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The Lanaudière Table of Partners for Social Development: A Case Study

by

**William Ninacs, with the collaboration of
Francine Gareau**

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Introduction

The World Summit for Social Development was held in Copenhagen in March 1995 under the auspices of the United Nations. As pointed out in the final Declaration, this was the first time in history that heads of state and government had gathered to “recognize the significance of social development and human well-being for all and to give to these goals the highest priority [and] address profound social problems, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, that affect every country.”¹ The Summit concluded with an invitation to all people in all countries and in all walks of life, as well as the international community, to “join us in our common cause.”

The Québec government responded to this call by organizing an event that brought together hundreds of people from all parts of the province around the theme of social development. The following account tells how the actors in one region used preparations for participating in this event, the *Forum national sur le développement social* (National Forum on Social Development), as a lever for regional and local mobilization around social development.

It is, of course, the dream of anyone who organizes conferences, symposia and large meetings of all kinds, that such efforts will help participants move forward in their thinking and action. The National Forum was a success in this regard, because social development committees have now sprouted up in nearly all of Québec’s administrative regions. But nowhere did the National Forum spark such phenomenal mobilization as in the Lanaudière region. Indeed, the effects of the process of preparing for the National Forum are still being felt in this region through a vast range of local and regional structures and initiatives sustained by an original mechanism of dialogue, concerted action and partnership dedicated specifically to social development: the *Table des partenaires du développement social de Lanaudière*, or the Lanaudière Table of Partners for Social Development. This is its story.

The forum for social development

The national mandate

Since the 1980s, industrialized countries have been undergoing major transformations: globalization and changes in the rules of economic development, the massive arrival of new technologies, aging populations, and growing poverty and social exclusion. In Québec, this is a period of major reforms of public programs and basic government policies on health and social services, local and regional development and employment development, along with questions about the real effectiveness of such policies in solving the problems facing society. It was in this context that in 1995, in the wake of the World Summit for Social Development, the Minister of Health and Social Services

gave the *Conseil de la santé et du bien-être* (CSBE – Health and Welfare Council) the mandate of instigating widespread thought and reflection on the future of social development in Québec.

The Council took up the challenge by initiating a process aimed at developing a shared vision of social development and fostering the kind of partnerships and harmonization needed to make that vision a reality.² Faced with increasingly widespread exclusion, the Council identified social participation as the main means of tackling social development. According to the Council:

... social participation implies a mutual exchange between the individual and the community; it involves, on the one hand, the collective responsibility of enabling everybody to participate actively in societal life and, on the other, the individual responsibility to act as a responsible citizen. ... Social participation can take various forms: paid work, human or financial investment in a business or a community project, mutual assistance and volunteer work, involvement in democratic institutions, etc.³

With social participation as the foundation, the CSBE proposed that forums be held in each region of Québec as a way of reaching local and regional players and obtaining a regional outlook on what social development should be, based on their reality. The regional forums were also intended to be a way of identifying approaches likely to encourage individuals to participate in social life, be it in their immediate circle, their living environment or their community, as well as identifying barriers that might hinder such participation.

A regional response

In response to the CSBE's invitation, the *Conseil régional de développement Lanaudière* (CRDL – Lanaudière Regional Development Council) set a process in motion in November 1996 by inviting representatives of organizations from various backgrounds to a meeting to get a clear grasp of the issues involved in the CSBE's proposal. An advisory committee was created to discuss the various scenarios for organizing a regional forum on social development and identifying the opportunities open to the region. The committee was composed mainly of institutional stakeholders: a number of government ministries, the regional health and social services board, the regional development council, the regional development co-operative, the Roman Catholic diocese, Centraide and the CSBE. Judging that the issues at stake in the process were of vital importance for the region, the CRDL accepted the committee's recommendation and hired a person to coordinate the organization of the regional forum so that the region would be well prepared to participate in the national forum.

