we moved beyond exploration into active partnership development. SASW was not interested in pursuing the exploration of a strategy independently, and when a multi-organizational collaboration had been established, this was the group that eventually selected the name Poverty-Free Saskatchewan. I was able to report to Council that this group had emerged with a structure, mandate, body of research, and a plan to continue the work into the next two years. I also reported that many positive meetings were held with government policy officials and elected members and that the dialogue we had had moved from initial exploration into increased attention to the idea of an anti-poverty strategy.
A key interest of the SASW was to explore how to involve itself effectively around its mandate to pursue social justice. The evaluation suggested that SASW’s involvement in this initiative contributed to the anti-poverty strategy organizing effort to go further than was first thought possible. Learning suggests that effective organizing can be aided through good organizational leadership. Our intentional exploration of collaborative approaches demonstrated that this approach can be effective in moving an item of interest onto the social policy agenda of groups with the eventual goal of influencing the governments agenda.

Evaluation also suggested to me that SASW’s four mandates, regulation, practice support, promotion, and social justice, were inter-related. Working on one area supported the advancement of other areas. For example, when we met with officials within the Ministry of Social Services about pursuing an anti-poverty strategy, we were also profiling the profession and talking about regulation. Discussions about regulation also profiled the need for improved social policy and programming. Leading a multi-organizational and community-based collaboration profiled the association as having a contribution to social justice matters.

We also learned that SASW could add to the capacity of community and social justice efforts. Through my practicum we were able to provide a level of leadership and capacity that might not have been otherwise possible. Evaluation suggested that it can make a big difference for the SASW to delegate staff time to social justice efforts, and I recommended that in the future, if resources allow it, activities such as the work I did on this anti-poverty organizing effort could consist of some of the tasks of a program position. Council members were very positive about these evaluation outcomes and expressed appreciation about the work that had occurred. I feel that positive social justice work was profiled as a result of my practicum work and internal organizational capacity was increased as a result of these efforts and outcomes.
As it relates to the community, I think the evaluation showed very positive outcomes. Poverty-Free Saskatchewan will carry forward and lead the anti-poverty strategy work into the future. A provincial network, which had long been called for, had been established. I believe that the organizational and capacity development work that occurred during my practicum will benefit the anti-poverty movement’s voice around poverty issues even if an anti-poverty strategy is never adopted. I found that the kinds of conversations that this community group was having about poverty was more organized and sophisticated than it was able to be before we started to organize around an anti-poverty strategy. I think that this group has positioned itself in a positive way that will add to the strength of the anti-poverty movement, and the group can work into the future and identify goals and activities, to contribute to the effective development of poverty and to give voice to the issue of poverty in a well-researched and thoughtful way.

Ending

My job as a practicum student was to support the exploration and capacity building of a group that might pursue the eventual adoption of an anti-poverty strategy. This work will not end at the completion of my practicum. Rather, this is work that may occur over the next several years. For me, ending my work with this group as a community organizer meant aiding the group to develop and utilize its own capacity. Lee (1999) suggests “Sooner or later the organizer is going to be pulling up stakes and leaving the community. Ideally this should happen when the worker ‘has worked her way out of a job’, and the community no longer needs her” (p. 194). I would say that, while I may not have “worked myself out of a job”, I did manage to support the development of capacity that will allow the group to carry on functioning.

The community group that I engaged with is different from a group of low-income residents, or members of a remote Northern community. Since, primarily, the group I was
working with were representatives of organizations, they are a resourced group. The considerations I had to make in planning for my exit as an organizer did not include ethical dilemmas about how a vulnerable group might carry on without me. Also my exit was, and will continue to be, a gradual one. In some ways, as I described earlier, I am an insider to the group. Thus, I am not exiting as fully as I might if I were picking up and moving away. I will continue on in this effort as a volunteer by reclaiming previous roles that I set aside when I started this practicum. I will remain as co-chair of the social justice committee within the SASW, and also as a volunteer committee member as part of my social work role at the agency where I work. This means that my exit will consist mainly of role clarification and re-negotiation. I will not have the time or resources to help out in the way that I had during my practicum and, thus, I will defer much of the responsibility to the leadership that has been established within the community.

