



Sustainable Cities

Youth Led Development in Sustainable Cities From Idea, to Policy to Practice

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Executive Summary

This is a case study of the creation and support of a program for youth-led development in an international organization dedicated to urban sustainability. It is the story of how a small organization tackling huge issues has integrated youth within its own operations and is mainstreaming youth projects and programming it in its work with cities all over the world. Still in the earliest phases of innovation, the study documents the history of the program, its gains and losses and its future directions in an effort to reflect lessons being learned as change is introduced.

The key lessons relate to:

- Unwavering commitment;
- Co-design;
- Two simultaneous paths: specialization and mainstreaming;
- Active learning;
- Managing risk and conflicts;
- Use of seed funding;
- Appropriate evaluation and monitoring; and
- Nurturing innovation.

A 'Continuum of Youth Programming' has been developed for discussion and is appended to the Case Study.

Background

“In this difficult time of multiple crises, - of financial volatility, climate change, HIV AIDS, growing inequalities between rich and poor, and threats to bio and social diversity – the accelerated transfer of learning between cities and communities about what works and doesn’t work is crucial. City-to city learning and the action research needed to support that learning is of top priority. It is the most cost effective development tool available today.”

N.K. Seymoar, President and CEO, International Centre for Sustainable Cities

The International Centre for Sustainable Cities¹ is the operating arm of the Sustainable Cities Foundation, a not-for-profit organization headquartered in Vancouver Canada. Founded in 1993 in response to the Earth Summit, the mission of the Centre is: “to catalyze action on urban sustainability in cities around the world through:

- practical demonstration projects;
- peer learning networks;
- affiliations and
- high profile events.”

‘Sustainable Cities’ is a do tank as well as a think tank. Its projects have encompassed a broad range of urban issues including urban planning and design, waste, water, transportation, energy, disaster mitigation, poverty reduction, food, empowerment and governance. It is the founder and secretariat for the ‘Sustainable Cities: PLUS Network’ (PLUS is an acronym for Partners for Long-term Urban Sustainability) – a network of over 36 cities and regions in 15 countries dedicated to applying a long-term sustainability lens to their current planning processes and implementing short term community action projects that begin the implementation of those visions.

A small catalytic organization, ‘Sustainable Cities’ has a track record of success. Over the past fifteen years, it has won awards and its projects have been included in many “best practices” compendia and web-sites. Most recently, the Centre won the highest award in Canada, the Canadian International Cooperation Awards – for Long-term Dedication to International Cooperation.

‘Sustainable Cities’ model of development is four directional:

- top down (It engages national and local governments.);
- bottom up (It brings the disadvantaged to the decision making table.);

¹ The International Center for Sustainable Cities is often referred to as ICSC. However, the organization’s original acronym and website was often confused with the International Council of Shopping Centres. In 2008, the organization decided to refer to itself as ‘ Sustainable Cities’ and to change its website to sustainablecities.net. Although this too, may be confused with initiatives of other agencies, it does accurately communicate the work of the organization.

- outside in (It brings people from other cities and organizations to share experiences, expertise and technologies.); and
- inside out (It takes cities to see, show and share their learning with others.).

The Centre accelerates the transfer of learning from city-to-city. It scales out learning from demonstration projects through small groups of cities (clusters) facing similar circumstances, through medium sized networks of diverse cities and large membership organizations (such as ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability), and amplifies the results through media, publications and presentations at high profile events such as the World Urban Forum.

Youth-led Development: The Exploratory Phase

1. Establishing Relationships and Exploring the Options

Prior to the second World Urban Forum (WUF3) in 2004, 'Sustainable Cities' began collaborating with the Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA), and KAYA (Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association) also located in Vancouver. Leaders of the three associations sat on the Vancouver Working Group and the National Committee for preparations for WUF3 and shared a common vision of the importance of engaging youth in the Forum and expanding their influence within UN HABITAT. The three organizations were also involved with the World Peace Forum that followed WUF3 and believed that youth might play an important role in both events.

During the lead up to WUF3 these organizations participated actively in monthly Sustainability Community Breakfasts organized by 'Sustainable Cities' in Vancouver. The organizations supported one another in the presentations and positions taken at WUF II in Barcelona, at the 2005 UN HABITAT Governing Council, various World Urban Youth Cafés, the Habitat JAM, and throughout the preparations and presentations at WUF 3 and the World Peace Forum.

