



Making the Most of the Times

Virtual Community Engagement in Indigenous and Remote Communities

Amanda Sheedy

I would like to extend my gratitude and thanks to the First Nations leaders who participated in three workshops that led to the creation of the [Virtual Community Engagement Guide: A Toolkit for Hosting Online Community Engagement and Meetings in Rural, Remote and Indigenous Communities](#), and to [Nature United](#) for supporting and enabling this work.

Introduction

I cut my teeth on virtual community engagement and collaboration in 2009 when I was hired to coordinate an ambitious project to engage Canadians and food movement leaders in the creation of a vision for a People's Food Policy. Thanks to the incredible network that Cathleen Kneen had assembled as the chair of [Food Secure Canada \(FSC\)](#), we leveraged these relationships to pull together over 100 people (mostly volunteers) anchored in their local context to host conversations (that we called Kitchen Table Talks) and capture these conversations in 10 policy papers. We heard from 3500 Canadians, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and new Canadians about their hopes for a just, sustainable and healthy food system and created a common vision that still guides the work of FSC. After 2 years, we succeeded in establishing Food Policy as national policy priority, reflected for the first time in the election platforms of all 5 parties during the 2011 federal election. The momentum created by this coordinated grassroots community engagement effort seeded the [Food Policy for Canada](#), which was launched with initial modest funding in 2019. It was an exhilarating ride to say the least!

This project happened before Zoom, Teams, Google Suite, Miro and the myriad of other tools we now have to support virtual collaboration and engagement. We held innumerable conference calls with team members, orchestrated complex timelines and coding for versions of papers, and experimented with web designs to gather and share data from our engagement sessions. Video conferencing was just emerging, and in 2012 when the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food reported on his findings about Canada, he offered to present this to the food movement. With only 50 places available, we created our first 'hybrid' event – with 50 local community events (convened by many of the community leaders involved in the People's Food Policy Project) all connected to each other through an online platform. With little more than staff and volunteer time, we connected over 1000 people to the Special Rapporteur and hosted 50 community conversations about the right to food in Canada.

Since leaving Food Secure Canada several years ago, I have had the honour and privilege of supporting community engagement for policy and program development with many First Nations and Inuit organizations, Nations and communities as a consultant. My experience has revealed to me the inspiring

commitment of many Indigenous people to engage knowledge holders, Elders, leaders, youth, and community members in important planning initiatives. For some, traditional laws require collaboration and guide this inclusive way of doing things that predates the terms and concepts that guide my own work. I have learned much on this journey and continue to learn thanks to the people I work with across Turtle Island. I speak for only myself in this article and recognize that others may have very different views and opinions on the matter.

Navigating Virtual Community Engagement

Community engagement in northern and remote communities requires a huge amount of time, resources, and logistical planning. Not all communities are connected by road, and when there are roads, they might be seasonal, of poor quality or hard to navigate. Despite these challenges, the commitment of Indigenous communities to come together and overcome challenges continues to be nothing short of inspirational.

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In 2018, I was hired by the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services to support community engagement to inform the Nunavik’s Regional Food Policy. Nunavik, an Inuit land claim area in Northern Quebec, has 14 fly-in communities with no road access. Bringing together community members and leaders in one village for each of the four engagement sessions cost between \$60-\$100,000 per session not to mention the staff time required to coordinate flights and accommodations for 40-80 people (including when inevitable storms would delay flights!). The commitment of all involved was awe inspiring, including the participants who generously gave days of their time to come together and put in motion their vision for the future of food in their region.

But that was before the pandemic. That was before we were all grounded, confined to our homes and could no longer come together to feast, talk for days, and make plans and decisions together.

