

# Stronger Together!

Putting the  
Family  
and Social  
Development  
Policy into  
practice in Les  
Maskoutains

## Stronger Together! Putting the Family and Social Development Policy into practice in Les Maskoutains: Lessons learned to build upon for the future.

### Key Points

- The *Politique de la famille et de développement social* (Family and social development policy (FSDP)) promotes collaboration among organizations and citizen mobilization to equitably improve healthy lifestyles and environments conducive to quality of life in the Municipalité régionale de comté des Maskoutains (MRC).
- Collaboration among organizations around the FSDP has been strong and can be buttressed by the following recommendations:
  - Continue to leverage the credibility of the MRC administration to recruit and engage organizations.
  - Engage organizations that have prior experience working collaboratively.
  - Develop relationships with more isolated organizations by having one-on-one meetings.
  - Ensure that committee leaders have qualities to achieve a balance between effective project management and consensus-seeking.
  - Provide ample time for discussion among members during meetings.
  - Enable members to prepare for and follow-up from meetings by engaging within their organizations.
  - Draw attention to common aims across organizations.
  - Take a holistic approach to issues so that various organizations can see their interests represented.
  - Focus on work that will lead to impactful outcomes.
  - Keep the collective goal and common values of organizations at the forefront.
  - Be clear that the focus is on identifying productive collaborations among members, not taking responsibilities away.
  - Highlight the perceived benefits of working on the FSDP to member organizations.

### Why is collaboration among organizations needed to promote social development and family wellbeing?

The health and wellbeing of a population is largely determined by environments for daily living, such as employment and working conditions, education, access to housing and food, early childhood development, and physical environments including access to greenspace and exposure to pollutants.

Family wellbeing plays a critical role in how we experience all of these factors across the lifecycle. Action across a range of governmental and non-governmental partners (hereafter referred to as organizations) is needed to support family wellbeing and social development, so it is important to find ways to develop and strengthen collaborative action across relevant organizations.

**Abbreviations:**

- MRC - Municipalité régionale de comté (Regional county municipality)  
 FSDP - *Politique de la famille et de développement social* (Family and social development policy)  
 SDC - Comité de développement social (Social development committee)

### Collaboration among organizations in MRC des Maskoutains via the *Politique de la famille et de développement social*

In 2017, a new FSDP and action plan were launched by the MRC des Maskoutains. By integrating family and social development policy, the FSDP promotes collaboration among organizations and citizen mobilization to equitably improve healthy lifestyles and environments conducive to quality of life.<sup>1</sup> The implementation of the FSDP is governed by two multi-organizational groups including governmental and non-governmental members:

- The commission permanente de la famille (the standing committee) provides oversight of action plans related to the FSDP.
- The comité de développement social (SDC) meets more frequently and aims to increase “consultation between organizations and support initiatives that contribute to the social development of the region.”<sup>2,3</sup>

### Strengthening collaboration among organizations in MRC des Maskoutains.

Between June 2020 and February 2021, the **HARMONICS** research team interviewed 14 people from organizations participating in the FSDP committees to investigate how and why these collaborations worked in Les Maskoutains. In spite of the pandemic, interest in the FSDP has remained strong. Recommendations and a summary of research findings are presented to support on-going work to deepen collaborative action on the FSDP among organizations in Les Maskoutains. Main themes of the findings include: 1) the role of leadership, 2) making the most of committee meetings, 3) facilitators and constraints in implementing the FSDP, 4) perceived benefits from member organizations.

**Quotations:**

All passages in quotation marks are direct quotes from interviewed FSDP committee members.

## 1. The crucial role of MRC and committee leadership

Certain initiatives and attitudes of leaders of the MRC and FSDP committees have been helpful in recruiting relevant partner organizations and keeping them engaged.

**Recommendation: Keep leveraging the credibility of the MRC to facilitate recruitment and engagement of new organizations to work on the FSDP.**

The MRC was perceived to have authority and credibility by leaders in organizations across Les Maskoutains, which helped to attract and retain their support and participation on the standing committee, ultimately speeding up the creation of an initial action plan for the FSDP. For example, some participating organizations prioritized communications received from the MRC over other tasks because of the credibility of the MRC and the perception that the work would be important and well supported.

**Recommendation: Engage organizations who already have experience working collaboratively when recruiting new partners to work on the FSDP.**

When setting up the new SDC, leaders leveraged momentum from another multi-organizational initiative, the Plan to Fight Poverty, by inviting some members of that initiative to join work on the FSDP. Since those members had first-hand experience with how efficient and effective collaborative work could be, they were easier to recruit onto the SDC. Similarly, organizations who had a history of collaboration with existing members of the SDC were easy to recruit because there was already a mutual respect developed and mutual recognition of expertise between those partners, and a sense of belonging to build on.