Much of my work has been in supporting the group to gather the capacity so that they could do this. Also, a new practicum student has established an opportunity with one of the partner organizations and she will take forward this work and help Poverty-Free Saskatchewan pursue its goals. Thus, my exit was a relatively easy one. Although, I have had to take care to remove myself responsibly and respectfully from the role that I had. My role would change had I been able to stay longer. Much of the initial developmental work is complete and new objectives and goals would have to be established. In many ways it was a natural time to make my exit, and I think this speaks to the success of this community work and the planning that I did with my supervisors and colleagues.
Skills

The purpose of an MSW practicum is to gain advanced social work practice skills. My practicum at SASW provided an opportunity to gain skills and to reflect upon action and integration beyond what I had initially expected. Some of the skills that I acquired were at a macro level that related to integrating theory and action, improving my ability to be self-reflective, and conceptualize the ideological, philosophical, ethical, and pragmatic aspects of practice. I feel much more equipped as a professional having explored the area of practice as it relates to social justice, organizing, and social policy even if my career takes me in the direction of direct practice work with individuals. Many of the skills I acquired relate to community organizing practice. Lee (1999) outlines five key skills in organizing that I will reflect on here.

Listening

The first skill, listening, is a crucial social work skill and is equally important as it relates to community organizing. My job as an organizer in this effort was to gather people together and initiate conversation. I had to be open to hearing a diversity of opinion, difference, disagreement, possibility, and hope. Being able to listen often means hearing, and the ability to hear requires the skill of reflecting back and ensuring that people feel heard. I feel that I improved upon this skill in a way that differs from other social work practice because in organizing work, the pace of dialogue can be quick, and people speak from a perspective that can be based in research, experience or values. There can also be many people around the table at a discussion and this means there is a lot to “listen” to and keep track of and to ensure people’s opinions are acknowledged.

Information Gathering
The skill of information gathering was achieved through completing a literature review of anti-poverty strategies, pros and cons, and ensuring that I stayed abreast of current trends and research. These skills improved greatly, because in my professional history, I have been primarily a direct practitioner. I had to extend myself into the social policy realm, something that I was happy to do, and found myself developing skills in synthesizing and reporting back to my supervisor, Council and advisory board, at meetings with policy developers and politicians, and of course to the community group. This skill manifested itself in increasing my skills of writing and presentation, as well as preparing briefings and speaking notes. The skill of information gathering relates closely to the next organizing skill Lee (1999) discusses.

**Analysis Skills**

Analysis skills were also a key skill development area for me. In gathering information and planning for strategy I was expected to develop a level of analysis that the SASW and community members might find helpful. I did not have to be solely responsible for analysis, rather, I found myself inviting discussion with key people to analyze directions and possibilities. However, I searched out relevant literature and research material to share with the committee participants and presented possibilities for planning to SASW’s Council. I refined skills relating to critical analysis and strategic thinking.

**Facilitation Skills**

Much of my practicum work related directly to facilitation. I facilitated numerous meeting, with the community group, with government officials, as well as with SASW advisory board and Council. Facilitation skills require active listing, thoughtful responses and the ability
to influence the discussion in a positive and productive direction, and I was often challenged and rewarded by working on my ability to do this well.

*Negotiation Skills*

This skill is crucial in organizing, especially in organizing across differences. Even when people agree there are differences, differences are even more apparent when there is resistance to an idea. Negotiation takes good facilitation and there were many experiences where I was tested in my negotiation skills that included conflict resolution, aiding effective communication and collaborating.

The fieldwork I did during my practicum was a rich learning experience and I feel that I have had an opportunity to gain social work skills and to integrate theory and to reflect upon intentions and hopes I have for my career. The following section discusses hopes and visions I have for my career, profession and community.

*Visions*

In order for effective anti-poverty organizing work to occur, a vision for a different kind of community is required. Anti-poverty organizing requires us to see poverty as a “symptom of a system of inequality. Poverty is something produced in the markets, offices, schools and legislatures of the normal political economy” (Burman, 1996, p. 143). If this is true, then poverty is not inevitable, implying that through reorganizing of the systems, policies, and programs in place change could be possible. I envision possibilities for these changes based on:

1. An enduring commitment by SASW to contribute to social policy development that reflects social work principles.

2. Effective, adequate, and interconnected anti-poverty social policy, possibly expressed through the development of an anti-poverty strategy.

As a way to explore these visions and aspirations I will elaborate upon each of these three topics.

