



# « THE CITY OF VANCOUVER’S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN: COORDINATED PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION »

Vancouver, Canada

*Period of implementation: 2005 (launch) | Study case written in 2007*

The City of Vancouver’s Social Development Plan (SDP) is an example of a coordinated municipal Social Inclusion Framework, a municipal strategy to bring coherence to social goals by linking inter-connected social issues under one policy umbrella. In September 2005, in response to worsening social and economic inequality, declining civic engagement, and related concerns, Vancouver City Council endorsed the creation of the Social Development Plan. The objective of Vancouver’s SDP is to create a coordinated response to worsening social challenges that can guide and position the municipality to better respond to the changing needs of Vancouver’s population and provide for strategic, long-term planning. The SDP puts a social ‘lens’ on the work all civic departments, boards, or commissions regardless of their core functions.



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *City context*

Vancouver is a city of approximately 629,000 inhabitants covering 114 square kilometres (BC Statistics estimate, 2009) which is situated within the Metro Vancouver urban region of approximately 2.3 million inhabitants (2009 est.). Vancouver is the largest city in the province of British Columbia (BC) and the third largest in Canada. Metro Vancouver is Canada's only unamalgamated metropolitan area and comprises 21 municipalities, one electoral area, and one treaty First Nation. Created in 1967, Metro Vancouver is not a regional governing body. Rather it is a municipal partnership responsible for the delivery of region-wide essential services including water, sewage and drainage, and solid waste management, as well as various activities relating to environmental stewardship of the region, including air quality, regional parks, and housing (GVRD 2004).

### *Government and decentralization context*

In Canada, constitutional arrangements and divisions of fiscal and legislative responsibility mean that local governments have historically been constrained in their ability to support the wide range of social challenges that they now face (Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003). Canadian cities are experiencing pressure to 'compete globally' while at the same time responding to mounting social, environmental and infrastructural demands in their localities, typically with limited resources. Recent years have seen a great deal of agitation by municipalities for inter-governmental reform that would confer greater powers to cities (Bourne and Simmons 2003; Bradford 2002; Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues 2002). Calls for increased governing autonomy for municipalities are coming to reflect a preoccupation with new strategies to address areas of social policy that were significantly eroded over the course of the 1980s and 1990s including child care, affordable housing, immigrant settlement and poverty reduction (McBride & Shields 1997).

**Institutional level of policy development:** Municipal

### *Social context*

Although Vancouver is often recognized as among the most liveable cities in the world, it has been experiencing growing social and economic polarization. City Council's endorsement of Vancouver's Social Development Plan was developed in response to indications of growing social and economic polarization in the city and region. In the 1990s, the gap between top and bottom incomes in Vancouver grew almost twice as much as occurred on the national level (City of Vancouver 2004). Unemployment rates were higher than the national average for vulnerable populations including aboriginals and new immigrants. Declining incomes, rising shelter costs, and reductions in social assistance became a problem for increasing numbers of individuals and families in Vancouver. Other concerns included indications that Vancouver was performing poorly compared to other Canadian cities in areas of social interaction, inclusion and civic engagement (City of Vancouver 2004).

Evidence shows that these trends worsened into the 2000s with concentrations of poverty clustering in specific neighbourhoods. In Vancouver's poorest neighbourhoods some census tracts reveal rates of low-income individuals at higher than 85% (Ley & Smith 2000; Myles, Picot & Pyper 2000). This situation is compounded by the fact that Vancouver is rated as the most unaffordable city in Canada for housing, and ranks 13<sup>th</sup> worst among countries included in

the Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey (2006).<sup>1</sup> This pressure is exacerbating the region's homelessness problem. The number of homeless people in the Vancouver region almost doubled in the period 2002 to 2005 (from 1,121 to 2,174 homeless persons) (GVRD 2005a). Furthermore, the number of people at-risk of homelessness in the region remains high. There were 126,500 people at risk of homelessness in 2001, compared to 80,000 in 1991 (GVRD 2005b). Health concerns are also an issue. Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) has attracted international attention due to extremely high rates of HIV and Hepatitis C virus (HCV) in a neighbourhood known for illicit drug use and serious social problems.

## Policy development

The Vancouver Social Development Plan as an example of a coordinated municipal Social Inclusion Framework (SIF). SIFs are a municipal strategy to bring coherence to social goals by linking inter-connected social issues under one policy umbrella. Sometimes called social development plans or social well-being plans, these frameworks take a coordinated long-term approach to issues including housing and homelessness; safety; immigration and diversity; belonging and citizenship; arts and culture; and economic security (Mendes 2007). Vancouver's SIF is called the *Social Development Plan*.

## Background

Vancouver's SDP reflects a recognition that local governments have an important role to play in enabling social inclusion by better coordinating the services and functions for which they are already responsible; creating new policies where needed; improving avenues of citizen participation; and advocating to higher levels of government on social issues where the municipality has limited or no direct authority (Burnstein 2005; Clutterbuck, Freiler & Novick 2005; Mendes 2007b, 2008; Torjman, Leviten-Reid & Heisler 2002; Torjman & Leviten-Reid 2003).