Given this region's specific features, geography and location, stretching from the Laurentians to the Mauricie with Montréal and Laval to the south, it is hard to imagine how the process could have been carried out successfully without regional coordination. The region covers a vast area of 13,521 square kilometres, with close to 400,000 people living in 63 municipalities divided among six regional county municipalities (MRCs). But there are wide disparities among the MRCs. For

example, two are located in the northern ring of the greater Montréal area and are urban or semi-urban, with their residents accounting for more than half the population of the region (although many of them work in the Montréal metropolitan area). The other four MRCs are almost entirely rural: 10.9 percent of the territory is farmland and 77.8 percent is forested. The region has had the highest demographic growth in Québec since 1981, mainly because of Montréal's urban sprawl. There are other inequalities – in unemployment rates, education and income levels – with the two MRCs closest to Montréal considered to be well-off and very well-off, while three of the others are classified as disadvantaged. The sixth and most remote, the MRC Matawinie, is very disadvantaged. It is also the largest geographically (covering approximately 80 percent of the region) and the least populated (10 percent of the population). Another indicator of major inequalities: a child attending elementary school in Chertsey (MRC Matawinie) has only a 40.1 percent chance of graduating from high school by the age of 19, compared to 81.5 percent for a child attending a school in Saint-Ambroise-de-Kildare (MRC de Joliette).

A process coloured by local experiences

Because of disparities within the region, it was deemed important for each MRC to state its needs and potential solutions with regard to social development. Each MRC set up an organizing committee that coordinated a local event based on the form and themes that seemed most relevant to it.

In Matawinie, for instance, the chosen theme was reducing poverty within the territory, while in L'Assomption, the focus of reflection was social participation to fight poverty by focusing on children, youth and the family. The MRC de Joliette examined social participation to fight exclusion, while people in d'Autray discussed the theme of "Quality of life is everyone's business!" Montcalm and Des Moulins decided to make the concept of partnership their central concern.

Generally speaking, participants from all sectors were invited to outline the situation in their MRC, identify projects that were feasible in the medium term, and set local priorities aimed at encouraging individuals in their community to participate in social, economic and cultural life. The foundation of social participation promoted by the CSBE thus reached right into local communities. The organizing committees in each MRC realized that local deliberations would provide the raw materials for the regional forum, but they also wanted the results to be translated into action. So they subsequently converted themselves into follow-up committees to ensure the continuity of the local process and, above all, to ensure that commitments made in the local events were honoured.

Regional dialogue and joint action

At the same time as the local events were being organized, an assembly of regional and institutional partners was established. The regional branches of Québec ministries and the regional administrative conference that coordinates them, regional health and social service authorities and regional development agencies, community organizations and the labour movement, as well as regional coalitions of the women's, youth and seniors' movements, all sat down together to work out a common understanding of social development on the basis of their respective knowledge, expertise and concerns.

The Regional Forum took place in April 1998. It identified a regional strategy based on shared analyses and courses of action developed locally and by sector, and mandated a sizable delegation to participate in the National Forum and share Lanaudière's vision. For instance, although the Lanaudière position reiterated that the state had to continue playing a major role in ensuring equity, social justice and the sharing of wealth, it also made specific demands for promoting social development in the region. These included allowing the Lanaudière region to collect royalties on the exploitation of natural resources in the region and ensuring better use of all the transportation resources currently available in the region. Participants also wanted the problem of school dropouts to be tackled as an issue for society as a whole and not just as a concern for those in the education field.

The National Forum on Social Development was held two weeks later. The 25 representatives from Lanaudière joined more than 600 delegates from the other regions of Québec who had come to share their vision of social development. Discussions revolved around the means to promote social participation by the poor and young people through job creation and building closer social ties. They also explored ways to bring about a new division of powers and responsibilities among stakeholders by improving communications and partnerships among the various organizations, developing closer ties between education and the business world, and making full use of community organizations. The role of the state was also scrutinized, as was the decentralization of state powers in order to foster local and regional development.

The National Forum did not close with a grand declaration, because the majority of those present saw the event more as one step in a process than an end in itself. All the local, regional and national participants now had to go back to their respective settings to continue the work. Spanning almost a three-year period, the entire process had mobilized close to 8,000 people from all sectors of activity in Québec society, with 70 local forums, 13 regional forums and one national forum. The dynamic then had to be kept up in the regions and local communities in order to achieve concrete results.

