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CLIMATE TRANSITIONS

FIELD NOTES | SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND ENDING POVERTY

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These field notes capture the experiences, ideas and insights shared during a workshop on how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can support community efforts to end poverty. The virtual session was held on May 6, 2021, during the Cities Reducing Poverty (now, Communities Ending Poverty) annual gathering. 116 participants from around the world joined the session to learn from practitioners in Alberni, British Columbia, and Oxford County, Ontario.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Within Tamarack's Communities Ending Poverty network, a number of communities have started to connect their work to the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., Canmore, Alberta; Oxford County, ON; Alberni, BC, Kitchener, ON). By making this connection, they have started to tie their work in poverty reduction to intersecting issues of climate justice, environmental issues, equity and wellness.

Oxford County

Oxford County is a regional municipality that consists of eight lower-tier municipalities with a total population of 119,000. It has a strong agricultural base and is rich with farmland.

The idea for Future Oxford, the region's sustainability plan, initially came about in 2013 when the County was reviewing a proposal for a new private landfill. This event triggered a commitment to develop a holistic approach to community

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Meet the Practitioners

Dennis Guy, Oxford County – As Manager of Strategic Initiatives with Oxford County, Dennis provides backbone support for a multi-stakeholder community effort in administering its Future Oxford partnership.

Marcie DeWitt, Alberni Clayoquot Health Network (ACHN) – In her role as Coordinator with ACHN, Marcie is working with all communities in the Alberni Clayoquot Regional District to identify priorities and take action to improve social determinants of health and health outcomes.

Laura Schnurr (moderator) – Laura is supporting communities to implement the SDGs and advance equitable and just climate transitions.

sustainability, starting with a community consultation process. In 2015/16, the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan was established.

Following an inclusive and comprehensive engagement process with individuals, organizations, businesses, and governments, Oxford developed its sustainability plan with three pillars focused on community, economic, and environmental goals. The Plan sets out 70 actions to reach the targets set within the pillars. The County also established the Future Oxford Partnership, a group of champions implementing the Community Sustainability Plan. Through the Partnership, the sustainability plan provides a guide for several cross-sectoral roundtables.

> **When the idea of a landfill is introduced in one on our communities, it can eventually lead to reducing poverty in others.** — Dennis Guy

When Oxford County Council approved a resolution to achieve zero poverty in 2017, it connected its poverty reduction work to its community sustainability plan.

The SDGs mapped to the three pillars of the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan

By leveraging the concept of sustainable development to promote community-based poverty reduction, poverty became integrated into the broader context of community wellbeing, economic vitality, and environmental leadership. The Zero Poverty Oxford Plan, which was officially endorsed by council in June 2018, represented a comprehensive whole-of-society approach to eliminate rather than alleviate the hardships of living in poverty. The Zero Poverty Action Committee –made up of community partners – led the development of the Zero Poverty Plan and continues to lead implementation activities.

In November 2020, Future Oxford provided a 5-year progress update to the community. The update highlights forward momentum and success on 94% of the 70 actions in the Sustainability Plan. The work of Future Oxford highlights the value of communities working to localize sustainable development goals through a whole-of-society approach to ensure their communities are vibrant, prosperous, and responsible to each other and future generations.

Alberni Clayoquot

The Alberni Clayoquot Health Network (ACHN) is a network of community members, organizations and regional partners with a mandate to address the social determinants of health. It is made up of a Table of Partners with diverse representation from across the region and several action tables tasked
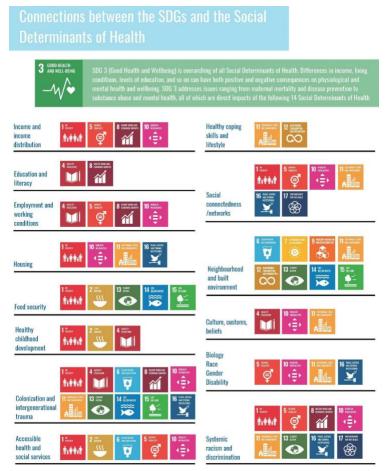
with moving specific priorities forward. It initially formed in 2011, though really took off in 2014-15.

ACHN operates across the Alberni Clayoquot Regional District, which is a massive geographic area on Vancouver Island with a population of under 40,000 that is quite diverse, with rural and remote, First Nations, and urban adjacent communities. Health status in the region is low, it has the fourth highest rates of poverty amongst BC regional districts, and there is no clear consensus on priority issues to address.

The ACHN's work has revolved around increasing awareness of local issues, identifying and acting on shared priorities, communications, leveraging resources, influencing decisions, and working with limited resources.