On September 20, 2005, in response to worsening social and economic inequality, declining civic engagement, and related concerns, Vancouver City Council endorsed the creation of a Social Development Plan (SDP). The SDP is a municipal strategy to bring coherence to social goals by linking inter-connected social issues under one policy umbrella. The SDP takes a coordinated long-term approach to issues including housing and homelessness; safety; immigration and diversity; belonging and citizenship; arts and culture; and economic security (City of Vancouver 2004, 2005, 2006).

## Policy objectives

The objective of Vancouver's SDP is to create a coordinated response to worsening social challenges that can guide and position the municipality to better respond to the changing needs of Vancouver's population and provide for strategic, long-term planning (City of Vancouver 2005, 2006). The SDP is designed to put a social 'lens' on the work all civic departments, boards, or commissions regardless of their core functions. It is characterized by an emphasis on promoting a civic culture of community engagement, capacity building and citizen participation. In this way, the SDP is both outcome-driven and process-driven in its approach (Mendes 2007a).

## Chronological development and implementation

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<sup>1</sup> The Survey covers urban housing markets in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The SDP was developed in three Phases:

*Phase 1 – Research and staff engagement*

Phase 1 involved extensive background research on existing social plans from other jurisdictions as well as current socio-economic and demographic research on Vancouver's situation and needs; the creation of a city-wide inventory of programs, policies, and strategies that support social development; and a consultation process designed to bring together City Departments, Boards, Commissions, and other institutional partners to achieve buy-in and support.

*Phase 2 – Identification of strengths, gaps, opportunities and key themes/areas of concern*

Phase 2 consisted of analysis of research results to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities; the identification of preliminary themes or areas of concern that would be presented for review and feedback during the public stakeholder consultation process; and targeted consultation and community engagement. The eight theme areas<sup>2</sup> are:

- Housing and Homelessness
- Arts and Culture
- Belonging and Citizenship
- Diversity and Intercultural Development
- Economic Security
- Healthy Living and Wellness
- Learning and Education
- Safety

*Phase 3 – Broad public consultation process*

The City of Vancouver has now moved into Phase 3, consisting of a broad public consultation process to review the themes, validate, or contest their importance, and ensure all key areas are identified. On the City website, residents are invited to comment on and prioritise the themes identified, suggest others, etc. and submit this information through an email. A web-based interactive survey is under development (SDP website, Sept. 2010).

The results of the consultation process will inform the development of strategic directions. Once strategic directions are drafted, recommendations for action will be developed and presented to City Council for further public input and final approval (City of Vancouver 2005, 2006).

## *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

### **Agents involved**

Partners in the implementation of the policy: City of Vancouver and a range of community and non-profit organizations. Social Planning Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC) compiled information on non-municipal key actors influencing social development in Vancouver as part of the research phase.

### **Beneficiaries**

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<sup>2</sup> As currently worded on the City of Vancouver's website (September 2010).

All citizens, vulnerable groups, decision-making institutions.

## *Institutionalizing and financing*

### **Institutionalization processes**

Vancouver's SDP is stewarded by staff members in the Social Planning Department, and supported by an inter-departmental Technical Team made up of representatives from all major City departments, agencies, and commissions. The development of the plan is ongoing.

### **Financing**

At the time of writing the original case, financing for the development of the policy was indirect, with funding coming from the City of Vancouver budget for staff positions to develop the SDP, organize and carry out consultation processes, and conduct research.

## **Outcomes and reflections**

### *Key results and achievements*

SIFs like the Vancouver Social Development Plan can act not only as a management tool for local governments, but also as a strategic instrument that enables more robust social inclusion processes and outcomes by integrating issues that may fall outside of a municipality's direct authority.

Although the most far-reaching contributions of the SDP will take place in Phase 3 when broad public consultation takes place, and later on when the plan is taken up and implemented through multiple City departments and functions, it is possible to identify beneficial outcomes of the first two phases. Four general categories of contributions can be observed:

*Internal and external stakeholder mobilization* – The first two phases of the SDP succeeded in mobilizing key internal stakeholders (within the City bureaucracy) through the creation of the Technical Advisory Team who liaised with individual municipal departments to enable broad buy-in and essential communication about SDP goals and strategies. The first two phases of the SDP also involved targeted community consultation in the form of an on-going series of 1/2 day workshops with social service providers, Neighbourhood Houses and other key community agencies to identify goals and priority areas. Furthermore, the SDP provided the grounds to introduce a pilot approach to Vancouver's local area planning process. Specifically, for the first time, the "Visioning" process for one Vancouver neighbourhood, Mount Pleasant, is being guided by a social development approach based on the SDP (as opposed to land use planning alone).

