



What We Heard –Edmonton Café Pracademique

Background

This report summarizes what was learned at the Edmonton Café Pracademique held as part of the Community Housing Canada Research partnership. The intent is to highlight the collective understandings that were found in terms sustainability and resilience in community housing. This partnership, led by Capital Region Housing and the University of Alberta, is looking at the sustainability and resilience of Canada’s community housing sector. The Café Pracademique format intends to blend the lines between practice and scholarship and develop a concrete deliverable by the end of the workshop. Throughout the day it became clear that most of us were still approaching reconciliation from a western lens.

Common Themes

Treatment of tenants as persons

Moving slowly

Removing the language of “othering”

Redefining community housing

Common philosophy of community

Thought Leaders

Our thought leaders were Cheryl Whiskeyjack, Executive Director of Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and Sarah Woodgate, Director, Calgary Housing and President, Calgary Housing Company.

Highlights from the conversation:

- Reconciliation means many things to many people; it is important to take a step-back to acknowledge this, even if it may mean reconsidering what affordable housing is.
- Reconciliation is good model to use to better understand community housing, especially since data on Indigenous peoples in community housing is limited.
- Steps toward reconciliation need to focus on the individual. This includes fostering their wellbeing, with providers taking responsibility for the people they serve.
- Current legislation and policy may be contributing to a cycle of poverty and limits cultural practices of Indigenous peoples. It is based on a model of family that does not confirm to all those who live in affordable housing.
- A balance needs to be struck between regulations and opportunities for people to create solutions for their situations that does not penalize them for doing so.
- Part of reconciliation is moving away from creating an “other” and instead focusing on an “all of us” mentality.

Key Observations of Sustainability and Resilience

Sustainability in Community Housing should be:

- Continuously ongoing and focused on the generations coming ahead
- A holistic system approach (multi-sector)
- Inclusive and have representative and participatory governance
- Involve ongoing relationships and the community has whole
- Full of diverse providers (public, private, NFP, Indigenous) in co-operation/conversation and engaged in friendly relationships
- Adaptable and flexible
- Purposeful and intentional
- Support capacity building and learning
- Have a commitment to financial viability
- High quality and contributing to social, economic, and environmental wellbeing over generations
- Considerate of climate change

Resilience in Community Housing should be:

- In a Western context: an ability to nimbly adapt by bouncing back
- In an Indigenous context: natural law, honesty, sharing, strength
- Preparing for, and anticipating ups and downs (especially in funding flows)
- Ensures supports align with experiences and challenges of families (ex: family violence is a priority criteria for entry into housing, but not ability to provide wrap around supports for families experiencing domestic violence)
- Maintaining flexibility in all areas of operation and policy through decentralized decision making that puts the story and experience of the person/family at the centre
- Accept grey areas (avoid black and white rules)
- An enhanced consciousness that evolves to meet the needs of the community and the people being served
- Active and ongoing

Current Status

Sustainability and resilience can help map the current status and end goal or vision for community housing. Participants also described sustaining forces that were preventing change and driving forces that were supporting change. Again, it was recognized that this exercise and image is drawn from a linear western perspective.

1. *Current Status of Community Housing*

- Housing is viewed as a commodity
- There is a focus on market housing and homeownership
- There is inequity in funding distribution based on status, including Indigeneity

2. *End Goal / Vision for Community Housing*

- Increased supply
- Equitable distribution of funding
- Culturally appropriate built forms
- Common philosophy
- Focused on people
- Facilitates tenant choice and dignity

2. *Barriers / Events / Distractions to Community Housing*

- Lack of commitment to and understanding of reconciliation
- Continued Western lens
- Funding – not just for housing but also for affordable living
- Election
- Representation – whose voices count and are valued
- Prejudice and racism
- Policy



Critical Uncertainties

In examining how identified critical uncertainties impact and intersect with one other, participants said that:

- Despite potential low funding, it is still possible to work towards reconciliation if stakeholder's commitment to it is high.
- Low commitment and cultural understanding to reconciliation will always make it difficult to bring about impactful change, regardless of how well other uncertainties are addressed.
- Currently there are mid-levels of understanding and engagement with reconciliation, but further understanding is needed.
- High levels of funding but low commitment to other uncertainties resulted in insincere solutions on Community Housing and value placed on the asset not the individual.
- The most ideal situations involved a shift in the current power dynamics.

Critical Uncertainties identified:

- Funding
- Commitment to reconciliation
- Right to housing
- Community engagement
- Understanding and measuring housing insecurity
- Implementation (action)
- Shifting government priorities

Priorities and Deliverables

In the next five years the following priorities can be addressed to reach the vision of community housing:

- What is community in the term "community housing" – who is community?
- How do different stakeholders perceive community housing?
- What does community mean to Indigenous peoples and how is it different from settler understandings of community?
- Reconsider the design of buildings and their location within complete communities (includes engaging people within the community and creating resilient environments)
- Develop engagement tools to increase knowledge and community reconciliation
- Clarify the purpose of publicly funding housing (terms, who is it for?)
- Encourage appropriate education and understanding – who is teaching and who is listening?
- Make housing a human right – how can we make this happen?
- Pursue system change – how can the system change for reconciliation or relationship with Indigenous peoples?
- Improve understanding of who is in need of community housing but remember urgency for action
- Have a model to understand how reconciliation is happening and what measurable actions address reconciliation, to know if we are moving forward in the housing sector
- Evaluate outcomes related to reconciliation (not only financial, but also other outcomes)
- Improve collaboration within and between provinces and territories in meeting a common goal

Acknowledgements

We respectfully acknowledge that this café took place on Treaty 6 territory, traditional lands of First Nations and Metis peoples.