As a result of the growing trust between their organizations, 'Sustainable Cities' and the Environmental Youth Alliance decided to develop a joint proposal for a youth-led development project in Ukraine. The project had two components – a work study component developed with Simon Fraser University and a grassroots economic development project focused on unemployed youth. A major donor accepted the concept paper and invited them to develop a full proposal. As a result the two organizations became closer and their social and intellectual capital about youth-led development grew.

Finding common projects with KAYA and indigenous youth was a more difficult matter. KAYA did not need 'Sustainable Cities' – and there was less direct connection between collaboration and funding. Indeed, KAYA's attractiveness to their funding organizations was weakened by the fact that 'Sustainable Cities' was not an aboriginal organization and had only a minor focus on urban

aboriginals, remote or First Nations communities. KAYA was not focused on 'place' whereas 'Sustainable Cities' was. A different strategy to engage aboriginal youth was needed.

Thus over time, the relationship between 'Sustainable Cities' and EYA grew stronger and the one with KAYA grew weaker.

Learning

Shared values and willingness facilitates the exploration of options for youth development but joint projects for mutual gain are needed to maintain collaboration and build social and intellectual capital to advance urban sustainability.

2. Youth in Governance of the Sustainable Cities Foundation

"The first challenge facing 'Sustainable Cities' was the fact that we were not a youth organization. We had no youth on our Board or staff and we did not have any projects explicitly dedicated to youth empowerment or development. Our hearts and theories were in the right place but our policies and practices lagged far behind. Getting the Board's commitment to including youth within our operations and projects was easy. It was discussed and a motion passed at an executive committee meeting in 2005. After all – who could be against such an obvious need? It was a "no brainer". Implementing this good intention, however, was far from easy." Nola-Kate Seymoar

Defining youth as under thirty years of age, in 2006, 'Sustainable Cities' decided to extend its membership to include two youth and invited Grace Myong from the Environmental Youth Alliance and Kelly L'Hirondelle from KAYA to become members. At that time this represented about 7% of the total membership.

The organization faced another dilemma. It had no youth on staff, and had no core funding and no vacancies in project personnel. Most of the volunteers working with the organization were retirees or mid career professionals. The challenge was to build youth into all future activities.

The Centre met this challenge through a number of vehicles. It obtained support from Canadian programs aimed at hiring underemployed youth. It entered into agreements with language training schools to provide 6 to 16 week volunteer placements for students in the role of receptionist at the Centre. It applied for and obtained youth interns under the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) International Youth Internship Program. When it received the contract to write up the results of the Habitat JAM, it hired two youth on staff. Since 2006 it has actively recruited youth volunteers for overseas projects.

The result has been a stunning success. This year (2008), 'Sustainable Cities' directly engages a total of 28 youth as staff, volunteers, interns, consultants and members, and has two Associates, one in North America and one in Africa, who, although over age thirty, have special expertise in youth led development. Of the 28 youth, 23 are women and 17 are visible minorities. It is fair to say that these 30 people are bringing a focus on youth concerns to all aspects of the 'Sustainable Cities' and influencing projects and programs.

Learning

Incorporating youth within the governance structure of a mainstream organization is relatively easy. Options for youth involvement include staffing, volunteers, interns, members, consultants and associates. Maintaining that engagement requires ongoing activities of mutual interest.

3. Projects and Programs

As mentioned earlier, 'Sustainable Cities' and EYA, along with Simon Fraser University (SFU), developed a concept paper to support a youth project in the Ukraine. The five million dollar five year project involved two cities and had two objectives – to introduce a work study program at the universities modeled after SFU's program and to engage unemployed youth in an environmental service corps to develop livelihood and entrepreneurial skills. In negotiating the detailed project proposal it became clear that the donor was interested in the university-led work study program but considered the youth-led project activities for unemployed youth to be highly risky. Eventually, the partners were told that approval depended upon cutting the youth-led activities. This caused a crisis for 'Sustainable Cities' and EYA. The proposal represented considerable investment of time and resources. It had been developed over many months by volunteers, including a youth who was counting on being hired to implement the project. Trips had been made to meet with partners in Ukraine and relationships developed with the universities and with the business community. 'Sustainable Cities' did not have other proposals in the final stages of approval and five million dollars for five years represented a significant degree of stability. On the other hand – introducing a work study program at universities was not central to 'Sustainable Cities' mandate and core business – urban development. Working with unemployed youth in the inner city, however, was central to the Centre's mandate and interest in developing a youth-led development program. After much soul searching, by mutual agreement, the Centre and EYA withdrew and left the project to Simon Fraser University. Although this was a financial loss, the crisis served a useful function for 'Sustainable Cities' and EYA in clarifying their commitment to youth-led development.