The Lanaudière Table of Partners for Social Development

Local roots

The population of Lanaudière wholeheartedly embraced the entire process proposed by the CSBE and rallied to it in exceptional numbers: More than 1,600 people – nearly as many as in Montréal! – took part in the various local and regional events. Local communities were especially active, and even before the Regional Forum was held, follow-up committees had already begun to convert themselves into local social development committees.

In each MRC, the local committee had the mandate of providing support for and coordination of local social development projects, while ensuring the liaison between the various stakeholders concerned by social development within its territory. Each local social development committee was composed of between 15 and 30 individuals and representatives of local organizations. The local public health department sat on each committee and contributed its specific expertise regarding the community's social and health issues. Local committees met several times a year. Some worked through sub-committees or organized public information and awareness activities, depending on local concerns. It was these committees that made social development a concrete reality through projects or initiatives developed on the basis of each local community's needs.

The people involved in the local committees quickly realized the importance of support at the regional level for their efforts as well as the need to draw on the expertise of all the social players. The executive summary of the report of the Regional Forum emphasized: "The need for regional follow-up is undeniable. To continue locally, we need strong leadership at the regional level, provided by a credible regional organization."⁴ There was also a wish for some kind of vehicle to link the various MRCs and provide direction for local actions. It was decided to set up an organization that would be independent of any other structure so that it would have more latitude in choosing its areas of work. The result was the creation in May 1999 of the *Table des partenaires du développement social de Lanaudière* (Lanaudière Table of Partners for Social Development), described as a central forum for circulating, exchanging and sharing a variety of information and expertise, awareness, knowledge and insights on social problems and issues.

Structure and operations

At the current time, 53 organizations belong to the Table, including 18 members of the former assembly of partners that had fostered the intersectoral joint action preceding the Regional Forum. The current membership of the Table is much more numerous and diverse than the original assembly of partners. There are now community organizations (including groups of people on social assistance), women's groups, regional development agencies, representatives of ten provincial ministries

and nine paragovernmental agencies, labour unions, social economy enterprises, school boards, farmers, the Diocese of Joliette, the caucus of the region's MNAs and one representative of each of the six local social development committees. The participation of the local committees is crucial, because it helps keep information circulating and is a way of expressing local concerns at the regional level.

The Table is a nonprofit organization with a deliberately flexible structure: There is no formal membership procedure. It takes a generally pragmatic approach, seeking above all to work on areas of consensus with the members who are present, on a voluntary basis. The number and composition of participants therefore varies constantly. In 2001-02, the Table met four times, with guest speakers at each meeting giving presentations and discussing themes as varied as culture, youth, the needs of people on income security benefits, and social housing. The meetings are also an opportunity for members to come and present the region's issues, problems and projects from the viewpoint of the stakeholders concerned.

In December 2000, the organization signed an agreement for \$490,000 over three years with the *Conseil régional de développement* (Regional Development Council), the *Ministère des Régions* (Québec Ministry of Regions), the *Régie régionale de la santé et des services sociaux* (Regional Health and Social Services Board), the *Ministère de la Solidarité sociale* (Québec Ministry of Social Solidarity) and *Emploi-Québec* (Québec Employment Agency). The amount is used to implement regional priorities and finance projects presented by local committees. It has also allowed the Table to hire a social development officer who participates in meetings of local committees and facilitates the Table's working committees, as well as a secretary.

Actions

The Table considers that social development issues should be of concern to each organization and each institution within its territory, and it defines social development as "...working to improve the quality of life, develop solidarity and struggle against inequalities so as to enable all individuals to fulfil themselves and to live healthy lives."⁴ Its fields of work revolve around two main mandates: 1) updating the regional issues identified as priorities during various consultations on social development; and 2) supporting local committees in carrying out and following up on projects identified in local forums that have been or will be held.

i) Regional issues

So far, the Table has emphasized all the priorities arising from the Regional Forum, and has added one more.

