



CASE STUDY | TransformTO: Multisolving in Action

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TransformTO is the City of Toronto's Climate Action Strategy. It was collaboratively developed by the City of Toronto and The Atmospheric Fund to reduce the city's greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050. What makes TransformTO particularly inspiring is that it intends to reach its bold environmental targets while **ALSO** improving health, the local economy and social equity. This is multisolving in action: an approach for tackling complex, problems by focusing simultaneously on achieving “multiple benefits in climate change, health, the economy, equity, disaster resilience etc.” in a holistic way.

OVERVIEW

[TransformTO](#) was developed as a collaboration between the City of Toronto's Environment and Energy Division and The Atmospheric Fund with support from a diverse Advisory Group with members from several city divisions and community leaders with environmental, health, economic and equity perspectives.

TransformTO's strategy champions a broad and innovative approach to achieving its bold goal of reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050 and its strategy includes specific targets for energy performance in homes and buildings; energy use; transportation; and, waste diversion. But what makes the TransformTO plan truly inspiring is that it intends to meet these environmental targets while also positively contributing to health, the local economy and social equity at the same time.

Traditional methods for addressing a complex issue like climate action have emphasized a siloed, single-sector approach that focuses on a specific set of manageable, achievable actions.

About TransformTO



[TransformTO](#) is the City of [Toronto's climate action strategy](#). Its goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve our health, grow our economy, and improve social equity. Everyone will have a part to play in transforming Toronto into a low-carbon city.

TransformTO was developed between 2015 and 2017 as a collaboration between [The Atmospheric Fund](#) and the City of Toronto's Environment & Energy Division with input from 10 city divisions and 20 diverse community representatives.



In contrast, TransformTO has chosen to embrace a multisolving approach, resisting the temptation to focus exclusively on the city's environmental issues and refusing to fragment them from other pressing concerns that matter to residents. TransformTO's multisolving approach proposes that "climate actions be designed with and for Toronto's diverse communities to maximize benefits and mobilize the necessary support to achieve our mutual goals."

WHAT IS MULTISOLVING?

Multisolving "is a strategic approach to finding solutions to the interconnected problems facing the climate and human society – producing multiple benefits in health, justice, equity, resilience and well-being." "A multisolving effort improves metrics in more than one sector with the same investment of time, money or political will." [Climate Interactive](#), a Washington D.C.-based climate change think-tank, credited with developing the practice of multisolving has identified 3 principles and 3 practices foundational to its approach:

3 Principles of Multisolving

1. **Everyone Matters and Everyone is Needed** – Multisolving goes deeper than focusing on co-benefits on a central issue. It recognizes that in an interconnected world, no one is free until everyone is free. This means complex issues must be tackled together by joining perspectives, experiences, knowledge and expertise. "Experts and citizens, health workers and energy workers, elected officials and advocacy leaders all hold a piece of the needed solutions."
2. **We Can Succeed by Addressing Tough Problems in An Integrated Way** – Multisolving assumes that problems might be easier to solve together than one at a time. While it is typical to solve problems by breaking them down into smaller pieces, "the genius of multisolving is to see how certain interventions solve several problems at once."
3. **Large Solutions Start Small and Grow Through Learning and Connecting** – Multisolving projects tend to grow in impact, budgets and partnerships "via idiosyncratic pathways that depend on unpredictable processes" but share an "underlying commitment to experimentation, learning and documenting impacts. These impacts, woven into stories of possibility, are often the ingredient that drew new partners, sectors and resources to the work."

3 Practices of Multisolving

Multisolving projects rely on these 3 practices – cycling through them in iterations – as the project impact grows and extends. The three multisolving practices are:

1. **Welcoming** – Multisolving requires diverse perspectives willing to think and work together. Multisolving leaders paradoxically "welcome new partners and ideas while holding strong to the core vision of the project providing guidance that carries forward through growth and change."

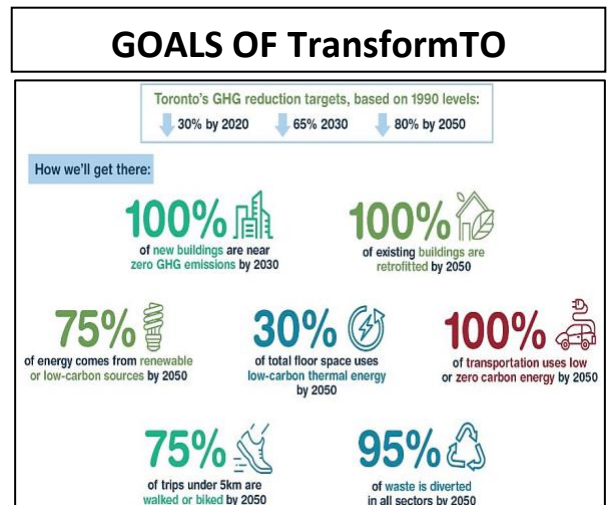
2. **Learning and Documenting** – Multisolving projects invest in learning and act on what they learn. All multisolving projects are disciplined about documenting their impact and measure a wide array of benefits.
3. **Storytelling** – Multisolving projects tell stories of what is possible and what is already being achieved. These stories attract more partners and resources to the multisolving effort.

