

# TRANSFORMING PLANNING PROCESSES

## AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF CLIMATE, EQUITY, AND DECOLONIZATION

By Lindsay Cole and Maggie Low

### SUMMARY

Local and regional governments are facing increasing pressures to address complex challenges of climate change, equity, and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples as entangled challenges. Innovation into how planning processes are imagined, designed, and facilitated is urgently needed as a response to these pressures. It is no longer good enough to work on these challenges discretely, within departmental or disciplinary silos, or solely within the dominant, western colonial paradigm and practices of planning. This article describes a transformative planning process drawing from social innovation, systemic design, and decolonizing approaches. This article is a summary of a recently published open access journal article in *Nature Urban Sustainability*.

### SOMMAIRE

Les gouvernements locaux et régionaux sont soumis à des pressions croissantes pour relever les défis complexes du changement climatique, de l'équité et de la réconciliation avec les Peuples Autochtones qui sont autant d'enjeux enchevêtrés. Pour répondre à ces pressions, il est urgent d'innover dans la manière dont les processus d'aménagement sont imaginés, conçus et facilités. Il ne suffit plus de travailler sur ces défis de manière discrète, au sein de silos départementaux ou disciplinaires, ou uniquement dans le cadre du paradigme et des pratiques d'aménagement dominants et coloniaux occidentaux. Cet article décrit un processus d'aménagement transformateur qui s'inspire de l'innovation sociale, de la conception systémique et des approches décolonisatrices. Cet article est un résumé d'un article récemment publié en libre accès dans *Nature Urban Sustainability*.

**NEED FOR INNOVATIONS IN PLANNING**

Over the past decade, the possibilities and pressures that local governments are facing related to complex challenges like climate change have surged. The International Panel on Climate Change has begun emphasizing the vital role of local and regional governments in climate adaptation and mitigation work related to land-use planning, infrastructure, transportation, housing, community development, and others. Political and civil servant leadership from local governments is a powerful force for change on the world stage, with growing influence on other levels of government, business, civil society, and the public imagination.

While local government leadership on climate-related work continues to strengthen, it is often treated as a technical, engineering, land use, communications, political, and/or financial challenge. The related systemic challenges of reconciliation and equity tend to be under-addressed in climate plans and policies. While local governments work to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate, the very same lands, waters and people who have been systematically excluded, oppressed, and exploited by the dominant structures and processes of government continue to be left out. There are ongoing harms being caused by climate work that does not embed justice, and there are missed opportunities for synergies. This is a compelling impetus for transformative innovation in planning, so that in their eagerness to act on climate, local governments do not recreate and perpetuate problematic practices from the past/present that result in inequities and oppression.

**DOMINANT PLANNING PARADIGMS**

The standard planning processes used in local and regional governments in Canada (and beyond), are embedded in the New Public Management, western, colonial governance paradigms. These paradigms and processes are being reinforced rather than reimagined in climate work even as their suitability to respond to complex, social and ecological justice challenges at the rate, scale, and depth required is being questioned. Urban planning is characterized by evidence-based rationality and objectivity, bureaucratic routines and procedures, and significant



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emphasis on a planner’s ability to know what is good for people and the public interest. While some planning work has consciously tried to redistribute power through equity planning, to better align with the goals of communities through radical planning, planning processes often impede innovation and adaptation to dynamic pressures. Planning must evolve to address the unpredictable and systemic nature of the complex challenges we face.

There is an opportunity and responsibility to reimagine the planning processes of local and regional governments to ensure that climate-related concerns are considered in an integrated way with equity, justice, reconciliation, and decolonization work. Climate change issues have the same systemic root causes of colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, and cis-heteronormativity and can and should be worked on together. What then is demanded/required of planners if the dominant approaches taken in their work no longer serve complex, intersectional, and systemic challenges of climate, equity, and decolonization? And where else might we look, beyond the field of planning, to inform and transform these approaches?