The SASW has a mandate to pursue social justice as one of the cornerstones of its organizational goals. SASW enthusiastically supported my proposal to base my practicum fieldwork out of their office because they saw an opportunity to intentionally explore ways in which they might contribute effectively to social policy. The SASW intends to shape social policy discussions it has with policy makers based on social policy principles that reflect social work ethics. They have a position that social policy should reflect principles of social inclusion, equity, and universal access. However, finding ways to achieve these aims in an effective way has been challenging. Based on the outcomes of my practicum, which were discussed above, I believe that SASW has a clearer perception of how it can fit into the Saskatchewan anti-poverty movement. This relates primarily to finding strategies for authentic consultation with government. It might also support social workers in the province to engage more broadly with systemic issues. However, its main approach to social justice work will be limited to collaborative and relationship based approaches as a result of its interests and perspective.

Visioning a poverty-free Saskatchewan might sound idyllic, however, there are a number of basic, concrete, and measurable steps that can be taken that could have an immediate difference. I believe that an anti-poverty strategy represents an effective framework for addressing social policy in a comprehensive way. If a strategy is going to be effective there are a number of key steps that would be required to make a strategy effective. These steps require an authentic commitment from governments, and achieving such commitment is a longer project for the anti-poverty movement in Saskatchewan. However, other provinces have been successful in
getting their governments to engage to targets and measures (NCW, 2007). If a comprehensive social policy framework is going to make an impact on poverty rates it should include:

1. A solid commitment by the provincial government to significantly reduce poverty and increase income equality.

2. Adoption of a standardized and effective measure of poverty to set a baseline.

3. Establishment of realistic and measurable goals within a clear timeframe that ensures:
   - Every Saskatchewan resident reaches the poverty line through the secure access to expanded and adequate social assistance benefits and a living minimum wage.
   - Targeted measures for children, First Nations/Aboriginal people and people with disabilities.
   - Rigorous labour standard legislation.
   - A food security framework which offers an alternative to food bank and meal provision programs.
   - A strategy for adequate and affordable housing and expanded social housing combined with a larger homelessness strategy.
   - Universal, affordable and accessible daycare provision.

4. Accountability mechanisms that ensure governments meet outcomes.

Many of these initiatives are partially in place, and could greatly reduce poverty through increasing both the access to and adequacy of the benefit provided and the coordination of policy. For example, raising social assistance rates, improving minimum wages, investing into social housing, and capping rental rates would contribute immensely to reducing poverty rates (Holden et al, 2009; Torjman, 2008). However, these efforts have to be done in a coordinated way so that the people who are experiencing poverty can feel the impact. It is no help to raise
social assistance rates if the private sector rental market raises rental rates to capitalize on people’s increased resources. Equally important is that governmental ministries work together so that policies and programming are linked to a common goal. For example, improvements in a family’s budget for nutrition and housing could eventually cut expenses in health care. Support for education could reduce social assistance expenditures. Linking policy and programs could have a significant effect in solving many obvious poverty issues. However, this would take commitment and cooperation by both sides of the legislature and amongst various ministries. No such commitments have been forthcoming and this will remain the key question that should guide anti-poverty organizing in Saskatchewan. Also, long term commitment from governments would be required to move beyond rhetoric towards substance if a difference is to be made for low-income people.

If a Saskatchewan anti-poverty strategy were to be different from the commitments made in 1989 to end child poverty by the year 2000 (Campaign 2000) then several things are required. Saskatchewan anti-poverty groups will need to be strategic and consistent in their message. Governments will have to find the political will to prioritize poverty, and this will likely only happen through promoting the economic and social costs of poverty, or through increased call by the public for action. An effective anti-poverty strategy would also require a significant investment into social programming and benefits. This would mean that the current trends towards a regressive tax system would have to be reconsidered (Silver, 2009). While solving poverty might be achieved through attending to several basic and obvious concerns, these commitments would require a significant shift in current neo-liberal thinking. In this way, an anti-poverty strategy may only succeed in Saskatchewan if there is a significant shift in public perceptions about poverty. Thus, a clear goal for Poverty-Free Saskatchewan might be to find
ways to contribute to shifting the dominant discourse and challenge the current and persistent
neo-liberal debate.

Thus, an organized and energized anti-poverty movement will be required in
Saskatchewan. There is currently little evidence to suggest that Saskatchewan social policy will
become more comprehensive, integrated and adequate. However, what is clear is the need for an
organized and strategic movement (George, 1997), which could contribute to an alternative
discourse on poverty in Saskatchewan (Cassiman, 2008). Whether or not an anti-poverty
strategy is an effective framework for re-envisioning social policy in Saskatchewan, what is clear
is that exploring an anti-poverty strategy as a project has been a catalyst for re-energizing anti-
poverty organizers.

