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Climate Change Action in Communities: Barriers and Opportunities

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Issue

The story of climate change mitigation and adaptation in Canada is one of innumerable false starts, piecemeal policies, and great potential. At the national level, the Canadian government has largely adopted a much criticized “wait and see” approach in the ‘post-Kyoto’ implementation period, while attempting to predict the outcomes of the Obama administration’s climate change efforts before deciding upon the Canadian policy direction.

Increasingly, the attention of policymakers and scholars is being focused on delivering measurable results necessitating a shift in focus to the local: the level at which responses will be put into action. Provincially, British Columbia has demonstrated leadership through legislated greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction targets, a revenue neutral carbon tax, and the Climate Action Charter with local governments¹. The Charter has driven municipalities to develop climate change action plans, set GHG reduction targets, and purchase carbon offsets to attain ‘carbon neutrality.’ However, British Columbia’s leadership has not been replicated across the country; instead there are a variety of climate policies and approaches employed by jurisdictions across Canada. Despite a wealth of financial, technical, and human capacity in some large Canadian municipalities, it remains a challenging task to implement effective climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. This briefing note examines the levers that can be used to sustain action at the local level.

Background

Canadian municipalities have the potential to create sustainable communities through levers including land use planning, utility provision, transportation infrastructure development, and

waste managementⁱⁱ, but are fundamentally hampered by inertiaⁱⁱⁱ. In larger municipalities, such inertia may arise from a lack of understanding of climate change causes and response options, competing priorities, and a tendency to produce policies according to habit and routine^{iv}. In smaller municipalities, technical capacity, financial capital, and human resources are particularly critical. Research has been conducted in BC's Lower Mainland that illustrates the progress made, and challenges faced, with regard to municipal action on climate change in the more populous areas of the province.

Some determinants of action include:

1) A **long-range strategic sustainability plan** may ensure that climate change response efforts are aligned with the goals of other departments and broader policy priorities^v. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Partners for Climate Protection Program^{vi} serves as a valuable driver of municipal climate change action, though it emphasizes emissions reductions rather than integrated sustainability mandates.

2) The **array of policy and regulatory tools** that municipalities have is significant. For instance, the Official Community Plan (OCP) and system of zoning bylaws provide the regulatory framework upon which the vast majority of development decisions are made. Outdated OCPs often contain little concrete reference to climate change or specific greenhouse gas reduction plans (e.g. stringent building efficiency guidelines). To remedy this, BC's Bill 27 (Green Communities)^{vii} required municipalities to incorporate GHG targets and associated policies and actions into their OCPs by May 31st 2010. The next step is to ensure that these actions will lead to desired outcomes.

3) **Leadership, supported by sufficient financial and human resources**, is an especially critical determinant of the success of local climate change action. Political leadership is especially crucial in the early stages of priority-setting, while technical leadership (on the part of senior municipal staff and the Chief Administrative Officer) becomes increasingly important as implementation progresses.^{viii}

4) Finally, the **location of climate change and/or sustainability in the organizational structure** is a key driver. While leading municipalities have built a team that acts as a resource on climate change, others have tasked very few, if any, specific staff with climate-change files, and they are typically responsible for a host of other activities as well as being located in the planning or engineering departments. This can prevent the accumulation of significant institutional learning and inhibit effective cross-department climate change action.

Recommendations

In many Canadian communities, a more ambitious, integrated climate change adaptation and mitigation plan that addresses both corporate and community emissions can help to achieve climate change related goals. This must be supported by mechanisms that nurture inter-departmental collaboration and innovation. These mechanisms could include:

- Inter-departmental working groups that include planners, engineers, and financial and environmental practitioners to design integrated climate plans;

- Frequent opportunities for sharing best practices with municipalities and climate change experts, facilitated at the provincial level;

Leadership, at both political and technical levels, is an equally significant missing ingredient. Stronger leadership may both drive innovation and assure technical staff that climate change priorities will remain high on the agenda. In the past, municipal leadership has been most successfully fostered by strong incentives at the provincial level. Within municipalities, locating climate change within the mayor's office may help to drive action in more technically oriented departments.

British Columbia, as part of ongoing collaboration with municipalities, must carefully evaluate the emissions targets incorporated into OCPs as a result of Bill 27 to determine whether or not they are sufficiently ambitious. More generally, provinces can play a particularly important role in facilitating the sharing of best practices amongst communities. This will help to fill the technical and financial gaps that are most prevalent in smaller Canadian municipalities, and strengthen efforts to tackle sources of emissions that have yet to be addressed.

Conclusion

Many Canadian municipalities have made significant strides toward effective action on climate change, but still face significant barriers to achieving authentic carbon neutrality. Smaller municipalities may need to combine resources via jurisdictions akin to BC's Regional Districts in order to overcome gaps in technical knowledge and financial resources. Rather than being linked to a dearth of technology or money, barriers in larger municipalities most often grow out of routines, lack of compelling leadership, and faulty communication. Crucial enablers of action include a compelling high-level vision, leadership that stimulates innovation and collaboration, and the embedding of climate change response measures within standard operating procedures. Together, targeting these levers may help communities across the country to achieve carbon neutrality and transition away from the purchase of carbon offsets in the long term.

Sources

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ⁱⁱⁱ Burch, S. and J. Robinson. 2007. A framework for explaining the links between capacity and action in response to climate change. *Climate Policy* 7(4): 304-316.

^{iv} Burch, S. 2009. In pursuit of resilient, low carbon communities: An examination of barriers to action in three Canadian cities. *Energy Policy* DOI 10.1016/j.enpol.2009.06.070.

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^{vi} Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2010. Partners for Climate Protection. Accessed on September 13, 2010, from: <http://fmv.fcm.ca/Partners-for-Climate-Protection/>.

vii Province of British Columbia, 2008. Bill 27 (2008). Local Government (Green Communities) Statute Amendment Act. Accessed on September 13, 2010 from http://www.leg.bc.ca/38th4th/1st_read/gov27-1.htm.

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