Beyond the principles and practices outlined above multisolving requires courage to implement because it embraces an approach that is counter-intuitive and challenges the dominant paradigm of how problems are solved. Multisolving is also counter-cultural, advancing a way of thinking and acting that does not fit neatly into our existing sector silos and resource flows.

BUILDING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OF TRANSFORMTO

A central task of TransformTO in the early days of the project was for its team to develop a community engagement strategy that built shared ownership for TransformTO and invited input to help set the city’s low-carbon priorities.

TransformTO’s Community Engagement Strategy included a specific focus on three key audiences: Community Stakeholders; Public & Community Groups; and, Toronto City Council. The aims of the engagement strategy included raising awareness, garnering support, mobilizing advocacy for next steps, and building partnerships for implementation.



A core element of TransformTO’s engagement strategy was the creation of a 30-member, multi-sector advisory group known as the Modelling Advisory Group (MAG) which included representatives from eleven different city divisions and agencies; the provincial government; public utilities; Metrolinx; academics and professional associations; environmental and climate change advocacy groups; municipal and land-use specialists; community and social planning groups as well as subject-matter experts.

Over the course of one year this group provided input on what measures to model, and also participated in a day-long “multi-criteria analysis session” that evaluated the highest impact climate actions considering their perceived ability to drive other positive community benefits. Mary Pickering, VP of Programs and Partnerships with The Atmospheric Fund, describes this session as “the pinnacle moment for really embedding the multisolving approach” into the work of TransformTO.

A commitment to multisolving is reflected throughout the Modelling Advisory Group’s [Summary Report](#) which includes a recommendation that embodies the spirit of multisolving, “Recognize that it’s possible, and necessary, to achieve significant emission reductions at the same time as achieving other public policy priorities – particularly social equity. TransformTO actions need to proactively consider the needs of all of Toronto’s communities, and must not unduly burden or unfairly advantage one segment of society over another, nor create intergenerational inequities. The Poverty Reduction Strategy identifies many objectives that TransformTO also seeks to achieve and can support with climate actions. TransformTO must also continue to align with poverty reduction objectives.”

TransformTO’s application of multisolving did surface some important tensions however. One example of this emerged during the multi-criteria analysis meeting when it was revealed to all that the highest impact actions for generating climate outcomes were not the same as the top-ranked climate actions for generating other health and social benefits. The group resolved this tension by working together to identify three “sweet spots” that generated solid climate outcomes while also addressing priority social and/or health benefits as well. The three “sweet-spots” identified were:

1. Driving Local Employment Through Buildings

Retrofits – More than 50% of Toronto’s greenhouse gas emissions come from buildings so retrofitting buildings to improve their energy efficiency will be a key strategy to reaching the city’s 2050 goal. Building retrofits and social housing renewal contribute to the city’s climate action targets, generate health benefits and create jobs. It is estimated this work will generate an estimated 80,000-person years of local employment between now and 2050.

2. Ensuring the Electric Vehicle Revolution Support

Equity Outcomes – Switching vehicles from gasoline and diesel to electric power will significantly improve air quality and improve health for Torontonians. This must be managed with consideration to impacts on the city’s energy grid and also balanced with the need to keep access to mobility and public transit affordable for all.

3. Mobilize Low-Carbon Neighbourhoods

– Tap into the significant resources and creativity in our diverse neighbourhoods to create flexible, innovative low-carbon solutions that help people address local concerns. This includes neighbourhood support and actions including: community energy planning; home retrofits; transit expansion; and, supporting the shift to cycling and walking

“Achieving emission reductions is an important opportunity **AND** we need to understand community priorities and design climate action to address them as well.”

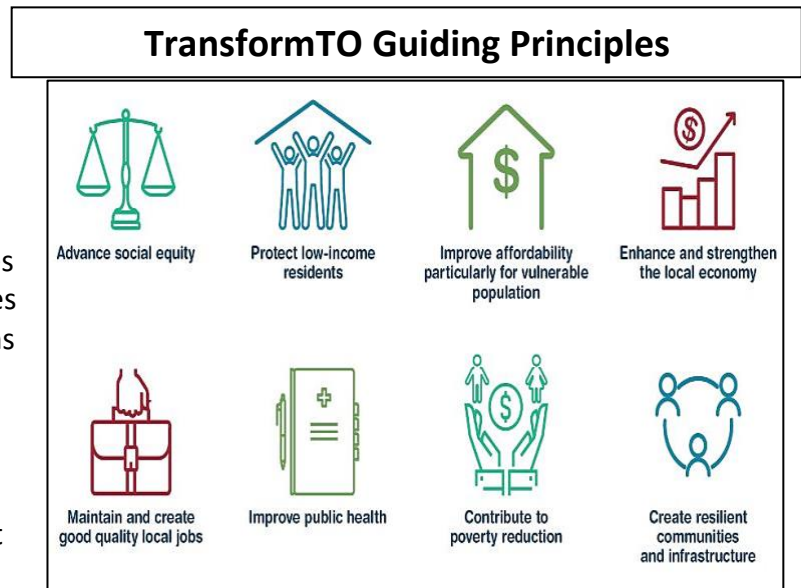
TransformTO's community engagement strategy attracted input from nearly 2,000 people who participated in an array of input opportunities, including some co-hosted by community groups. Partnerships with community groups built a high degree of community and resident ownership in the process and ultimately succeeded in mobilizing strong support for TransformTO from the public and community organizations alike.