Harmonization of modes of transportation

Given the expansive territory of Lanaudière, the quality and organization of the transportation system can have a considerable impact on the public's access to health care and social services or to better jobs, or even on the exodus of young people to urban centres. In fact, the relative lack of public transit often reinforces individuals' exclusion. According to the Table, the social or economic integration of the less fortunate portion of the population is impossible unless they are provided with the means of moving about more freely.

In 1999, a partnership among a number of organizations and agencies – transportation companies, municipalities, community groups and ministries – provided three MRCs with the human and financial resources needed to gather information from their communities to define the population's specific daily travel needs and develop scenarios for harmonizing existing modes of transportation, based on the results. In 2001, the three studies made recommendations for improving access to public transit (school buses, adapted transportation, taxis). The Table is monitoring the issue, which is still under study.

Preventing students from dropping out

The high school graduation rate in Lanaudière lags behind the Québec average. In some MRCs in the region, about 40 percent of young people have not completed high school. Dropping out of school can have tragic social and economic consequences, such as making it harder to get a job and earn an adequate income. For the Table, it is unrealistic to think of satisfactory economic development when close to 40 percent of young people are excluded from skill-enhancing and well-paid jobs.

Given that genuine action on this issue depends on all the social players pooling their input and expertise, the Table plays a rallying role here. More specifically, the Table set up a regional committee in the fall of 1999 to update the regional portrait, foster more concerted action among the partners concerned, and make the region aware of the causes and consequences of dropping out of school. Together with the *Conseil régional de développement Lanaudière* (Regional Development Council of Lanaudière), the *Commission scolaire des Affluents* (Des Affluents School Board), the *Carrefour jeunesse emploi de l'Assomption* (L'Assomption Youth Employment Centre) and the CLSC Matawinie, it organized a regional intersectorial day of dialogue for joint action in 2001 that brought together more than 165 participants from the six MRCs. In the discussions, they identified the positive and negative factors for each MRC and the opportunities that could be developed to stop young people from dropping out of school. The regional committee has become the *Comité régional pour la valorisation de l'éducation* (CRÉVALE – regional committee for the enhancement of educa-

tion), which today includes more than 25 different partners. This joint approach has raised community awareness and helped generate a host of local activities in a number of MRCs, ranging from the organization of a Prevention Week in one to the creation of committees on school drop-outs in two others.

Social and community housing

It is hard to separate people's living conditions from their ability to find affordable housing in a safe and healthy environment. In Lanaudière, close to 44 percent of tenant families spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

Since the Regional Forum, the shortage of social housing has emerged as a major problem and given rise to a regional committee to take stock of needs and identify all the existing social housing programs. In 2000, with a grant from the Public Health Department and support from 100 community groups and institutions, the Table, in partnership with organizations like the *Office des personnes handicapées du Québec* (Québec Office for Persons with Disabilities), the *Société d'habitation du Québec* (Québec Housing Corporation), the *Ministère des Régions* and the *Groupe d'aménagement du logement populaire de Joliette* (Joliette Social Housing Development Group), carried out action research on social housing in Lanaudière. Once the research was completed, the Table invited some 20 stakeholders in the region to work together to map out common strategies and prepare a development plan for the coming years. The plan also includes the creation of a regional strategy committee, extensive dissemination of the research findings, and the development of a plan to consolidate and expand social housing.

Inter-regional equity in health services

Equity among different regions was one of the priorities identified at the National Forum on Social Development. In the Lanaudière region, health care and social services are underfunded by tens of millions of dollars. The role of the Table on this issue has been to work closely with the various partners to educate the public and political decision-makers about the direct consequences of underfunding health care services.

