



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is Inclusive Cities Canada?

It is the collaborative effort of five social planning councils¹, from different urban regions across Canada, in association with the Standing Committee on Social Infrastructure of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Inclusive Cities Canada uses a social inclusion framework to build people-friendly cities, promote good urban governance and develop strategies for supporting growing urban diversity. The aim is to create and sustain inclusive communities for the mutual benefit of all people.

Why this initiative?

Inclusive communities are critical not only to the well-being of individuals, but also to the social and economic health of nations. It is in cities and communities where the social and economic future of countries is being determined. Governments at all levels recognize this and have responded by developing urban strategies. The focus to date however has been on the crisis of the physical infrastructure such as deteriorating transit, water and sewer systems. The social and community infrastructure of cities also needs to be central to an urban strategy. We hope to support civic capacity to build inclusive communities; to secure a stronger voice for urban communities in national social policy and to ensure that voices of diversity are recognized as core Canadian ones.

What is an inclusive community?

Inclusive communities promote the open, welcome and supported participation of all people in the decision-making affecting their lives. They provide opportunities for the optimal well-being and healthy development of all children, youth and adults.

Practical expressions of inclusion are: universal access to meaningful opportunities in education, the arts, culture, and recreation; relevant health services and school curricula adapted to specific needs and strengths; family support services and respite; safe streets and parks, and responsive governance on all levels.

¹ Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia; Edmonton Social Planning Council; Community Development Halton; Community Social Planning Council of Toronto; Human Development Council of Saint John, New Brunswick.

Why is this initiative relevant?

Canadian public policy needs to reflect the current reality. 80 per cent of our population now resides in cities, with half living in large urban centres. Growing urbanization, combined with Canada's dependence on immigration to sustain its population, compels us to address the implications. A social inclusion framework can both assess and shape the mix of community supports and the human services that provide stability and advance social development within cities.

What make Inclusive Cities Canada different?

Inclusive Cities Canada is the only initiative that has gathered people across Canada at a community level not only to assess disparities but to determine what is needed to promote inclusion. This is a new approach for Canada. The social inclusion 'audits' conducted by Inclusive Cities Canada provide an assessment of how engaged different sectors are in their communities and how public policy and institutions such as justice, health, education, community services or city hall relate to them. Our research indicates what is working in our communities; what isn't and what can be done.

How was the feed back received?

Civic panels drawn from municipal and community leaders were established in each city to oversee the research. Using common methodology, focus groups reflective of the social and cultural diversity of the community explored perceptions of inclusion in five areas: diversity; living conditions; community services; human development and civic engagement. Further community soundings with different sectors of the population were held to enrich the research findings and, finally, feedback forums were held to corroborate the findings. In total over 1,000 people participated across the five cities.

What did the participants say?

Most encouraging was the universal desire of participants to make their cities work. They view diversity as an asset and reject gated communities to keep people with differences out. They acknowledge the contribution that public institutions and services such as schools, libraries, parks and recreation make to urban vibrancy. They see their local governments as largely accessible and note the willingness of local authorities to set policies addressing diversity.

On the other hand they point to growing income polarization and the marginalization of aboriginal populations, gay, lesbian and transgendered peoples and people with disabilities. In the largest centres a growing racialized pattern of economic disparity was seen to threaten community cohesion. They cite the absence of minorities, women or those from less advantaged backgrounds in local governance; and document the entrenched practices and the lack of institutional strategies to translate goals into realities.

What can be concluded from the feedback?

The participating cities reflect the Canadian landscape – Toronto is a major urban area; Vancouver is a large city; Saint John a small one; and, Burlington and North Vancouver are representative of suburban communities. Yet, regardless of city location or size, the themes were consistent. This tells us the challenge of building inclusive communities is a ‘main street’ Canada issue, and is not confined to large urban centres. Therefore the action of federal and provincial governments is required to strengthen urban foundations, support diverse communities and address social vulnerabilities.

Are the findings valid?

Social inclusion is a value-based concept, a ‘confidence index’ of overall community well-being and how secure and welcomed individuals and different groups feel in their community.

The advantage of this measure of community perception is it can show where efforts might be concentrated for improvements. Social inclusion sets the bar high because success is declared when equality of opportunity is extended to the least advantaged in the community. The higher the goal, the more likely that inclusive policy and practice will be institutionalized and the more resistant they are to erosion or displacement. Using a social inclusion framework can serve to motivate and encourage both our political and community leadership to strive more effectively together to build an inclusive city.

Why should the community be interested in the report?

It is a wakeup call for policy makers and residents of the growing polarization in our community and a reminder that no one is immune to the consequences. Virtually every local decision can promote or hinder inclusion: zoning; residential development; the location and hours of operation of community services; when and where public transit runs; where a road goes; police attitudes to youth and visible minorities, etc. With significant federal and provincial support less assured, increased pressure is being put on residents and local authorities to become the primary source of inclusion.

What can be done at the local level to promote inclusive communities?

If residents value and desire a fully inclusive city, this will have to be demonstrated in local practice. Are residents willing to contribute the public revenues necessary to pay for essential public goods? Can key institutions such as schools and the police become models of inclusion? Will local governments also become strong advocates for federal and provincial investments in the social infrastructure of the community?

Where are the next steps?

The civic panel members will be taking the reports back to their respective organizations. The reports will also go to the mayor and council; school boards; the United Way; labour and business councils; ethno cultural community leaders and media; and other forums as

appropriate. The findings from the five cities will also be shared at a roundtable to be held in Ottawa on June 2, 2005. Here we will be developing common recommendations to the federal and provincial governments.

Inclusive Cities Canada is a cross Canada supportive network. We encourage other municipalities to be a part of this process. The reports are posted on our web site: www.inclusivecities.ca.