**SITUATING EQUITY AND DECOLONIZATION**

Concepts like justice, equity, and decolonization are not static, singular, with clear and agreed-upon meanings. They are contested and actively being worked out in institutions, processes, and everyday life and are expressed differently according to place, context, history, and culture. Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang point out that settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone and argue that decolonization is only about

land and Indigenous life. In other words, decolonization is not a metaphor for “other things we want to do to improve our societies.”<sup>5</sup> Decolonization is rooted in the assertion of Indigenous self-determination.

In this article, we encourage planners to think critically about the word ‘decolonization’ and what it means in planning practice. Tuck and Yang’s settler ‘moves to innocence’ reveal attempts to reconcile settler guilt and complicity that do not require giving up land, power, or privilege. We agree the central work of decolonization should be the return of land. At the same time, as planners doing research entangled with practice, we are motivated to find meaningful entry points to decolonization through practices that every planner can enact.

In this research we take the perspective that settler colonialism is an ongoing structure and not an event. Our guiding principle, at least for now, is that decolonization work is for all of us to do and so we are enacting it as practice(s), and expressing these practices in multiple and embodied ways in the specific context of complex planning challenges. That said, decolonization work will look different for non-Indigenous peoples than it does for Indigenous people. Here we focus on planning practice happening within settler colonial systems of local government, and explore what and how we might (un) learn and practice equity, justice, and decolonization for/among each other in the context of climate work in local government.

Theories and practices from the fields of social innovation, systemic design, and decolonizing methodologies offer promising alternatives for planners to work differently on complex challenges, each of which is discussed briefly next.

COMMON APPROACH	TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH
<b>FRAMING</b>	
Climate, equity, decolonization are discrete	Climate, equity, and decolonization are interrelated
Planning is neutral	Planning is personal and rooted in place
Time is scarce and constrained	Time is abundant and non-linear
Challenges are complicated and technical	Challenges are complex, systemic, and adaptive
<b>INITIATING</b>	
Begin with outcome	Begin with question
Project charter and project management plan	Design brief and theory of change
<b>RESEARCH</b>	
Scenario planning	Speculative and visionary fiction
Policy research and best practices	Action and user research
<b>ENGAGING + ENABLING</b>	
Inform, consult and engage	Co-create
Distinct, hierarchical, disciplinary roles	Teams are self-organizing, whole, purposeful
Stakeholders represent known interest groups	Centre systemically excluded perspectives
<b>IMPLEMENTING</b>	
Pre-determined solution	Experimentation and prototyping
Linear cause/ effect pathway	Iterate
Project completed when plan/ policy approved	Project ongoing into implementation
<b>EVALUATING + LEARNING</b>	
Council Report	Storytelling
Quantitative/summative evaluation at end of project	Learning, reflection, evaluation throughout

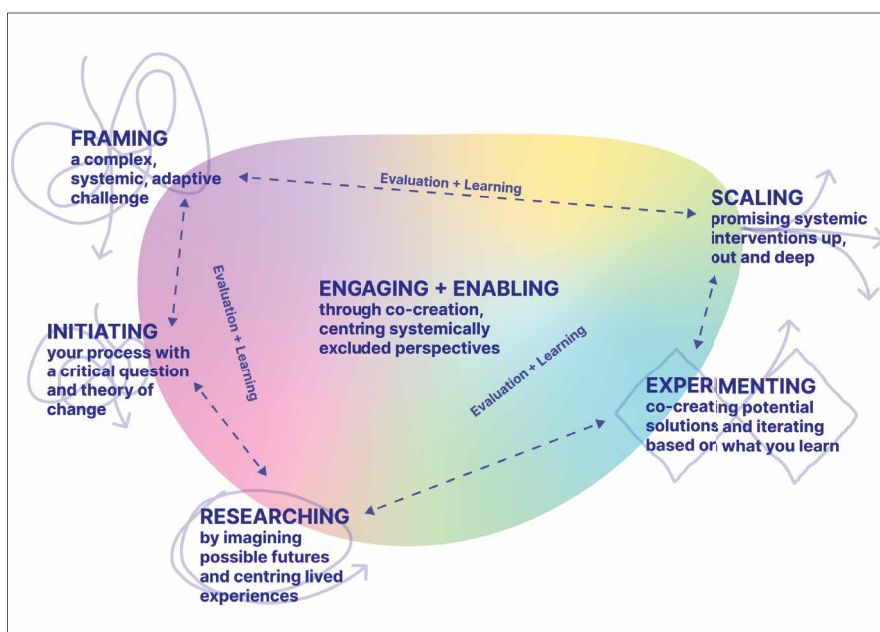


Figure 1: Transformative policy making and planning process map.