Since 2020, many communities have put their engagement work on hold because they could not imagine having these conversations without being together while others have been forced to meet online. Decisions needed to be made, and conversations needed to happen, there was simply no other way. The digital divide, including poor internet access, low band width, and lack of access to computer technology, continues to present real obstacles to meeting on-line for people in remote communities. However, necessity has again proved to be the mother of innovation. COVID-19 and the constraints it imposed on us has cracked open new possibilities and ways of doing things that I suspect will change how we think of and plan for engagement.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



Last year Nature United asked me to facilitate a workshop series with First Nations leaders who wanted to learn more about how to engage their community members in important conversations despite the pandemic. While we did some learning about using Zoom and other online tools, the most interesting part of the conversations were not about technology.

The takeaway message from these workshops? With a little creativity and planning, virtual engagement can play an important role in bringing the community together, creating a sense of care when we need it the most and keep projects moving forward. Through the workshop, we shared how we had experimented with bringing some of our favourite elements of community engagement into our virtual work:

- In one community, they catered a meal for participants and had it delivered to each person's home ahead of the meeting, allowing them to have the experience of eating together. Others have done the same with tea or care packages.
- Opening prayers or ceremony that bring us into our bodies and into relationship with the land can still provide powerful ways for us to start our meetings together.
- Bringing culture and the land into the meeting can be as simple as asking people to share something that is meaningful to them in an opening circle, and/or opening with their language.

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5 Wise Practices for Virtual Community Engagement in Indigenous, Rural and Remote Communities:

What emerged from our conversations were the follow 5 principles:

1. Wise Practice #1: Connect to land and culture – Coming together is an important opportunity for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to practice culture and reinforce identity. In a virtual context this can be done by:

- a. Opening with the community's language, with ceremony or prayer
- b. Seeking advice and involvement from Elders
- c. Sharing maps, pictures or videos of the land and places you are talking about
- d. Creating space for land and culture, such as sharing items of importance to each in opening circles.

2. Wise Practice #2: Create a caring, healing and connected atmosphere – Meetings are a chance for people to care for each other, heal from the past and connect to one another. While it may seem difficult, this can be brought into a virtual meeting by:

- a. Adopting a trauma-informed approach to meetings
- b. Planning breaks for care and rejuvenation
- c. Providing space, time, and options for people to connect, share and participate (without pressure to do so)
- d. Facilitating with kindness, patience, and compassion

3. Wise Practice #3: Communicate and frame to get people to your meeting – Getting people to your virtual gathering might take some extra convincing, so here are some tips that might help fill the zoom room:

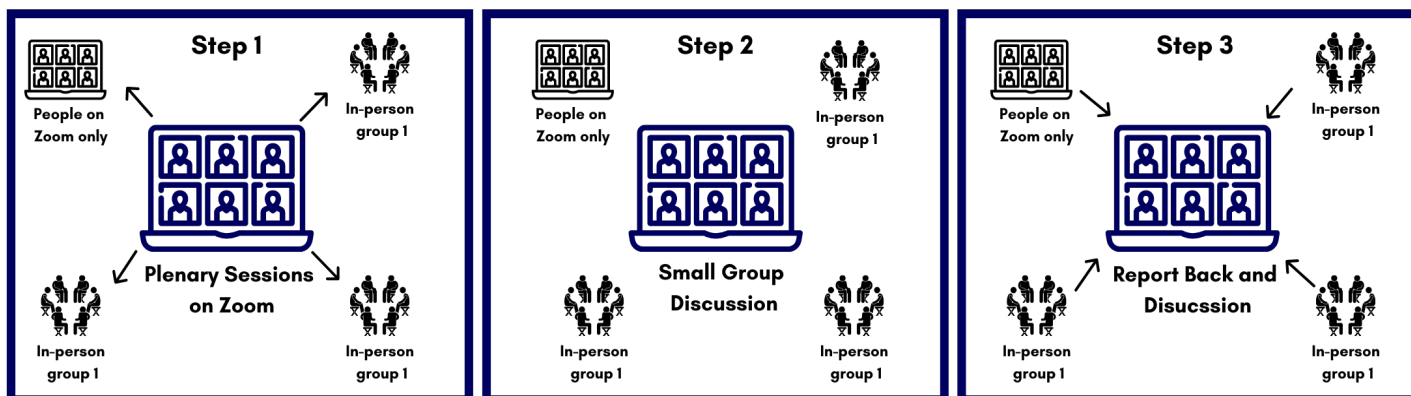
- a. Frame the meeting around addressing strengths not deficits
- b. Be clear and use plain language
- c. Offer ‘door’ prizes (even if they are at home)
- d. Invite a well-known person to co-host or present at the gathering