*Improved intelligence* – Further benefits stem from the extensive intelligence gathering that took place in the first two phases. These activities provided an essential foundation for more collaborative and participatory decision-making. Specifically, the first phase of Vancouver's SDP development involved the creation of an inventory of municipal programs, policies, and strategies that support social development. This process had the benefit of documenting the municipality's existing strengths and gaps with regard to social inclusion issues, while also helping to show the relevance of social issues to municipal departments and agencies that may not have previously seen a role for themselves. A second inventory, conducted by the Social Planning Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC) for the municipality, compiled information on other key actors influencing social development in Vancouver.

The inventory includes other levels of government, the private sector, academic institutions, the faith sector, and community-based voluntary sector agencies. Together, the two inventories represent essential foundation needed to create new enabling mechanisms and decision-making protocols that can consistently be brought to bear on programs, projects and land use plans. Significantly, the creation of the inventories was undertaken under the auspices of new partnerships created between the municipality and key community development organizations including the Vancouver Foundation and United Way of the Lower Mainland.

*Clarified social inclusion goals and accountability (in process)* – The SDP provides a strong policy rationale for the municipality to clearly identify social inclusion goals and become more accountable to fulfilling commitments in the social sphere. Specifically, the SDP mandates the development of progress indicators that will be used to assess social development objectives and actions in Vancouver and the region (City of Vancouver 2006). Although setting targets and tracking progress in the social sphere presents unique challenges (Mendes, Mochrie & Holden 2007), the SDP has committed to identifying and tracking key social indicators in partnership with existing regional initiatives with key agencies.

*Political leveraging* – Finally, by codifying social inclusion goals in an official policy framework, Vancouver is positioned to engage in more coordinated inter-agency decision-making, lobby higher levels of government for appropriate resources, and motivate new partnerships and approaches to action with local organizations and citizens.

### *Overall assessment and replicability or adaptation elsewhere*

#### **Challenges**

The main obstacles encountered in the early phases of the policy were:

- Institutional buy-in and support;
- Limited (human and other) resources;
- Institutional capacity and professional expertise to develop and implement cross-cutting social inclusion strategies; and
- Mechanisms for inter-institutional decision-making.

More broadly, in spite of its current and projected contributions, the SDP alone will not ensure that possibilities are realized. Critics caution that many social inclusion policies remain administered by central governments rather than cities where the brunt of social challenges are felt but the least amount of direct authority to address social inclusion resides (Torjman 1999, 2002; Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003). Alongside calls for greater powers to formulate responses to social issues are concerns about limited resources and functional capacity of local governments to implement social inclusion policies, and lack of experience ensuring meaningful citizen participation in planning processes.

Equally critical is ensuring meaningful citizen participation. In order for local governments to meet the civic challenges of social inclusion, all citizens, but especially populations most affected by social challenges – immigrants, Aboriginals, children, youth, seniors and the poor – must be active participants in identifying problems and proposing solutions. The cross-cutting nature of Vancouver's SDP can be used as a strength to enhance participatory decision-making precisely because it embodies a wide range of inter-connected issues beyond a single sector, and organizes them into a coherent set of priority areas. Such a multi-faceted approach that

balances structure with flexibility can enable disparate community groups, agencies and individuals to organize around issues in which they all have a stake.

However, Phases 1 and 2 of the SDP has consisted of internal consultation within the City as an organization, as well as focused external stakeholder consultation. It is only during the third phase of development that broad public consultation will take place. This approach is not inherently problematic; however, it could become so if the balance tips towards re-affirming 'expert' knowledge at the expense of community contributions. Thus, there must be mechanisms to re-consider the preliminary priority areas identified in the SDP if broad public consultation reveals important discrepancies. As well, participation must also be ensured in the identification of actions. Failure to do so will put into jeopardy the very principles upon which the SDP is based. In spite of on-going challenges, Vancouver's Social Development Plan remains a compelling tool that the city can use to achieve more coordinated planning and participatory decision-making on social inclusion issues.

### **Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere**

Recommendations to cities that want to formulate and implement social inclusion policies:

- Ensure broad inclusive public participation
- Ensure meaningful representation and participation in decision-making processes
- Ensure adequate resources for community participants
- Balance 'expert' and 'local' knowledge
- Build capacity and professional expertise to develop and implement cross-cutting social inclusion strategies
- Create an inter-institutional strategic management committee to support inter-sectoral collaboration
- Formalize inter-sectoral agreements and/or protocols for decision-making
- Foster inter-jurisdictional 'ownership' of interventions based on a broader conceptualization of health (i.e., non-medical, social determinants)
- Ground interventions 'in place' by linking to land use decisions
- Balance neighbourhood-based strategies with city-wide (and even broader) contextual analyses
- Reconcile place-based interventions with population-based interventions where necessary

### **Further information**

The narrative was written in 2007 by Dr. Wendy Mendes, Social Planner, City of Vancouver under the coordination and edition of Prof. Cabannes assisted by Yasar Adnan Adanali, at the Development Planning Unit, University College London, UK.

All narratives compiled in 2007 including this one were revised by a DPU editorial committee composed of Ernesto Jose Lopez Morales, Sonia Roitman, Michelle Pletsch, Steffen Lajoie, Luisa Dornelas, Iyad Issa and Pechladda Pechpakdee.

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