**Recommendation: Reach out to more isolated organizations in the MRC by having one-on-one meetings to build relationships.**

Some rural municipalities in the MRC were previously typically left out of collaborative planning in the region. Leaders of the committees had to work hard to engage leaders from these municipalities by drawing on connections with the MRC and planning a series of one-on-one meetings to discuss the FSDP. This effort led to issues important to rural municipalities being adopted into the FSDP action plan, which resulted in rural partners feeling recognized and helped them to identify the value of participating. In the end, rural partners valued sharing the table with a range of organizations and local and regional leaders from across the MRC because it helped them see how they could “build bridges between the committee and (their) municipality” and they felt less isolated.

**Recommendation: Ensure that committee leaders collectively have the qualities to achieve a balance between effective project management and consensus-seeking.**

Interviewed representatives of member organizations identified multiple leaders within the FSDP committees.

A mixture of two leadership styles was described:

- A structured approach, which involved leaders managing the project over time by finding out what was working and what was not, and making changes to governance, personnel and project activities as a result.
- A flexible-consensual approach involving leaders who were well connected to the community, good listeners, and available, and which focused on keeping members informed and checking in on all perspectives. This helped members feel heard and included in the policy process, and ultimately facilitated cohesion and involvement of member organizations working on the FSDP. This approach also helped generate collective ownership and consensus over the policy development process. Members felt that the “policy belongs to us.”

Some organizations perceived that their influence on the decisions would be enhanced if elected officials shared leadership with them in the policy development and implementation process to a greater extent. That said, there was generally positive feedback about leaders of the FSDP committees, who were perceived to have effectively managed implementation through their continual support of FSDP activities, including their knowledgeable input.

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## 2. Fostering productive committee meetings.

A lot of the collaboration on the FSDP happens during committee meetings. Therefore, they should be carefully prepared and facilitated. Over time, a couple of successful strategies have been used.

**Recommendation: Provide ample time during meetings for members to have discussions so that they can identify shared goals and create a shared vision.**

Committee meetings with time for members to share information about their own organizations (e.g., current objectives and activities) and discuss topical issues kept members engaged in FSDP work. Discussions helped members identify shared goals and needs, and generate a shared vision of the policy development process. As a result, they created a common ground thereby strengthening the collaboration and leading to a joint discourse with many members wanting to go in the same direction. Later, this alignment helped generate strategies that were in tune with all organizations.

When committee meetings followed a stricter agenda and limited open discussions, members reported feeling disengaged and less empowered, as if they were “passive spectators to the process,” and thus contributed less to the discussion.

**Recommendation: Enable members to prepare for and follow-up from meetings by engaging within their organizations about committee work.**

Members noted that it was important to discuss committee work within their organizations so that they could get a fuller sense of community needs and ultimately be empowered to influence decisions and impact the community. This was accomplished at committee meetings by providing agenda points in advance so that members could consult their teams before attending meetings, polling members about relevant topics in between meetings, and giving members time to consult about key issues within their organizations after meetings.

**Recommendation: Encourage collaboration by highlighting aspects of committee objectives that are widely relevant across members organizations, and also by drawing attention to common aims of different member organizations.**

One strategy used by committee leaders to encourage collaboration across organizations during meetings of FSDP committees was to highlight how current committee objectives were relevant to various organizations, and to identify common aims of different organizations. This strategy helped members foresee how working across organizations could lead to “wins and synergies”, including visualizing their work as a process that would ultimately yield rewards for them and their communities.

Engagement of specific organizations in this way fluctuated based on the issues being addressed. For example, when the issue being addressed had greater alignment with the aims of a member’s organization, the member perceived having the power to contribute to addressing the issue and was more involved.

### 3. Lessons learnt about facilitators and constraints in implementing the FSDP

Developing and implementing a collaborative policy involves certain hurdles that were either avoided or overcome in the case of the FSDP. Here is how.

**Recommendation: When creating a collaborative policy, define the focal issue holistically so that a wide range of organizations will have their interests represented.**

A holistic approach to social development involves taking into account all of a person’s needs instead of focusing on single problems; “a person doesn’t just have a mental health situation, a homelessness situation, an addiction situation, a dependency situation; It’s all of those things.”

One way that a more holistic approach was facilitated was by the use of shared language when discussing social needs of the community and FSDP action plans, which increased awareness and understanding of the FSDP objectives and community needs across organizations with different backgrounds. For example, members were able to understand the needs of all populations, cohorts, and ages, independent of their organization’s target population, which led to a “framework to work together on family and social development.”

Defining community needs and initiatives in a holistic manner when creating the new FSDP facilitated the involvement of different partners at the table and a shared vision of social development, which created a sense of ownership, linking the missions of more organizations to the FSDP goals. As a result, more organizations saw their interests represented and thus remained at the table to advance the initiatives, despite slight deviations between the FSDP mandate and their own goals, because they could still relate to them. This approach also helped to create policies

impacting a broad range of populations, leading to the efficient creation of a social development plan because all organizations in the SDC were thinking in the same direction.

That said, it should be acknowledged that, according to one member of the SDC, in initial phases of the committee, organizations with conflicting views left, leaving a table with organizations sharing a communitarian orientation.

**Recommendation:** Focus on work that will lead to impactful outcomes so that organizations can see the effects of collaborative work.

