

## **Regional Support for Social Planning and Action – Needs Assessment Research**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ---

Social planning and action groups can be powerful catalysts of positive change at the local level, however they often face significant challenges. This paper presents research related to social planning and action in the Southern Interior of British Columbia. A group of provincial or regional organizations interested in exploring how they can best support these local initiatives instigated this research.

Local social planning and action groups often form to meet social realities that are no longer addressed through federal and provincial funding. Municipal governments are often reluctant and/or unable to take responsibility for the social sector, which has traditionally not been part of their mandate. Facing the repercussions of this vacuum first hand, local groups that are closely tied to social service organizations are left struggling to do more with less – and often turn to various social planning and action activities. The members of these groups are usually already overstretched. So while there is great need and potential, there are also significant challenges and therefore widespread appetite for external support.

On-the-ground social planning and action looks very different in different communities. From the eleven communities studied, three models for social planning and action emerged. The first is a community-based social planning and action model, where a number of people have a broad mandate to address social issues. The second is a project-focused model, where a community or government leader spearheads various projects, with very little coordinated planning and relevant partners engaging as needed. The last is an issue-based model, where a group with a specific focus, such as food security or early childhood development, will lead social initiatives as a direct or indirect result of their work.

Common traps and obstacles are present in all three models. Some of the most significant ones are internal to the groups themselves: recruiting and working with multi-sectoral groups; over-dependency on key individuals and a lack of succession planning; and burn out and cynicism. Externally, groups struggle with mobilizing community support, funding and other resources. Successfully instigating concrete change was a challenge for some groups, particularly the community-based groups that emphasized group process and planning.

Successes and enablers were common across groups. Characteristics associated with success are strong and visionary leadership, access to funding and assets such as owning a building, and resourcefulness. Enabling strategies are identified as building relationships and opportunities for communication, evidence-based and strategic planning, raising the profile of social issues in the community, and seeking “wins” – early and often. Contextual enablers are a broad support for social planning and the size, demographics and spirit of the community.

There is a high level of interest for engaging in regional level support initiatives. Strategies with the highest demand are: regional workshops; individualized support for communities such as train-the-trainer and mentoring projects; an investment document that outlines the positive outcomes and cost-benefit of social planning; and face-to-face networking and communication opportunities.

Working group members are pleased to better understand what the priorities are related to social planning and action and are hopeful about using this information to better inform future initiatives. As a group, it is difficult to develop a comprehensive plan based on these priorities at this time – in large part due to the ongoing organizational transition occurring within the lead partner of the working group, Interior Health. The working group has therefore identified the creation of an investment document – that will make the case for social planning and action – as an achievable next step in this process. Interior Health’s Health Equity team will take the lead on this and looks forward to continued, valuable support from working group members.

Details related to this research are presented below, concluding with a section on next steps.

## **SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION**

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### **Background and Research Methodology**

The purpose of this paper is to present qualitative research findings related to social planning and action in the Southern Interior of BC and to guide further regional level support for these initiatives. This research was initiated by Interior Health’s Health Equity team. It supports the goals of their Income Distribution and Health Portfolio and its result area related to social planning. The research was conducted in collaboration with a working group who advised this initiative and connect it to relevant organizations outside of Interior Health. Working group members are:

- Aimee Ambrosone, Manager of Planning and Development, Columbia Basin Trust
- Laurie Cordell, Sustainability Facilitator, Fraser Basin Council
- Sara Davis, Project Coordinator, Planning and Development, Columbia Basin Trust
- Caitlin Etherington, Population Health Facilitator, Interior Health
- Scott Graham, Manager of Research and Consulting & Director of Community Development Education, Social Planning and Research Council of BC
- Rona Park, Executive Director, Nelson CARES Society & Vice Chair of Nelson SPAN Society
- Rose Soneff, Registered Dietician

All the data and findings are based on qualitative key informant interviews. Interview questions were created by the researcher, Population Health Facilitator Caitlin Etherington, with input and feedback from the working group. A dozen interviews were conducted by the researcher over the phone (with one exception where written feedback was provided), each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Interview participants were limited to the Columbia Basin region. Interview participants were suggested by the working group and with two exceptions were limited to one per community. Although an attempt was made to connect with someone in every community in the region, scheduling difficulties made this impossible. All interviews are confidential and therefore quotes are not linked to specific interviewees unless specifically approved.

