



Issue Brief 2: Sustainability and Underserved Communities

Inclusive municipal sustainability initiatives must consider the needs of underserved communities and engage them in decision-making processes

Governing Sustainable Municipalities

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Governments, industry, communities, and the public are increasingly prioritizing their preparations for the future. National governments across the world are developing plans and policies to ensure that their countries continue to thrive, but municipal efforts are just as important to ensure that local communities operate effectively today, and in the years to come, by preserving their unique characteristics and authenticity.

Why do municipalities need to prepare for the future?

Residents want their communities to thrive and become stronger in the future. Local governments therefore develop plans and policies to make this possible. The plans and policies must balance many different aspects of the governance framework, taking into account the unique social, environmental, and economic aspects of each community. Local governments are best placed to understand how these aspects interact and change.

One way to visualize this balance is to think of a stool with three legs (Figure 1). The seat is the community, and each leg represents a different



supporting pillar: environmental, social, and economic. If one leg is shorter, weaker, or missing, the stool will be unstable. Similarly, a community that is economically robust but has an inhospitable

environment, or weak social cohesion due to the lack of recreational facilities or friendly play areas, is likely to grow smaller as families move away in search of more supportive neighbourhoods. The ability to maintain a good balance over time by considering how the three areas interact is known as sustainability.

Sustainability is a useful word to describe what municipalities are doing when they put plans and policies in place to preserve the community now and into the future. A sustainable municipality can strengthen the economy, often driven by local purchasing and production networks, while maintaining environmental benefits such as access to green spaces, clean water and air, and rich biodiversity. Sustainability projects also bring people together, helping to build strong communities that are less vulnerable to change. Some of the core concepts of sustainable development are already in current legislation, such as *The Cities Act* (2002; p. 15) which states that the purpose of cities is “...to foster economic, social and environmental well-being.”

Figure 1:

A strong community visualized as a three-legged stool.

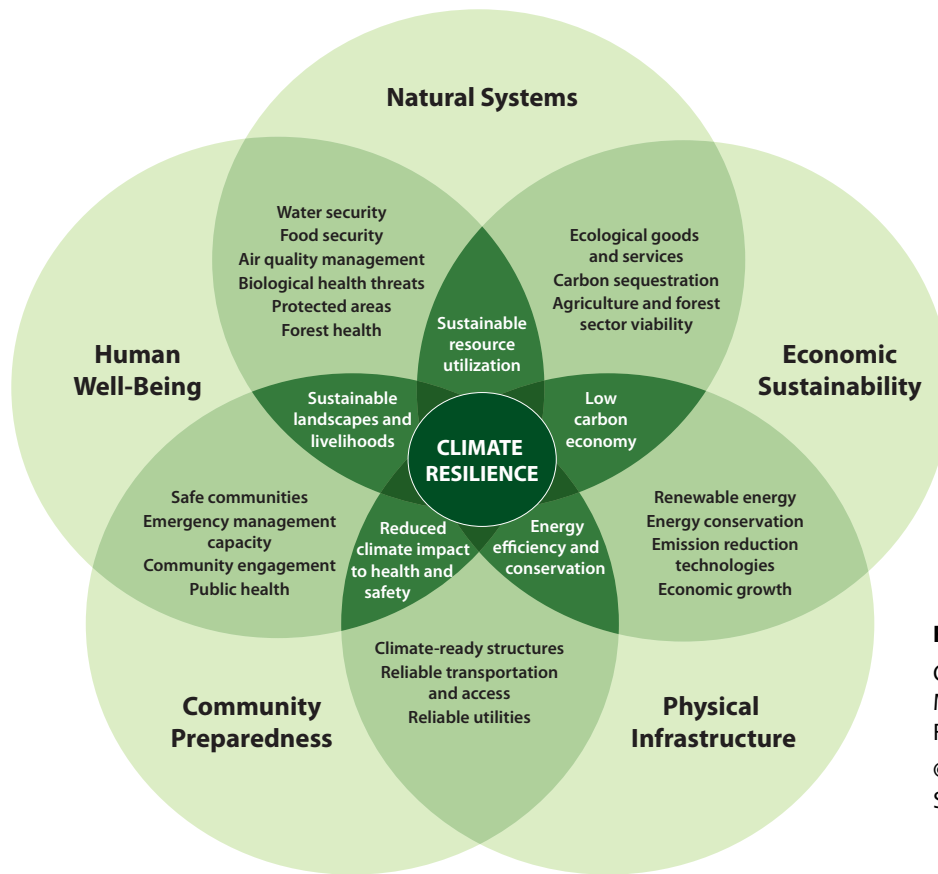


Figure 2:
Climate Resilience Measurement Framework
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What can municipalities do?

