



ADVANCING A CANADA-WIDE STRATEGY FOR BELONGING

BRIEF 6: WHY BELONGING MATTERS FOR COMMUNITY CLIMATE ACTION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change is reshaping communities across Canada. Floods, wildfires, heat waves, and shifting seasons affect how people live, work, and care for one another. Research and field experience consistently show that the strength of social connections within a community shapes how well it can prepare for, respond to, and recover from climate impacts.

This brief explores the relationship between belonging and climate resilience, drawing on the Tamarack Institute's work with over 130 communities across Canada through the [Communities Climate Transitions \(CCT\)](#) network and the [Communities Building Belonging \(CBB\)](#) network. Communities where people feel connected are better positioned to take collective climate action. Climate initiatives built with community connection in mind earn broader trust and last longer.

This brief is written for policymakers, practitioners, and community sector leaders with the ability to shape local policy, funding decisions, and collaborative structures. The goal is to offer practical insights and questions to guide dialogue and decision-making.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

Across Canada, communities have invested years of work on climate action. Hundreds of municipalities now have action plans in place. Local leaders from across sectors are building partnerships, trying new approaches, and sharing what they learn.

While local relationships naturally shape how communities grow and adapt, climate planning often overlooks their strategic value. The connections people have with their neighbours, local organizations, and local governments determine whether climate action earns trust, builds participation, and holds together through setbacks. The social dimension of climate action, rooted in trust and a shared sense of place, is a foundation that strengthens every technical plan built on top of it.

Recognizing the importance of that foundation also means acknowledging what happens when it is absent. Social isolation and weakened community connection have real consequences for how communities respond in times of climate stress. Emergency preparedness is harder when people do not know their neighbours. Recovery is slower when social networks are thin. Climate action loses momentum when people feel isolated from decisions and from each other.

Climate change also generates personal and collective distress. Climate grief describes the emotional weight of loss, anxiety, and uncertainty that many people carry about the future. Without spaces where people can speak openly about how climate change impacts their lives, moving from awareness to sustained engagement becomes harder.

This brief makes the case that belonging is a foundation for climate action. Belonging is the experience of feeling seen, connected, and valued as part of a community. It is distinct from inclusion. While inclusion provides access to existing structures, belonging ensures every individual has the agency, safety, and power to shape the decisions and spaces that impact their lives.

KEY FINDINGS

MUNICIPALITIES SHAPE BOTH CLIMATE OUTCOMES AND COMMUNITY LIFE, AND THE TWO ARE CONNECTED

Municipalities [influence](#) approximately half of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions, making them critical leaders in the transition to a low-carbon future. Yet no single actor can accomplish this work alone. Effective climate action requires a whole-of-community approach, bringing together diverse perspectives to co-create solutions that are both effective and equitable. Municipalities also shape community life through decisions about public spaces, neighbourhood programs, and civic engagement. As Tamarack's Leading Together cohort [demonstrated](#), when power is shared, lived experience is centred, and relationships are strong, climate action accelerates.

THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO CLIMATE ACTION ARE RELATIONAL, NOT TECHNICAL

Progress stalls when organizations are disconnected, equity is overlooked, trust is fragile, systems remain siloed, and impact is not communicated in ways that build public will. Among the 13 communities participating in Tamarack's 2026 [Adaptive and Resilient Communities Cohort](#), the top three cited challenges were limited financial and human resources, difficulty reaching equity-denied populations, and sector coordination gaps. These are not failures in technical knowledge; they are gaps in trust, shared purpose, and relational infrastructure.

SOCIAL CONNECTION STRENGTHENS COMMUNITY READINESS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER CLIMATE EMERGENCIES

When emergencies strike, communities with the fewest resources carry the heaviest burden. Preparedness built with those communities, rather than just for them, makes a crucial difference. Through its Emergency Preparedness Community of Practice, the Tamarack Institute collaborated with Vancouver-based partner [Good Neighbour Kitsilano](#) to develop local approaches to emergency preparedness.