In 2000, a group of community organizations established the *Coalition des citoyens et citoyennes tannés d'attendre* (Coalition of citizens fed up with waiting), whose purpose is to mobilize the public on the issue of closing the funding gap for health care and social services. The Table is a member of the Coalition's coordinating committee and fully backs the Coalition's actions supporting its demands – e.g., a press conference, mass rally and meetings with MNAs (members of the

National Assembly). The Coalition's work has earned it a degree of recognition from both the Ministry of Health and Social Services and local round tables of community organizations. The Table intends to continue working with the Coalition because, although some *ad hoc* funding has been received, Lanaudière is still one of the most underfunded regions in terms of health care and social services.

The social development fund

Right from the start, the Table has been concerned about funding for social development in the region. At the outset, it demanded that royalties be collected on the exploitation of natural resources within the territory as a source of funding. More recently, it has worked instead with both Centraide Lanaudière and the *Ministère des Régions* to promote the creation of a social development fund. The fund would be used to support local and regional projects. Centraide Lanaudière is ready to allocate an amount from its reserve fund and intends to invite private foundations to participate. The government's contribution could take the form of progressively smaller amounts of financial assistance over a five-year development plan. Discussions are in progress.

ii) Support for local committees

The Table provides local committees with support in carrying out their projects. For this purpose, the Table allocates \$30,000 under its three-year agreement to each MRC for the implementation of local projects such as community kitchens, support for caregivers, and efforts to overcome the problem of students dropping out of school. Each project must stem from and be recommended by the local committee. In addition, it must be an intersectoral project related to the priorities identified in local forums. Although \$30,000 may not seem like much, the local committees can decide to reserve the entire amount for a single project, or use it to leverage funding from other sources. According to the Table, which provides the project's proponent with support and the relevant information for submitting projects, when necessary, "the economic leverage that [this amount] represents can therefore be used to carry out other projects that are pending."⁷

This action component has also allowed the Table to involve persons with disabilities in social development and to demonstrate the contribution they can make to their community. In March 2001, the Table hired three persons with disabilities as support and promotion officers, thanks to a contribution from the *Fonds de lutte contre la pauvreté* (Anti-Poverty Fund) and the *Office des personnes handicapées du Québec* (Québec Office for People with Disabilities). Their mandate is to support local committees in organizing their activities, promote the participation of organizations for persons with disabilities in local committees, and help analyze the needs and issues of persons with disabilities in each of the territories.

Evaluation

The Table was evaluated in 2000 and 2001 by the Public Health Department, thanks to a financial contribution from Health Canada. The study tried to measure the degree of regional and local stakeholders' satisfaction with the actions taken, to identify their expectations with respect to their participation, to identify certain aspects likely to solidify partnership, to determine future directions and even to boost dynamism through the arrival of new partners.

The evaluation did, in fact, validate the directions taken by the Table and determine certain courses of action for the coming years including, for example, continuing resolutely to take action in accordance with the regional priorities identified, and supporting local committees. In addition, the education awareness, concerted action and mobilization objectives of numerous organizations in the region were achieved, because "the Table and the local committees constitute a central forum for exchanging information, alerting people, raising awareness and learning about local and regional realities."⁵ Respondents said that they appreciated the fact that the Table's structure was flexible and multisectoral, that the participants were representative and that the Table brought people and groups together. They considered that the structure allowed for close collaboration on various issues and even facilitated access to government machinery and the various ministries.

However, the same study noted that the representation of the private sector and citizens was weak or non-existent. In this regard, Mr. Yves Côté, the Table's social development officer for several years, indicated that "the business world had no interest in sitting down and spending three hours discussing work that still needed to be fine-tuned. It was instead agreed to go and see them when the project needed financial, human or technical assistance."

The Table is currently examining a project to recognize the role of corporate citizenship. This project is still in the preliminary stages, but its goal would be to make business circles aware of the problems encountered by people in Lanaudière and encourage them to establish mechanisms for taking into account the needs of their employees and the communities.

As for citizen participation, Mr. Côté emphasized that "no local committee was able to interest ordinary citizens, because of the complexity of the issues and the language used." A number of members of local committees and of the Table would, however, like citizens to be involved. Without their participation, the Table's credibility with decision-making bodies often suffers, and it is frequently harder to find the arguments needed to turn around a situation deemed unacceptable.