Municipal governments have jurisdiction over land use planning, zoning, and property taxation within their boundaries. They also have strong connections with the people, organizations and businesses in their communities – those most affected by sustainability issues, who are therefore known as stakeholders. Municipal governments exert a significant degree of control over the speed and transparency of administrative decision-making and policy implementation and can act as hubs for local partnerships (Teixeira et al., 2022). Forward-looking initiatives include new technologies, planning guidelines and investments, with municipal governments leading the promotion and advancement of such ventures (Antoshkina & Shmeleva, 2020).

Provincial Government of Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan has a growth plan that aims to build on private capital investment by \$16 billion

annually and invest \$30 billion in infrastructure. The plan also looks at projects and initiatives such as small modular reactor technology using Saskatchewan’s uranium resources. This will ensure that growth leads to a better quality of life for Saskatchewan families and communities (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2019). On 1 January 2021, the Government of Saskatchewan included a community health and well-being category in its Statements of Provincial Interest Regulations, providing for the first time a regulatory framework for municipalities to address community needs. The provincial government has also published the Climate Resilience Measurement Framework (Figure 2), which proposes indicators for five areas: human well-being, community preparedness, physical infrastructure, economic sustainability, and natural systems (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2018).

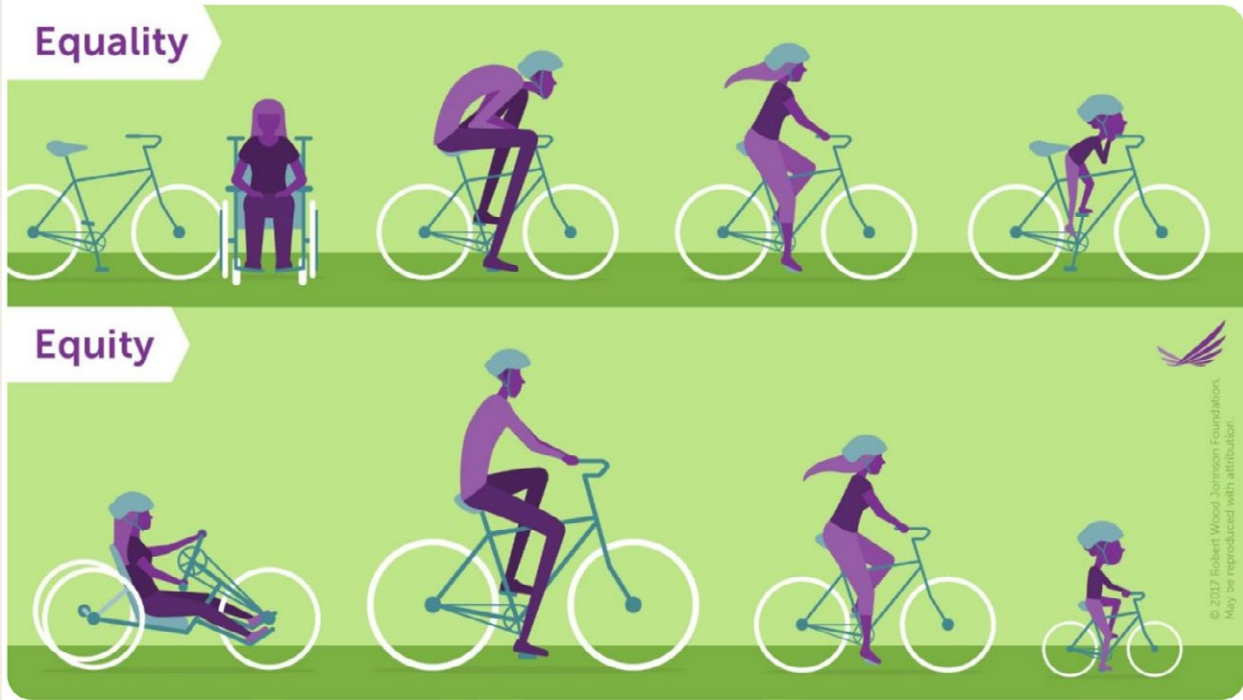


Figure 3: The difference between equality and equity. ©Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

What are underserved communities and how do they link to sustainable development?

The Governing Sustainable Municipalities (GSM) project defines an underserved community as one whose members may experience social inequities leading to discrimination. Underserved communities may experience barriers when engaging with the municipal planning system due to specific characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, culture, health, language, religion, place of residence, or occupation. Many underserved communities also face barriers when accessing local

healthcare services, as well as inequity in overall local representation (Lazarus *et al.*, 2019). The concept of equity is compared to equality in Figure 3. Because these communities are underserved, they are most likely to suffer from the economic, social, and environmental impacts of climate change. Sustainability initiatives must therefore focus on the needs of underserved communities to ensure that the benefits of sustainable development are shared by all.

Why should municipal governments include underserved communities in planning activities?

Sustainability initiatives should be developed using an inclusive and participatory approach to ensure

that underserved communities are represented in the planning process. Sustainable development can only

be successful when municipalities involve a diverse range of stakeholders, by empowering public and private organizations, individuals, and communities in consultation and decision-making activities. We should not focus solely on the outcome of an initiative (Frare *et al.*, 2020).