Conclusion

Despite the chronic and enduring reality of poverty, anti-poverty organizers in
Saskatchewan have argued that there is another way. My practicum work was only a very small
effort within a longer tradition of organizing that has taken place over Saskatchewan’s social
movement history. More so, the SASW is just one organization among many that has tried to
find its place within a diverse network of individuals and groups attempting to contribute to
improved social policy. The work I did on supporting the development of a provincial network,
now entitled Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, and exploring an anti-poverty strategy, is one small
option among an array of options for anti-poverty organizing. However, I do think that this
exploratory and developmental work has contributed to increased focus and energy for the
Saskatchewan anti-poverty movement. Exploring an anti-poverty strategy has contributed to
engaging a diverse and geographically mixed network of individuals and organizations in
consulting together about poverty, and its harm, and social policy options.
Exploring an anti-poverty strategy has provided the structure required for recruiting anti-poverty activists and researchers across the province around a mutual and collective goal. Whether or not pursuing a strategy remains the primary goal of Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, I think that several achievements have occurred. The provincial network has become established after four years of dialogue between the Regina and Saskatoon anti-poverty groups. The anti-poverty strategy concept proved to be a concrete enough project to initiate this group. Since its inception, the group has structured and organized itself in a way that it is now (a) beginning to develop positions on appropriate and adequate ways to define and measure poverty, (b) finding ways of engaging with people who have lived experience in poverty so that policy reflects the needs of these people, (c) determining key social policy goals that are required to comprehensively address poverty in an integrated way, and (d) exploring strategies that might produce authentic engagement and collaboration in producing community-informed social policy. There are many remaining questions about whether or not a made-in-Saskatchewan anti-poverty strategy will produce meaningful and lasting affects on chronic poverty rates, as well as how to determine the processes and tactics to best encourage governments of all parties to commit seriously to their responsibility to address poverty. However, I believe that Poverty-Free Saskatchewan has established enough structure and capacity to evaluate and work on this, and to reconsider organizing directions as it attends to these questions.

I also think that the SASW has a clarified perspective on its own role within social justice work. It is clear that if SASW is to engage in social justice work, this is most likely to occur due to its organizational structure, purpose and values through drawing on strategies of collaboration, dialogue, and consultation with government. Using my practicum work as a way to intentionally explore such possibilities for social justice work has resulted in a more explicit commitment
from SASW for prioritizing this work through considering ways to designate more time and financial resources to this mandate. I feel privileged to have had an opportunity to contribute, in a small way, to a meaningful organizing effort and hope that this brief work has contributed to a larger and lasting change.
References


Appendix A

Field Practicum Work Plan - SASW

Pre-Entry Research and Needs Assessment:

- Review anti-poverty/poverty reduction strategy literature to increase understanding about the trend as it is emerging in other Canadian Regions
- Support SASW to consider the merit of this initiative as an effective approach to address poverty in Saskatchewan
- Initial planning to develop an organizing strategy. Map stakeholders that include individuals and organizations already actively exploring the topic of an anti-poverty strategy

Provincial Networking

- Identify core group working on anti-poverty strategy initiatives and engage in conversation to explore interest in developing a provincial network
- Invite participants to an initial meeting to share perspective and report on anti-poverty activity happening within organizations and communities
- Determine if an anti-poverty strategy is a driving force. Gauge stakeholder interest. Determine who is providing natural leadership on this topic

Organizational Development

- Establish collective interest with core provincial group for an anti-poverty strategy. Weigh the strengths and weakness of this approach
- Facilitate strategy development for organizing towards the development of a strategy
- Develop a provincial organization, establish terms of reference, define membership and grow the group
- Establish working groups to grow capacity of provincial group
- Facilitate process to develop a shared vision for what an anti-poverty strategy should include in Saskatchewan

Developing Cross-Sectoral Partnership

- Engage in early dialogue with elected and non-elected government
- Explore strategies for engagement and collaboration
- Support provincial group to clarify its position through developing a research working group
- Meet with provincial Regional Intersectoral Committee’s
- Report to SASW about progress and complete activity related to strategic work plan that relates to exploration of an anti-poverty strategy