4. Wise Practice #4: Make your meeting accessible to all - There are lots of ways for people to contribute to the conversation besides being on a zoom call – perhaps you want to get youth visiting or calling Elders to get their opinion rather than trying to get them on zoom. You can also hold a ‘hybrid’ meeting (see below) or follow some of these tips:

- a. Provide community or family support to get folks online
- b. Provide tech training ahead of time (like hosting online bingo the week before)
- c. Find out what tech barriers people are facing and find some solutions together
- d. Provide technology to those who don’t have it (like a pre-loaded tablet distributed to community members ahead of the meeting)
- e. Create a diversity of ways for people to contribute (like small groups, through the chat, by submitting videos ahead of time, etc.).

5. Wise Practice #5: Prepare, prepare, prepare – As you can see from the suggestions above, it is likely to take you longer to organize this type of virtual engagement meeting.

MODEL FOR HYBRID MEETINGS



Adapted from Virtual Community Engagement Guide - A Toolkit for Hosting Online Community Engagement and Meetings in Rural, Remote and Indigenous Communities

You can find other nuggets of wisdom and tools for virtual engagement in general (such as role hosting online engagement, a checklist for organizing your online event, etc.) [in the online guide.](#)

Looking to the Future of Hybrid Community Engagement

Hybrid community engagement events, in my opinion, are the way of the future for remote communities and engagements that take place across vast territories. They combine small in-person gatherings that are connected to each other through an online platform.

In 2021, I used this method for a series of community engagement workshops in Eeyou Istchee, home to the James Bay Cree, to create a regional food action plan (still in progress). While most of the nine communities in Eeyou Istchee are connected to each other by road, we were not allowed to gather in groups greater than 10 due to COVID-19 restrictions. So, we adapted. Each community organized its own small event that doubled as a small group for break-out discussions while plenary sessions took place on Zoom, with panels, prayers and more.

Community-based facilitators in each community did outreach, set up the technology in a room where the gathering would take place (which overcame tech barriers faced by individuals) and facilitated small group discussions. These hybrid meetings make the most of the benefits of online community engagement and maintain many of the benefits of in-person events.

I did not expect to find a silver lining in the pandemic and its insistence that we do things differently. While I long for the days when I can be in a crowded room with people imagining the future together, I suspect that this will no longer be the go-to for community engagement in remote communities or elsewhere. These new virtual ways of engaging, in particular hybrid meetings, hold the potential to create new opportunities to engage people in important conversations, and to weave relationships by bringing people together in their communities, even with limited budgets. While we pursue these new opportunities, let us be mindful to not relegate remote communities to virtual engagement for the sake of the bottom line. Providing equitable access and opportunity must remain a central value and goal as we pursue these new ways of working. Only time will tell if these new ways are here to stay. But, if the pandemic has had one impact on my work and the field of community engagement, it has been a re-think about the assumptions that define what is possible or desirable, particularly with rural, remote or First Nations, Inuit, or Métis communities.

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About the author

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Based in Tio'tia:ke (aka Montreal) on the unceded territory of the Kanyen'kehà:ka (aka Mohawk) with her family, Amanda has supported grassroots community engagement and planning for over 20 years. She is skilled at designing and facilitating processes to help people think together and develop solutions collaboratively, including across sectors. Her work with Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island spans more than 10 years, supporting Indigenous food sovereignty projects and Indigenous-led planning on food, health, research, and conservation. Prior to her work as a consultant, Amanda was the Director of Engagement and Development at Food Secure Canada, a national non-profit where she designed and led national engagements to advance food sovereignty policy through coalitions and networks. With degrees in public health, community economic development and environmental health, Amanda brings a nuanced understanding of how

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