## Interview Participants:

- Connie Barlow, Executive Director, Golden Community Resource Society
- Lila Creswell, Chief Administration Officer, Village of Fruitvale
- Andrew Earnshaw, Executive Director, Castlegar District Community Services Society
- Joanne Ellis, Executive Director, WE Graham Community Service Society
- Marion Eunson, Director of Community and Family Services, St Mary's Band
- Cathy Girling, Manager, Community Development, Community Connections (Revelstoke) Society
- Ann Godderis, WINS Transition House Community Education Worker (Trail)
- Gord Johnston, Executive Director, Boys and Girls Club Cranbrook, Board Member Cranbrook Social Planning Society
- Janet Morton, Executive Director, Greater Trail Community Skills Centre
- Rona Park, Vice Chair, Nelson SPAN (Social Planning Action Network) Society
- Rafael Silver, Executive Director, Salmo Community Resource Society
- Aimee Watson, Food Security Coordinator, North Kootenay Lake Community Services Society
- Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator, City of Revelstoke

## SECTION 2: WHAT DOES SOCIAL PLANNING & ACTION LOOK LIKE RIGHT NOW? ---

### Setting the Context: Doing More with Less

Those who are involved in social planning and action are navigating complex and challenging dynamics. Although the research did not ask specific questions about this context, a quote from one interviewee stuck out as painting such a clear and important picture that it is included here in order to set the stage for the analysis that follows.

*“There are not a lot of small rural communities that have a social planner... It’s very hard for municipalities to wrap their head around the position, much less commit resources. I just almost lost my funding – regardless of our success. Traditionally, the social jurisdiction has not been the role of the municipality. We have always looked to higher levels of government. But with the gradual withdrawal of the social safety net, those days are gone and are not coming back. Municipalities are left to face the consequences of this withdrawal every day. So, there is a need to develop partnerships and strategies – local and regional partnerships to reaffirm that social safety net. Without a dedicated person to pull it together it is not going to happen. Social sector front line workers are busy and cannot do higher level planning or address community-wide issues ‘off the side of their desks’. But we need to be explicit about outcomes, tangible benefits. Social issues and successes are difficult to measure and quantify and this needs to be fleshed out.”*

– Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator, Revelstoke

## Models of Social Planning and Action

Three models emerged from the interviews that describe how communities engage in social planning and action. These are:

<u>Community-Based Social Planning and Action</u> → group of people → focused broadly on social planning	<u>Project-Focused Social Action</u> → led by local gov't or community group → partners as needed → less planning	<u>Issue-Based Social Planning and Action</u> → mandated to address specific issue → can lead to broad social planning and action
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This section provides an analysis of the interviews grouped according to these three models. A subsection on each model describes its key points and provides quotes from the interviews related to what stage of social planning and action the communities using that model are in. The choice of stages that interviewees were given to reflect on were: “internally-focused” with an emphasis on internal development and organization; “externally-focused” with an emphasis on current and future community-based projects; and “ready to support others” with enough success and lessons learned to feel they had something to offer other communities. Looking at this cross-section of models and stages offers an organized glimpse into what social planning currently looks like on the ground.

### Model #1: Community-Based Social Planning and Action (6/11 communities)

→ A group of people meeting regularly with a broad focus on social issues in their community

#### Key Points:

- Identified stages (“internally-focused”, “externally-focused” and “ready to support others”) blend into one another and are not linear. Groups move from one to the other triggered by external and/or internal factors.
- There is an ongoing need for “internal focus”. Even when a group has multiple successes and are looking for new projects, there is a need to continuously revisit the group’s internal dynamics. This is at least partially due to the challenge of working with a “social” lens and a multi-sectoral group.
- Resourced and strong leadership is critical to the maintenance and productivity of these groups. Therefore, sustainable productivity is always vulnerable to staff turnover. When present, formal leadership is either funded by local government or dovetailed into a position within a local social service organization.