Respondents mentioned the importance of developing a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy, including political action when needed. They think that the Table should play a more active role in this regard, notably in education awareness work with political leaders. However, the members of both the Table and the local committees are, to a certain extent, running out of steam. According to

Mr. Côté, this is explained by the fact that the individuals who are part of the Table are also members of other roundtables, where the issues dealt with are sometimes the same. As well, it has been hard to maintain continuity in the work given the turnover of representatives of the various organizations.

Conclusion

In 2001, the Table was part of a committee set up by the CRDL to provide an opinion on the provincial government's draft anti-poverty and anti-exclusion legislation. For the Table, "...poverty cannot be reduced to a mere economic definition and must take into account all of a population's needs: food, education, housing, social support, transportation, etc."⁶ To a certain extent, the Table's social development work consists of a series of anti-poverty projects. Its approach, focusing simultaneously on dialogue, joint action and partnership (despite potential weaknesses in terms of citizen and private sector involvement), is a major asset for the anti-poverty struggle, because this is "... perhaps the only region to have a distinct organization independent of any existing regional structure for the promotion of social development issues."⁷

This promotion of social development is done in two ways: through the concerted action of regional actors and through partnership of local actors. This dual approach seems to be working because of the participation of local committees which, by participating, can benefit from analyses and solutions shared by regional actors with sectoral expertise. At the same time, regional actors are informed of what makes things harder or easier for local proponents in implementing the strategies and programs that are promoted in the regional partnership process. There are many joint efforts in the social realm, but they do not always result in concrete projects being carried out – often because such projects do not fall within the mandates of the organizations working together, or because the latter are not ready to take on the responsibilities and constraints associated with the projects. Although not all of the Table's concerted efforts result in concrete projects, many of its joint activities can fuel or even guide local partnerships.

According to a major study on partnerships,⁸ the specific dynamic of partnership is the fact that each partner organization pursues its own interests which, in turn, subjects it intrinsically to power relations. Unless certain conditions are met, the partnership is likely to remain a means of managing social relations, thus serving the interests of established elites first and foremost. The conditions required to change an existing situation include consensus on the directions established in the process as well as the participation of all in implementing the resulting programs. This latter condition refers to the essential dialogue that precedes partnership, and this is where the Table excels – without neglecting partnerships, of course.

As Josée Mailhot and Alain Coutu, the Table's co-chairs, point out, identifying major problems in the region and potential courses of action depends on the concerted action of the actors present at the Table. Similarly, implementing actions requires the involvement and participation of the actors concerned.⁹ This is, indeed, what gives full meaning to the word 'partners' in the Table's name: the *Table des partenaires du développement social de Lanaudière*.

Endnotes

- ¹ Copenhagen Declaration, Report of the World Summit for Social Development, www.un.org/esa/socdev/docs/summit/pdf
- ² Conseil de la santé et du bien-être. (1998). "Forum sur le développement social : rapport," page 3.
- ³ Conseil de la santé et du bien-être. (1997). "La participation comme stratégie de renouvellement du développement social : document de réflexion," page 4.
- ⁴ Conseil régional de développement Lanaudière. (1999). "Forum sur le développement social : Agir, Contruire et Faire ensemble...pour le mieux être des personnes et de la collectivité," page 194.
- ⁵ According to the 2000-2001 annual report of the Table des partenaires.
- ⁶ 2000-2001 annual report of the Table, page 10.
- ⁷ Régie régionale de la santé et des services sociaux de Lanaudière, Direction de la santé publique. (2001). "Regard sur la santé publique," vol. 8, no. 4, page 7.
- ⁸ 2000-2001 annual report of the Table, page 14.
- ⁹ According to the 2000-2001 annual report of the Table.
- ¹⁰ Gagnon, C. and J.-L. Klein. (1991). "Le partenariat dans le développement local." *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, vol. 35, no. 95, pages 239-256..
- ¹¹ Mailhot, J. and A. Coutu (2001). "Un développement social axé avant tout sur le renforcement des communautés." *Développement social*, vol. 2, no. 1, page 11.