They collaborated with community foundations to develop common language, identify metrics and evaluation tools, and act on issues that no one organization or community could tackle independently.

ACHN's mapping of the SDGs to Social Determinants of Health

Transportation came out as a major challenge, and one that no one else was working on. ACHN identified a role for itself and gained traction around the issue of health access and equity as it relates to transportation.

ACHN developed two programs that assisted in increasing medical transportation and are currently working on a BC transit service between Ucluelet and Tofino. Throughout this work, things kept

pointing back to poverty and there was a realization that reducing poverty was essential for achieving prosperity in the region. ACHN drafted a Poverty Protocol that was signed by all of their municipalities, one of the local Nations, their MLA and MP, and the regional district. A Poverty Reduction Action Plan is also in development.

💭 INSIGHTS

The SDGs are useful as a common language and shared evaluation

As a common language and shared vision, the SDGs help communities to communicate the issues that matter locally, that no one organization or community can tackle independently. They are also useful when developing metrics for evaluation.

- "Our community foundations took on communicating through the SDGs via the Vital Signs reports and it's been a really powerful way we've been able to build evaluation tools and match those to initiatives that the municipalities, decision makers and communities care about. It's been especially useful in communicating with our municipalities, community foundations and funders." – Marcie

There is no shortage of opportunities for local level multi-solving

The space between the Sustainable Development Goals, rather than the goals themselves, hold the greatest promise. Using renewable energy as an example, Oxford County shared the interconnectedness of its goals of achieving zero poverty and its target of 100% renewable energy by 2050. Looking at these goals from a Community/Environment perspective, it aspires to have clean air; from an Economy/Environment perspective, it can build net zero affordable housing; and from a Community/Economy perspective, energy efficient housing leads to lower monthly energy costs. Dennis shared a number of examples of local initiatives that tackle both sustainability and poverty, such as the Great Pumpkin Rescue where jack-o'-lanterns are donated to kitchens that provide for those looking for a meal. Another example is a system whereby Oxford County libraries have a seed library, kitchen libraries and electricity meters so residents can plant their own gardens, borrow utensils and tools, and measure their electricity usage – all of this at no cost.

- "Zero Poverty results are Future Oxford [sustainability] results, and vice versa" – Dennis

The availability of timely, relevant data remains a challenge

Particularly in rural areas, data is difficult to gather. Census data is only collected every five years so is often out of date. In addition, available data is often not applicable to the challenges a community is facing. Another challenge is a lack of funding for local data collection exercises. Storytelling will often become an alternative way for communities to measure and report on their impact.

- "Since we can't have empirical data as often as we'd like, we need to figure out how to tell stories of individual successes and accomplishments in order to maintain that momentum of progress" – Dennis

🍂 ADVICE FOR OTHERS

Start by listening and fostering mutual understanding
In the Alberni Clayoquot region, a big challenge has been ensuring that the diverse communities that make up the region and their different realities, worldviews, and ways of knowing were understood by others. For example, in one of the First Nations communities there is no grocery store and no hospital, and the only access to the community is by boat. When ACHN started its work, there was limited awareness of this. Communicating these stories was the first step to identifying shared priorities and working together as a region. Both ACHN's Transportation Asset Map and Oxford County's Story Map are tools that were developed to collect and share local stories.

- "There was not much understanding throughout the region of what challenges our neighbours were facing. We ensured that we had those conversations, some of which were uncomfortable" – Marcie

Reserve SDG framing and language for the right contexts
When listening deeply to communities, the SDGs or Social Determinants of Health are not always useful frameworks. While undoubtedly helpful in other contexts, they may not resonate in community and risk taking the richness out of people's stories.

- "The SDGs are one of many useful lenses … We don't want to put an academic lens on the community's input" – Marcie

🛠 TOOLS

Vital Signs reports
More than 65 community foundations across Canada produce Vital Signs reports, collecting and reporting on local data about the community through local knowledge. Since 2017, the national data sets that Vital Signs uses have been aligned with the SDGs. See:
https://communityfoundations.ca/initiatives/vital-signs/

Alberni Clayoquot Health Network's Transportation Asset Map
ACHN collected stories about how people in remote communities travel to get groceries, go to medical appointments, etc. and translated that into a Google Map to communicate this more broadly. See: https://achn.ca/transportation/

Future Oxford's Story Map
With pins on a map showing projects and stories (e.g., zero waste, mobility, nature restoration) and a Faces and Places section that profiles people and the initiatives they've undertaken, this tool helps use storytelling to bring sustainability issues to life. See: http://www.futureoxford.ca/#42090

Interested in viewing the recording of the workshop?

Watch it here.

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