#### Notes from interviews:

- *“We are in the middle, externally-focused, and are heading backwards.”*
- *“There is a last stage that comes when groups have gone through their internally focused processes, done some concrete projects, and then go back to being internally focused. Need to revisit what type of social planning you want to do – how do you review it? Important because*

*each individual has their own ideas about what social planning is and therefore group needs to revisit that on an ongoing basis.”*

- *“We are definitely still internally focused. I am surprised we are still here, I thought we would be further along by now.”*
- *“We are externally focused, although we do have more internal work to do.”*
- *“We have jumped right into externally focused. My agency is the only one providing social services in town. We have identified and are trying to move forward on community development as a priority.”*

#### Project-Focused Social Action (4/11 communities)

→ Social projects are spearheaded by the local government or a community group and partnerships are developed or called-upon as they are needed.

##### Key Points:

- There is no, or very little, attention given to internally-focused activities.
- With some exceptions, less planning is done but considerable project implementation occurs.
- Informal collaboration occurs as it is needed within and outside of the social service sector.
- This framework, particularly when led by a non-profit, is dependent on strong leadership and is vulnerable to staff turnover.

##### Notes from interviews:

- *“We don’t have a social planning group – are in the exploratory phase. There are three major non-profit organizations that collaborate, coordinate – and any social planning happens at the board level. Lots of organizations - apparently there are 120 in the community - are excluded.”*
- *“No formal social planning group - outside staff and board of our organization. We are a non-profit organization working with community members and responding or reacting to needs and issues as they arise. We have a clear role in the community, built trust and credibility and have been extremely successful. I guess we are externally focused – looking for other opportunities and funding all the time.”*
- *“I am the social planner – delegated by council. I work with organic groups - depending on the issue.”*

#### Issue-based Social Planning and Action (1/11 communities)

- Social Planning is happening with a particular lens (e.g. food security, early childhood development, literacy).
- Broader social planning objectives are often met as a by-product of focused activities.

##### Notes from interviews:

- *“We are not a social planning program but through our (food security) activities, we are enabling a level of social organizing to occur.”*

## **Multi-Sectoral Participation**

- Unsurprisingly, communities that have government committees addressing social planning have the most consistent inter-sectoral membership on their committees.
- Many communities struggle to engage sectors outside of the social sector – particularly economic development, business and municipal governments.
- Many communities rely on relationships, engaging potential stakeholders on a project-by-project basis, rather than seeking consistent membership and ongoing participation.

## **The Role of Local Government**

- There is a spectrum of local government participation in social planning and action, including:
  - A facilitating or coordinating role where local government has a mandate to address social issues. Their role can include community consultation, planning and providing strategic direction, and providing resources including staff.
  - A participatory role where councillors are members of community-based social planning groups, in either active or more passive roles.
  - A supportive but sporadic role where government gets involved with specific projects as is feasible or relevant. Alternatively, when participation is dependent on who is in office.
  - A negligent or negative role – where local government is not willing to become involved and may even appear hostile or threatened by local social planning group.
- In facilitating or coordinating roles, there is an intention not to lead the process so as to have issues and priorities come from the community members
- Some community-based groups acknowledge the risks, compromises and power imbalances that can be associated with too closely aligning with local government.
- Overall, support and participation from local government is considered extremely important to social planning and action.

## **SECTION #3: WHAT HELPS AND WHAT HINDERS?** ---

### **Common Traps and Obstacles to Effective Social Planning and Action**

#### Working in Multi-Sectoral Groups

- Many communities have found engaging and sustaining participation from non-social sectors, particularly the municipal government and the business or economic development sector to be their biggest challenge.
- Those communities that have managed to establish a multi-sectoral group acknowledged that working within this context is also a huge challenge. This stems from the diverse values, goals, and depth of understanding about social issues that exist around a multi-sectoral table.
- Regardless of the challenges associated with it, working with a multi-sectoral group is consistently recognized as an essential component to effective social planning and action.