In fact, local community organizations have continued to demonstrate a high degree of ownership and involvement in the implementation of TransformTO once the policy was approved. Common ideas and recommendations emerging from these consultations included:

- better transit (transit that is reliable; accessible, affordable, clean and expanded)
- complete, dense and walkable communities
- urban agriculture
- cycling infrastructure
- presence of green space

Resident and community members offered the TransformTO engagement team feedback on the city's climate change agenda and also clearly indicated that climate change was only one of several urgent issues that residents wanted to discuss and act on. The TransformTO engagement team credit the community's feedback as instrumental in encouraging them to view climate change in a more holistic way. This led the TransformTO team to consider how their project's priorities might serve as a catalyst to address other issues that residents considered as equally important priorities.

Ultimately the feedback from residents and community groups led to the creation of a set of guiding principles that have become central to TransformTO's continued engagement. Mary Pickering of The Atmospheric Fund summarized the intent of these principles best when she said, "We know from cities around the world that low-carbon actions have significant potential to drive community benefits. For example, a campaign to improve the energy performance and comfort of Toronto's buildings would create good local jobs. It would also divert billions of dollars in annual out-of-province energy spending back into the local economy."



THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING OUR PRIORITIES RELEVANT

A valuable lesson that emerged through TransformTO's early community engagement work is the reminder that community residents rarely view issues in the same siloed, issue-specific ways that organizations and subject matter experts do. As one member of the TransformTO team noted, "Achieving emission reductions is an important opportunity AND we need to understand community priorities and design climate actions to address them as well." This learning – which is foundational to the multisolving approach – enabled TransformTO to illustrate how its strategies also offered ways for other community priorities to be addressed. A multisolving approach, encouraged the TransformTO team to consider how to make their priorities more relevant to residents and other sectors.

Paradoxically, this led to better policies and programs as well as broader constituencies of support. This shift in thinking led the TransformTO team to explore how to achieve climate goals AND: create local jobs; improve public health; advancing equity. How could TransformTO's climate action strategies be designed so that they also addressed other community priorities? How could TransformTO's strategies "enable local communities to advance and benefit from the work in their neighbourhoods?" These questions, which emerged from considering how to make TransformTO's strategies more relevant, ultimately led to opportunities to build much greater public support and leverage more diverse resources to support the goals of TransformTO.

RETHINKING HOW WE THINK ABOUT ENGAGEMENT

The lens of multisolving has deeply informed the TransformTO team's thinking about the work of stakeholder and community engagement. The central mandate of TransformTO initially focused on the question: ***How will we reduce Toronto's greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050?*** However, embracing a multisolving perspective led the TransformTO team to pose a different question: ***How can we mobilize diverse community intelligence and resources to address local priorities and contribute to an equitable, low-carbon city?***

This new question has set the stage for greater collaboration with a diversity of partners which is positive since it has been shown that cities that collaborate with other actors deliver twice as many climate actions because they are able to leverage synergies and inter-dependencies that a single-sector, city-driven approach would never have access to.



I believe that systems shift most effectively when change is happening at multiple levels with some sort of loose congruence. I also think change is held back when a preponderance of effort is focused at a single layer of the system and other layers are frozen in place or even changing in an opposing direction.



- Elizabeth Swain
Co-Director, Climate Interactive

It is important to note however that a multi-solving approach does not always align well with more traditional approaches to community engagement. As the TransformTO engagement team noted, “Collaboration with a diversity of partners requires trust and transparency. This can sometimes conflict with municipal decision-making timelines, protocol and culture.” It also requires a dedicated budget for engagement activities as well as ensuring that more time is allocated to allow for more effective and diverse community participation.

CONCLUSION

TransformTO’s approach to building awareness and engagement on the City of Toronto’s climate action goals is revolutionary. Its willingness to recognize the possibility of simultaneously achieving ambitious environmental, health and social goals in response to citizen and stakeholder input is inspiring. It also highlights a promising new approach – multisolving – that fundamentally changes our traditional thinking about how best to address complex community issues.

Counterintuitively, multisolving suggests that resisting the temptation to simplify to a single issue or narrow focus to a single sector can actually lead to solutions that have greater shared ownership AND greater impact on a multitude of issues that affect the lives of its city’s citizens.



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