Realizing the benefits of collaborative work strengthened participation in the SDC and standing committee, and the FSDP policy development in both early and later stages. Early successes included developing an action plan, “making real changes in the community”, and seeing improvements within partner organizations (e.g., increased referrals to services they provided in the community). When members realized these positive impacts of committee work, they increased their trust in the process and belief in the potential to impact their communities positively.

**Recommendation:** Keep the collective goals and common organizational values of members at the forefront (e.g., during meetings or in communications) to help reconcile differences in ideas.

While members of the standing committee did not report major conflicts affecting the policy development and implementation, ideological tensions appeared when the original goals of the committee faded away and there was less common understanding among organizations due to different points of view. The disagreements created hidden agendas and demotivated collaborative work. As a result, some organizations addressed issues by themselves rather than through collaboration.

When there was alignment of core values and views (i.e., respect, loyalty, commitment to work for the community, solidarity) among committee members, minor ideological conflicts or temporary tensions (e.g., little discrepancies on what social development means, disagreements on ideas related to the standing committee work) did not affect the engagement of members. For example, in the initial phases of the FSDP, organizations involved in the standing committee had the same objectives: “to provide a higher quality of life for its citizens” and to work on the action plans. This encouraged everyone to stay in “the same frame of mind”: “It’s about bonding, it’s about working together.”

**Recommendation: Be clear that the focus is on identifying productive collaborations among members, not taking responsibilities away from existing organizations.**

In the early phases of the FSDP implementation, since some organizations had similar expertise and target audiences, they expressed confusion over their roles and responsibilities on the FSDP and worried about losing control of traditional jurisdiction over certain issues in the process of collaboration. However, most members reported no concerns for the following reasons:

- The mandates of the FSDP committees were designed from the start in a way that was respectful of the mandate of existing organizations.
- Committee leadership explained the FSDP's purpose transparently and worked on building trust. For example, one leader reassured members early on that staff hired to assist the SDC were there to assist the committees, not to replace any of the roles of committee members in the community, which lessened fears of duplicated efforts and loss of control.
- All organizations at the table felt heard and well represented, which minimized the fear of losing control or giving up responsibility. It was also helpful that meetings prompted "productive conversations" addressing how to move forward while highlighting gains for each organization.

- A single organization from each sector was nominated through the Issue Tables (part of the SDC and Family Policy structure comprising organizations working on the same populations) to join the FSDP committees as a representative of the interest and needs of the *community* (rather than their organizations). This lowered conflict by preventing jurisdictional overlap when discussing the FSDP, even if several organizations at the table had overlapping missions and similar target populations.
- Members of the SDC minimized work duplication by referring citizens to the relevant organization according to their needs, which lessened members' fear of losing control. This strategy involved learning what other organizations specialized in, which was possible through the networks and exchange of information at the committee.



#### 4. What member organizations say about benefits of participation

Besides intended benefits for the community, member organizations saw benefits for themselves in collaborating on the FSDP.

**Recommendation: Highlight the perceived benefits of working on the FSDP to member organizations to encourage on-going collaboration and when recruiting new members.**

Partner organizations expressed a number of benefits of participating in the FSDP committees:

- The information shared in the meetings was an essential element of interest for organizations. Accessing “privileged knowledge” helped them become aware of other organizations and community needs, establish partnerships outside the table, and transmit relevant information to the organizations and target population in their municipalities. This allowed early successes (i.e., connecting their clients to useful services). Overall, this motivated members to regularly attend the meetings.
- FSDP committees were seen as a venue to raise awareness of issues of interest for the organization and advocate for the needs of the community. One member noted, “the SDC provides credibility and makes you more visible and present.”

- The SDC was seen as a valuable networking tool to connect with key organizations and leaders to put forward initiatives. Organizations perceived that the committee could expand their scope of action, make them known in the territory, and provide an extra layer of support. For instance, by sharing their mission at the committee, there was a perception that their needs as organizations could reach elected officials with power to take action: “they may talk to their boards about the work of the sectors.”
- For most organizations, centralizing local action projects into the FSDP was seen as a positive strategy to avoid overlapping actions across the region and have a support network comprising other organizations, namely the MRC and elected officials.
- Grant funding of the FSDP increased interest of some organizations to develop alliances with members in the committee.

Together, these benefits led to further engagement of member organizations in the SDC and the standing committee.

##### Perceived benefits in a nutshell:

- Access to relevant information
- A venue to share member and community interests
- Networking
- Centralization of projects
- Financial incentives



1. MRC des Maskoutains (2017). La politique de la famille et de développement social. [https://www.mrcmaskoutains.qc.ca/\\_files/ugd/e09662\\_a2a291d66bba4e8582d9a478004574f3.pdf](https://www.mrcmaskoutains.qc.ca/_files/ugd/e09662_a2a291d66bba4e8582d9a478004574f3.pdf)
2. MRC des Maskoutains (2018). Call for applications 05131 / 13534 (05-2018). Vacancy on the Social Development Committee - Family Policy and Social Development: MRC des Maskoutains.
3. MRC des Maskoutains (2017). Call for applications. Vacancy on the Social Development Committee - Family Policy and Social Development: MRC des Maskoutains.

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