### Key Person Liability and Succession Planning

- In more than half of the communities, the entire social planning and action infrastructure was reliant on the vision and leadership of one key person, or a small group of people and their well-established relationships with one another. In many of those, that person will retire within the next five years.
- There is very little thought given to succession planning and/or mentoring the next generation of social planners. In some cases there is a feeling that new, younger members are inadvertently discouraged from becoming involved because of the perception that they do not have the credibility, history, and positions of power to be useful.

### Burn-Out and Cynicism

- Without adequate support, a substantial amount of social planning occurs “off the side of the desk” of people in already demanding positions.
- Frustration associated with social planning processes and/or failure to produce meaningful and regular “wins” creates burn-out, cynicism and “complain-y” attitudes among leadership.
- This emotional climate can make it difficult to attract and sustain the new and diverse membership that is so critical to successful social planning and action.

### Funding and Resources

- A lack of funding for social planning initiatives, particularly for the processes outside of project implementation, is a significant barrier. Supporting a coordinator position was the activity most likely to be attached to this obstacle. However, “bringing people together” and supporting projects such as media coverage, brochures and websites were also mentioned as under-resourced needs.

### Galvanizing Community Support

- In some communities it is particularly difficult to engage community members either generally or with regard to key populations such as youth and young families.
- Many social planning activities – such as needs assessments and awareness raising – rely on relationships with and participation of the broader community.
- When the built environment is run-down and depressing (e.g. empty store fronts) it is difficult to galvanize people to think about an inspiring future vision for their community.

### Making Concrete Change

- For community-based social planning groups, moving from an internal (planning) to an external (action) phase can be challenging.
- With the emphasis on planning, some interpret the plan as the end-goal and fail to place as much emphasis on translating the plan into concrete actions.

- Engagement, such as awareness-raising events or workshops, does not always feel like a “win” or lead to concrete action.
- Without a shared understanding of what social planning and action is, as well as a genuine commitment to the process, goals can get sidelined by competing needs of members, agencies and sectors.

## **Success and Enablers to Effective Social Planning and Action**

### Relationships and Communication

- Few, if any, social issues are uniquely social and/or simple enough to be addressed by one or two agencies or individuals. Therefore, building relationships across sectors is a critical component of successful planning and action.
- Communication activities can look like public meetings, hosting speakers, sector-based meetings, social planning committee meetings and/or educational workshops
- The more you engage the community, the more they will engage you. Creating empowering and participatory processes will increase buy-in and commitment to invest and see projects through.
- A key part of the coordinator role is their presence on multiple committees and in multiple spaces, connecting people and becoming a central contact. As such, they can identify potential collaboration as well as duplication.

### Evidence-based and/or Strategic Planning

- Credibility can be found by grounding choices for action areas in solid research (internal and external to the community), consultation processes and/or strategic choices.
- When allocating scarce resources or making funding applications it is particularly important to have evidence-based community priorities, informed by research and community consultation.
- Strategic planning can include addressing issues that resonate strongly with the community, capitalizing on opportunities, and/or matching goals to the available resources and capacity.
- Intentional planning provides direction and focus within the often overwhelming multitude of social issues.

### “Wins”

- Achieving meaningful and concrete results and outcomes builds buy-in, momentum and credibility in the eyes of stakeholders, community members and funders.
- People are attracted to successful initiatives and success is generally measured very concretely – even in the social sector where the most meaningful change is often long-term and reliant on various invisible processes.
- Some groups focus first on “low-hanging fruit”, possibly at the expense of internally-focused processes and attention.

### Raising the Profile of, and Capacity to Address, Social Issues

- Social planning groups can act as a “hub” where spin-off groups can meet and break off to address specific initiatives.
- Having a multi-sectoral group, with voices in many corners, increases the visibility of social issues as well as the will and interest of the community to address them.