Learning

A core commitment to youth-led development may be a disadvantage in seeking

mainstream developmental aid funding.

In the period between 2006 and 2008, 'Sustainable Cities' embarked on a major project, the Sustainable Cities: PLUS Network, involving 36 cities and regions engaged in long-term sustainability planning and action demonstration projects. The Centre hired Amber Zirnhelt, formerly with EYA and a contributor to the research of youth led development case studies for the Habitat JAM. As a graduate student she had been working with aboriginal youth with the Tseshaht First Nation² near Port Alberni on Vancouver Island. She developed youth projects with several cities in the PLUS Network, and introduced and manages a youth intern/volunteer program. The internship/volunteer program provides work placements for young professionals in response to capacity building needs identified by PLUS Network cities. Thus, for example, in Dar es Salaam several interns and volunteers have been recruited to support a multi-stakeholder sustainable tourism project.

With the help of EYA, Sustainable Cities introduced asset mapping – in three Canadian towns and in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Matamoros, Mexico; and San Jose, Costa Rica. This approach engages youth in mapping the youth friendly and unsafe areas of their cities and in Dar resulted in the production of a Youth Friendly City Guide. In the course of the project, youth photograph and record what they like and don't like about their city and usually present their results to their city council. In some communities such as Iqaluit in the Canadian Arctic, Amber led youth visioning sessions in partnership with the local schools to engage youth in community planning. Based on Appreciative Inquiry and the 'Imagine' process (see www.imagineCalgary.ca), youth visioning was taken up by others in the PLUS Network. To date, perhaps the most successful and dramatic example of youth engagement in urban planning has been "Imagine Durban". Through schools and community events, thousands of children and youth were engaged in the planning for the future of Durban. Children's art was translated into a colorful stone park in one of the neighborhoods and one high school undertook a cultural week, involving students teaching one another about traditional food, dress and customs resulting in respect and new friendships across cultures.

Amber's engagement of the Tseshaht First Nations in education and health research led to further discussions and the eventual involvement of Port Alberni and a second First Nation community that shares the same geographic territory with the town. A common interest in the future of their children led the three communities to participate in a number of joint visioning activities. The two aboriginal communities are in land claim negotiations over the same territory so this opportunity was a significant one with the potential of increasing their cooperation. It is too early to tell whether their involvement with Port Alberni's

² First Nations refers to the governance of the aboriginal people who were indigenous to the land in Canada before European settlement and colonization.

long-term integrated planning process will continue, but the focus on future generations and youth engagement has clearly brought youth and the three communities closer together.

Learning

Youth engagement in mapping the assets of their communities and in visioning the future of their cities is a positive activity that improves sustainability planning and builds collaborative relationships beyond local political boundaries.

Youth engagement became a strong theme of 'Sustainable Cities' *Centering Women in Reconstruction and Governance* program in Sri Lanka. There and in a project involving three cities in Africa, the project design included a fund to provide small community seed grants. These were directed at enabling women, youth and the disabled to undertake livelihood projects, start micro-enterprises or make community improvements (lanes, drains and urban greening). In Africa and Sri Lanka the projects have engaged youth - providing training in how to write a proposal, how to apply for grants and loans, and how to manage a business enterprise. They have also supported youth in sports, music and street theatre activities. The community funds have been an essential element in empowering youth to be responsible for their own futures and to contribute to their local neighborhood. Access to savings and credit has facilitated the formation of enterprises and decreased poverty at the household level.

Learning

Access to seed funds, savings and credit is an essential component to successful youth-led enterprises and community improvement activities.

Two independent reviews were conducted of 'Sustainable Cities' and the PLUS Network program in 2008. This was a routine matter triggered by the size and nature of the organization's programming in CIDA's Partnership Branch. The results were very positive and both reviews noted the success of the youth components of the Centre's work. Of even more significance, however, was that both the reviewers recommended that the youth program expand beyond the CIDA International Youth Internship Program and involve peer exchanges between youth in the cities in the Sustainable Cities: PLUS Network. It was suggested that they be modeled after the successful city-to-city exchanges and workshops at the core of the PLUS Network activities.

Currently in Dar es Salaam for example there are several youth projects (water, cookware, performance arts, etc), a Youth Council and a fledgling One Stop Youth Centre. These are being supported by small community grants and the local councils. Similar projects are being undertaken in Durban and other cities in Africa, Latin America and Sri Lanka. Exchanges between the youth involved in the projects and workshops to strengthen their activities would enable the

transfer of learning among youth groups and between local councils – strengthening their current leadership and showcasing their innovations and support of the local councils. ‘Sustainable Cities’ is enthusiastic about this recommendation and will seek funds to support it.