This work shows that investing in everyday relationships creates essential social infrastructure before a crisis arrives. A central insight surfaced across these conversations: community resilience is relational, not just technical. Emergency preparedness is less about what is in a toolkit and more about who is in your toolkit.

CLIMATE GRIEF AND ANXIETY ARE REAL BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT, AND BELONGING OFFERS A PATHWAY THROUGH THEM

Climate change generates profound personal and collective distress, often described as climate grief. When formal climate planning focuses strictly on technical targets without acknowledging these human impacts, people frequently experience burnout or paralysis. Evidence across Tamarack's networks shows that when communities create dedicated, peer-led spaces for individuals to process climate distress together, emotional isolation shifts into collective purpose. Addressing the psychological dimension of climate change through social connection is a necessary condition for sustained civic participation.

KEY QUESTIONS

1 Why does belonging matter for climate action to succeed?

A 2025 Statistics Canada Quality of Life indicator found that less than half of Canada's population (48%) reported a strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to their local community. Field experience from over 70 communities in Tamarack's Climate Transitions network shows that building relational infrastructure alongside technical work is foundational to progress. Between 2021 and 2024, Tamarack member communities reported 82 instances of change, including expanded public and political support, increased resident capacity, and policy shifts. The primary driver of these changes was not a new technical tool or funding source; it was the relationships built over time. Belonging is not a byproduct of good climate work. It is part of what makes it possible.

2 How does social connection affect emergency preparedness specifically?

Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 British Columbia heat dome showed that communities best positioned to protect vulnerable individuals were those where people knew their neighbours and where trusted local organizations and support networks existed before the crisis. Community Resilience to Extreme Weather (CREW), a partner in Tamarack's emergency preparedness work in Toronto, demonstrated this in St. James Town, one of Canada's most densely populated neighbourhoods. Trained local volunteers organized into the St. James Town Climate Action Crew, proving that community-led resilience built on neighbour-to-neighbour connections reaches people in ways formal municipal systems often cannot.

3 What questions should local governments ask about their climate plans to ensure they work for everyone?

Climate resilience cannot be built on technical milestones alone. Local governments and community organizations seeking long term impact should ask three practical questions:

1. Who benefits directly from the climate solutions currently prioritized?
2. Who is being left out of planning, and what barriers caused that exclusion?
3. What internal processes need to change so this plan serves everyone?

4

Who bears the greatest risk when climate planning overlooks social connection?

When climate planning focuses strictly on technical targets without attending to social conditions, specific groups carry a disproportionate burden:

- **Households facing financial hardship** have fewer resources to prepare for, escape, or recover from extreme weather events.
- **Seniors and people living alone** face heightened risk during heatwaves and evacuations, particularly when local check-in systems or accessible transportation are absent.
- **Indigenous and remote communities** face elevated risks due to historical underinvestment in local infrastructure and limited access to sustained emergency funding. Meaningful involvement of Indigenous rights holders is essential for effective, equitable climate action.
- **Lower-resourced urban neighbourhoods** with less tree canopy, fewer green spaces and limited community hubs experience severe heat and flooding while lacking local recovery assets.

When climate planning builds belonging through trusted relationships and shared decision-making, these communities are far better supported before, during, and after climate events.

5

How do communities move forward on climate action without leaving people behind?

The urgency of climate change is undeniable, but speed alone does not produce lasting outcomes. When rapid planning limits who is involved, implementation stalls. Communities that centre equity and invest in building trust before executing action plans are better equipped to navigate setbacks, leadership transitions, and shifting conditions. The goal is not to slow down climate action, but to build it on a foundation that holds.

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNITY IN ACTION**BOW VALLEY, ALBERTA: ACTIVE HOPE AND THE POWER OF SHARED SPACE**

Context: Feelings of grief, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future are increasingly common among people grappling with climate change. Yet these emotional dimensions are rarely addressed in formal municipal planning, leading many residents to disengage. This challenge is acute in communities that have experienced direct climate impacts, such as wildfires, floods, and drought.