### Leadership

- Strong and dynamic leadership is a critical component of success in every model of social planning and action. It should, however, be balanced with capacity building of other members and ongoing succession planning.
- Diverse champions of social planning and action, who are able to connect with various sectors and populations, will enable the engagement of broad support.
- Effective and strategic leadership recognizes the central role of relationship-building.

### Funding and Assets

- Successful social planning and action groups have the time and capacity to match meaningful projects with available grants.
- Organizations with assets, such as property, or that are engaging in social enterprise, benefit from the relative stability of fund diversification and being perceived by funders as sustainable.

### Resourcefulness

- The ability to be resourceful, flexible, creative and “do a lot with a little” leads to both “wins” and credibility.

### Size, demographics and spirit of the community

- There is a perception that community size influences the feasibility of social planning and action.
- High levels of community spirit (or the widespread prioritization of the community over individual or organizational interests) can act as significant enabler.
- The demographics of a community impact the amount of time that community members have to engage in social planning and action. For instance, young families do not have the kind of time that youth, older adults and seniors have.

### Broad Support for Social Planning

- Support for planning and action from both within and outside of the social sector as well as with a diverse range of community members is an enabler.
- Local government and business and/or the economic development sector are key stakeholders.
- Tapping into this support also means accepting “the pulse of the community” and accelerating or backing off as needed.

## SECTION #4: HOW COULD SOCIAL PLANNING & ACTION BE STRENGTHENED? ---

### Strategies to Support Social Planning

Interviewees were asked to think about strategies that would be most helpful to the social planning and action activities in their communities and to reflect on a number of strategies identified by the working group. The following section provides a summary of their thoughts. It is indicated next to each whether there was a high (7-12 interviewees), moderate (4-6 interviewees), or low level (1-3 interviewees) of support for each strategy based on the number of interviewees that identified it as a priority.

#### Capacity Building – General (*high level of support*)

- At every stage and within every model there is a need for further capacity development.
- Specific thematic topics included:
  - best practices in social planning and action
  - protocols/resources for engaging various sectors
  - a general background on social issues and different types of social planning – what social planning is, its intent and how it connects to practices and actions.
- There is a demand to hear more from field leaders and experts.

#### Regional Workshops (*high level of support*)

- Hearing from and learning with others inspires, provides a big picture view and opportunities to build relationships, and makes people think outside of their boxes.
- Events should also target local governments, who generally are perceived as having a limited understanding of social planning and action.
- There is an opportunity to build on positive experiences and high demand from the Columbia Basin Trust symposium and Traction for Community Action workshops.
- Finding resources and time to attend can be a challenge.
- Not all communities feel that they are ready for this. Some feel they need to focus internally before they could benefit from hearing about the experiences of others.

#### Online Webinars (*low level of support*)

- Lack of support was due to:
  - A preference for face-to-face interactions
  - It being hard to prioritize when dealing with busy, full work-loads
  - The nature of the medium which engages a large, varied audience meaning that there is a tendency to be too general and/or focused on larger communities
  - It being difficult to use to build capacity of community-at-large

#### Individualized Support for Communities - General (*high level of support*)

- Communities face some very specific issues that are best served through individualized support.

- There is an opportunity to build off positive experiences and high demand for similar support from SPARC, Fraser Basin Council, LIRN and others.
- Potential activities that were identified include support with: community brain trusts, assessments, website development, and scenario planning.
- Particularly desirable for groups who are: in the initial stages of planning; struggling in later stages; or lacking experience in more formalized social planning.
- Can be particularly helpful to bring in someone with enough clout to get the attention of disengaged or reluctant sectors and stakeholders.
- This support could be dovetailed with regional workshops as reinforcing strategies.