**SOCIAL INNOVATION**

Social innovation processes work to transform the deep places in social systems - behaviours, structures, mindsets, and beliefs. An innovation is 'social' in that it aims to shift social practices, ideas, beliefs, interests, power, and agency so that innovations are diffused, scaled, institutionalized, or otherwise integrated and made routine. By doing this, the intent is to address root causes of wicked challenges more skillfully and effectively respond than is possible through existing or commonly used approaches.

**SYSTEMIC DESIGN**

Systemic design processes integrate systems thinking, human-centered, and service design. They bring a 'designerly' mindset, practices, and experiences to working with complexity. This approach

results in processes that hold a creative experimentation and action-as-learning bias, and that oscillate between divergent and convergent thinking-and-doing. This ensures that innovations land in the real world, in testable experiences, enable right-sized risk taking, and are with and for the people and places most affected by a challenge.

### DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGIES

Decolonizing methodologies ensure that social innovations and systemic design do not work within dominant and problematic paradigms of colonization and oppression and inadvertently perpetuate these systems under the guise of ‘innovation.’ Instead, wisdom and insight is sourced from culture, history, people, and possibility and is deeply grounded in place-based and relational practice. For instance, a pressing challenge for planning is reconciling its role in perpetuating the dispossession, oppression, and marginalization of Indigenous peoples and communities and grappling with the reality that all planning in local and regional governments in Canada happens on stolen Indigenous lands.

Together, these domains of theory and practice can inform the evolution/remaking of planning processes in ways that may result in more significant shifts than are possible when working within dominant systems that have oppression, inequity, and exploitation of humans and nature baked in.

### TRANSFORMATIVE PLANNING PROCESS

This process map (Figure 1) is designed as an alternative to the dominant approach to planning described earlier. This transformative planning process was generated through applied research with 40 people working on complex climate, equity, and decolonization challenges in Canadian local governments.

The process map captures key stages of this transformative approach, as well as the movement and connections between the stages. These stages are described briefly in comparison to more common planning approaches.

Note that these stages are not drawn as discrete, linear steps but rather as interrelated and entangled with iteration between. There is a general movement (indicated by the looping solid lines) from

broad/messy/open/exploratory that begins with framing, and toward a gradual focusing/clarifying process as we move through initiating, researching, experimenting, and eventual implementation at the scaling stage. Engaging and enabling, and evaluation and learning, happen throughout. As the connecting dotted lines indicate, there is iterative movement between stages when insights and learning require reframing, renewed experimentation, and/or return to learning from those most impacted by the challenge.

### PUTTING THIS PROCESS INTO PRACTICE

Remembering our goal in this work of identifying accessible and actionable approaches to working transformatively at the intersections of climate, equity, and decolonization we close with seven key moves that planners can make when trying to transform the processes that they use:

1. Begin well: take care, from the very beginning, to make different choices and signal that something other than what people are used to is going to happen.
2. Co-create an equitable, just, feminist, and decolonized space.
3. Enact a pro-love approach: prioritize being in a caring, loving, supportive, and collaborative community with/for each other.
4. Focus on practicing not problem solving: emphasize building and practicing competencies and capacities for transformation.
5. Draw on different theories and practices from social innovation, systemic design, and decolonizing methodologies.
6. Work with fear: surface and shine a light on the fears that show up, the fear of messing up, of saying the wrong thing, of offending, of failing to have impact. Then support each other and the system to develop different, more generative relationships with these fears.
7. Redefine impact and outcomes: there is no clear finish line in this work as it is long-term, ongoing, and generational. Imagining, enabling, and enacting transformative planning processes will require equipping both new and established planners with emerging/resurging approaches to complex climate, equity, and decolonization challenges.

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