In Canada, municipalities are encouraged to move away from the traditional planning process, where they exercise full control over public policies and decisions. Despite this push, underserved communities remain poorly represented (Leung, 2009). In addition, the specific needs of underserved communities are not well understood, which prevents effective engagement. As a result, the needs of underserved communities are generally not reflected in planning activities and decision-making (Bucik *et al.*, 2017).

The importance of engaging underserved communities in municipal planning and decision-making has been underlined in recent years by incidents described as environmental racism (Mohai & Bryant, 2019). This occurs when environmental policies, practices, or directives (intentionally or otherwise) disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable underserved communities (Waldron, 2020). A high-profile case known as the Flint water crisis occurred in 2014 and is used as an educational example for planners across the world. Municipal authorities responsible for the US city of

Flint, Michigan, switched their water supply from the central Detroit treatment facility to the poorly maintained local facility as a cost-cutting exercise. This exposed 100,000 Flint residents to dangerous levels of lead in their drinking water, including up to 12,000 children, who are particularly susceptible to lead poisoning due to its devastating impact on brain development (Johnson, 2016). The racial makeup of the city at the time was approximately 57% African American, 10% Native American/Asian/Hispanic/Latino/two or more races, and 33% White. The poverty rate was 40%, the highest among Michigan cities at the time. Multiple warnings from members of the community and industry professionals with important local knowledge were ignored, and many believed that the municipality would not have shown such indifference if the city's racial and poverty profile had been different. Environmental racism is not only an issue in the United States, but also in Canada, with reports showing that underserved communities are subject to conditions that would not be acceptable for other groups (Venkataraman *et al.*, 2022). Every underserved group can bring different perspectives, knowledge and resources to sustainability initiatives, leading to exciting and innovative solutions that can be achieved by combining modern knowledge, local expertise, and long-standing local practices.

How can Saskatchewan municipal governments improve communication and encourage participation with underserved communities?

Underserved communities can find accessibility a challenge when trying to engage with the planning system. For example, information leaflets must be distributed widely to reach all groups within the municipality, and recipients must have good literacy

skills to understand the contents. The use of social media and email can be an effective communication channel for many, but not everyone has access to this technology or the skills to use it. Working with organizations that act as a bridge between



Environmental Racism in Canada

The Anishinaabe community of Asubpeeschoseewagong First Nation (also known as Grassy Narrows First Nation) in northern Ontario is still living with the severe and long-term effects of environmental racism. The community's primary food source was fish from the local rivers, but 9 tons of mercury was discharged from a paper mill into the English-Wabigoon River between 1962 and 1970 (Philibert et al., 2022). Approximately 90% of the community still shows signs of mercury poisoning, including new generations born after 1970 (Leslie, 2016).

the municipality and underserved communities can be beneficial because such organizations can advise on the most appropriate communication methods (Abebe, 2016). Some communities may be reluctant to engage in political matters of any kind due to previous negative experiences. Appropriate partnerships can help to ensure that municipal approaches are not only accessible but also culturally sensitive (Public Health New Brunswick, 2022).

Saskatchewan also has three municipal associations that support and advise on communication and engagement with underserved communities in the context of sustainability initiatives. They are the Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities (www.newnorthsask.org), the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (www.suma.org), and the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (www.sarm.ca).

How can municipal governments include underserved communities in planning activities?

An open-minded approach is required when including underserved communities in municipal planning, ensuring a continuous, two-way process is in place. Different ways to encourage community participation have been tested at the municipal level in Canada and elsewhere, but they generally involve collecting opinions and feedback about initiatives that are already underway or even completed (Antoshkina & Shmeleva, 2020). This does not achieve the aim of community engagement in core

activities such as positions on task forces or advisory committees, creating policy, project management, or decision-making. Although a community engagement strategy is a core component of most official planning documents, it can appear tokenistic if not managed properly. Effective engagement with underserved communities in municipal planning makes it more likely that sustainability initiatives will succeed, and they may even achieve greater outcomes than anticipated.

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For more information on the Governing Sustainable Municipalities project, please visit www.jsgs-gsm.ca.

KEY MESSAGES

Underserved communities are residents of the area served by the municipality and they should be encouraged and enabled to participate in the planning process.

Every underserved group can bring different perspectives, knowledge, and resources to sustainability initiatives. Exciting innovations and solutions can be achieved by combining modern knowledge, local expertise, and long-standing local practices.

The probability of success increases for sustainability initiatives when communities are involved in the planning process.

Local partnerships are necessary for effective communication with underserved communities.

Some communities may be reluctant to engage in political matters due to previous negative experiences, so municipalities should ensure their service delivery approaches are both accessible and culturally sensitive.

Community engagement is more than the provision of information about sustainability initiatives and the solicitation of feedback. Representatives from all groups in the community should be encouraged to become actively involved in municipal planning, including policies, project management, and decision making.