#### Train-the-Trainer (*high level of support*)

- Important outcomes of this strategy are the creation of a network of social planners, as well as a broadened use of best practices and a shared language.
- There is an opportunity to build on the cooperation and collaboration that already occurs.
- There is a suggestion to put these trainers in municipalities, providing grants to cost share with local governments. They could then support social planning locally and act as regional trainers.

#### Mentoring (*high level of support*)

- It is important for a skilled facilitator to follow right through to the end rather than bringing in different people to lead each stage, which results in too much repetition and loss of momentum.
- The expertise of someone who has on-the-ground successful experience is valuable and holds credibility.
- There is a danger that outside people are not always accepted by smaller communities.

#### Tools and Resources – General (*moderate level of support*)

- There is a need for accessible local data on social issues such as poverty rates and food insecurity to be able to clearly speak to baseline concerns and project impacts.
- There is a need for more support specifically targeted to and designed for smaller rural areas. This is in terms of the content and approach as well as who communities are competing against for funding or support. For example, some initiatives define “rural” as all communities with a population below 50 000, which is very different from those with a population of 2 000 or 7 000.
- There is an idea to adapt CIEL’s community index (<http://www.theciel.com/>), tailoring it to a community capacity tool specifically for social planning and action that will assess what stage communities are in and target strategies accordingly.

#### Social Planning Investment Document (*high level of support*)

- There is a need for a tool that could be used by community groups to mobilize support for social planning and possibly for funding a coordinator. This could include a cost-benefit analysis.

- This is prioritized most highly by communities who are struggling with building multi-sectoral support and those who feel like not having a coordinator is their major impediment to moving forward.
- There is an opportunity to build off of the successes of social planning and advocacy for similar types of community coordinator positions (e.g. Social Development Coordinator in Revelstoke and Cultural Development Commissioner in Nelson).
- Having a municipal government funded coordinator is not the only feasible model and an investment document should explore other options and outline potential risks and benefits associated with each.

#### Funding (low level of support)

- The three communities that identified funding named it as the most important strategy to help them move social planning forward in their community. Funds would be allocated to support human resources involved with social planning and action, be it consultants, a coordinator or current volunteers.
- Many communities recognize that any funding for human resources would have to be matched by local government and/or the community.

#### Networking and Communication Opportunities – General (high level of support)

- There is a high demand to bring people together, regularly, to network within communities.
- In some communities the priority was convening and coordinating the main players in the social sector. In other communities the focus was around attracting other sectors such as faith, business and government into conversations addressing social issues.

#### Online Map of Social Planning and Action Organizations/Activities (moderate level of support)

- Support for this strategy assumed that this tool would: be easy to use, incorporate reminders to update your profile and include contact information. Additional key points are that it would:
  - be particularly helpful for communities who are starting out either with their social planning process or with a particular initiative;
  - build off the momentum of communities that are already sharing strategies and plans;
  - avoid wasting precious time and resources “reinventing the wheel”;
  - provide information about what is happening in neighbouring communities, which people too often do not have; and
  - offer ideas, momentum and inspiration.
- Hesitation about this strategy was based on the following:
  - Without guaranteed interest and buy-in, it runs the risk of being another website/tool that no one goes to or uses.
  - That community deficits are based in time and energy rather than knowledge or skills.
  - There is a reluctance to spend more time on the computer and/or a lack of familiarity with electronic media and social networking technologies. This sentiment was offered

by people who acknowledged their age and proximity to retirement along with a recognition that this will change as new, younger people move into these positions.

- A preference for face-to-face interactions.

## **SECTION #5: NEXT STEPS**

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1. This document will be distributed broadly to interviewees and other stakeholders that might find it useful at local, regional and provincial levels.
2. The information from this document has been used by working group members to inform decision-making regarding future activities related to regional support for social planning. Based on the working group's available resources, they have decided to move forward with an attainable next step – the creation of a written tool or resource that will support social planning and action. Interior Health's Health Equity Team will take the lead on creating the investment document with the support of the working group.
3. Distribution and opportunities for further capacity development that will build off of this tool, will be explored by the working group once it is completed (late summer 2012).