From idea to action: In Bow Valley, Alberta, the Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley, supported by the Tamarack Institute, launched Active Hope: Navigating Climate Grief and Anxiety. This workshop series created welcoming spaces for residents to gather and speak openly about climate impacts on their lives and futures. Tamarack's funding supported skilled facilitation, honoraria, and accessible venues.

The initiative shifted climate grief from an isolating experience into a catalyst for collective action. Across three workshops, 66 community members participated directly, 91% found the experience helpful, 83% felt more connected to their community, and six new partnerships were formed or strengthened.

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PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

To deepen climate resilience through social connection and belonging, policymakers and local champions should implement five policy interventions:

Integrate social connection indicators into official climate plans. When developing or updating climate plans, include an explicit look at the social conditions that will support or hinder implementation. Ask: Do residents feel connected to this place and to each other? Are there trusted community organizations already doing related work? How will this plan build trust and participation over time? Belonging and climate resilience are not competing priorities. They reinforce each other.

Invest in relational infrastructure alongside physical infrastructure. Funding for community convening and peer support is as vital as funding for green technologies and infrastructure retrofits. Governments and funders can signal this by creating funding streams that support process as well as product, including the slower and often invisible work of building the relationships that make collective action possible.

Create spaces for climate grief and emotional connection. Local governments and health authorities should support community gatherings and workshops that address climate anxiety, helping individuals move from emotional burnout to active participation.

Co-design engagement models with equity-denied populations

Local champions should move beyond traditional public hearings by utilizing multilingual outreach, accessible meeting formats, and partnerships with trusted local community organizations.

Align climate goals with everyday community priorities. Framing climate initiatives around tangible daily needs such as healthy food, safe housing, local economic security, and public health, builds broader civic participation across groups.

A useful starting question asks what a good life in this place looks like and what it would take to make that possible for everyone.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The questions below are designed to foster dialogue within your team, network, or community planning table.

- **Part 1: Setting the Stage** offers general prompts to set the stage, break the ice, and get people talking about the intersections between belonging and public health.
- **Part 2: Deep Dive** provides questions to help you reflect further on the ideas outlined in this brief.

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE

Use these prompts to open the conversation and help participants connect the ideas in this brief to their own experience and context.

1. Recall a time when you felt a strong sense of connection to your community. What conditions made that possible?
2. When you hear the phrase "climate resilience," what comes to mind first, and where does social connection fit into that view?
3. What factors help people stay engaged in community work when progress is slow or challenges appear overwhelming?

PART 2: DEEP DIVE

Use these questions to reflect further on the ideas in this brief and consider how they apply to your own work.

1. Reviewing your current climate or community plan, where is belonging most visible, and where is it underdeveloped?
2. Who in your community carries the heavy emotional weight of climate change, and what spaces exist to support them?
3. Where do climate planning and community development intersect in your organization, and what steps would bring them closer together?
4. What is one concrete commitment your team could make to embed belonging into your local climate action strategy?

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TAMARACK INSTITUTE'S RESOURCES:

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- Article (2026): [Building Climate Justice Through Relationships: Reflections from Climate Justice Montreal](#).
- Blog (2026): [Blueprinting Belonging: How Local Efforts Spark a Canada-Wide Movement](#).
- Blog (2026): [Introducing the 2026 Adaptive and Resilient Communities Cohort](#).
- Blog (2026): [Relationships First: Carrying learning from Networks for Change into 2026](#)
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- Briefing structure adapted from British Columbia/Yukon Pressbooks (2020): [The Mission, the Message, and the Medium: Science and Risk Communication in a Complex World.](#)

OUR APPROACH TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Tamarack uses artificial intelligence thoughtfully to support aspects of our work while maintaining human oversight, community voice, transparency and accountability. We are committed to being transparent about how we use AI, where we choose not to use it, and the tensions we are navigating as these technologies evolve.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TAMARACK USES AI](#)