Learning

Youth peer exchanges can accelerate the transfer of learning among projects, groups and communities, build capacity and maintain enthusiasm for local projects and sustainability initiatives.

In a like manner, the Centre plays an active role in facilitation and documentation at World Youth Congresses and the World Urban Youth Forum. It has been instrumental in advancing several ideas such as the establishment of the Youth Opportunities Fund and uses the forums to learn from others in the field and to share the lessons from its own youth projects. These activities have revealed two serious shortcomings. Firstly, ‘Sustainable Cities’ and many other practitioners who are not solely focused on youth issues or who are attempting inter-generational work, may lack an effective overall conceptual framework to guide decisions and program choices about youth. Secondly, the Centre, like many others, lacks an effective research component to document and evaluate successes and failures so as to guide policies, practice and programs for youth. Although its PLUS Network can transfer learning quickly – it can only be effective if that learning is based on solid assessments and evaluation. Participatory Action Research and Developmental Evaluation are both methodologies well suited to innovative programming in complex systems such as youth led development in cities. ‘Sustainable Cities’ has established collaborative relationships with the University of Colorado and Royal Roads University to seek funding to support the creation and dissemination of knowledge in the field. Nola Kate Seymoar has outlined a potential framework for youth programming which is currently under discussion by those involved with the Center’s program and may serve as the basis for future research (see appendix).

Learning

Participatory action research and developmental evaluation are needed to identify, document, and analyze what works and what doesn’t work in youth programs.

Summary and Conclusion

This case study of 'Sustainable Cities' experience in introducing a youth program and embracing youth-led development within its own operations and in its programs suggests a number of factors that have been key to success.

The key lessons relate to:

- Unwavering commitment. A determination to involve youth throughout the organization was undertaken without any increased funding. Eventually this was supplemented by small project funding for interns. 'Sustainable Cities' has remained committed to youth-led development projects occasionally at considerable expense to its bottom line.
- Co-design. Empowering youth is sometimes a difficult activity for a local authority to undertake. When youth, or other marginalized groups are mobilized by others outside of a municipality, they are often perceived as a threat to the status quo. 'Sustainable Cities' approach to youth development (top down, bottom up, outside in and inside out) seems to mitigate that threat and build collaborative relationship between youth and the local authorities. Involving all parties in designing the youth program establishes a win-win situation, and creates local ownership of initiatives among both youth and government.
- Two simultaneous paths: specialization and mainstreaming. 'Sustainable Cities' undertook to introduce special programs geared specifically at youth (asset mapping and visioning) within its main program areas. It incorporated youth within its own operations and gave them full professional responsibilities. To those evaluating the organization, the Centre was walking the talk.
- Active learning. In the absence of a guiding conceptual framework for youth programming, the Centre relied on its own ability to share, reflect and discuss the emerging lessons within its own Network and with other engaged in similar activities. The need for applied research and evaluation has emerged as a critical element for which funding must be sought.
- Managing risk and conflicts. In addition to the value of the four directional development model outlined above under co-design, the focus of 'Sustainable Cities' on very long-term sustainability planning, in particular visioning for the future, is compatible with youth led development and may serve as a positive force for bridging potentially competing or conflicting claims within bioregions.
- Use of seed funding. Youth-led development projects require small amounts of seed funds to enable youth groups to undertake enterprises and community improvements. Access to revolving funds, credit and savings is often needed to sustain projects over time.
- Appropriate evaluation and monitoring. Participatory action research and developmental evaluation appear to be useful approaches that are compatible with innovative and emerging youth focused projects in a complex urban environment.

- Nurturing innovation. Youth-led development at 'Sustainable Cities' is a new program area and requires continued funding and support from all levels of the organization.

'Sustainable Cities' has had a very successful experience of youth-led development, and gives credit for that to the caliber of staff, interns, volunteers and associates it has been privileged to recruit. That success also reflects an organizational culture committed to innovation, sharing and peer learning.

Note regarding Appendix A: "The Sustainable Cities Continuum of Youth Programming"

This continuum was developed as a way to categorize activities and organize an analysis of youth programming. It reflects different types of participation with different purposes. It is not intended to be a hierarchy or ladder. It is hypothesized that activities in all categories are needed, not only those in the youth-led development column. As noted at the end of this paper, 'Sustainable Cities' is interested in discussion of the framework and in gathering further examples of activities in each of the columns. Comments may be sent to nkseymoar@icsc.ca or azirnhelt@icsc.ca.

