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Integrating a Public Health Perspective into Municipal Climate Change Policies

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Issue

Increases in atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and resulting changes in climate will have health and quality of life impacts on communities across Canada. As a result, municipal governments across British Columbia (BC) are mitigating GHGs and preparing to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Despite the impacts of climate change on community health, the field of public health is often left out of municipal climate change planning and social mobilization strategies. Municipal staff members may fail to recognize the community health and wellbeing co-benefits of mitigating GHGs and adapting to climate change. The challenge for BC is to integrate a public health approach effectively into municipal climate change mitigation and adaptation policies to ensure communities remain healthy and resilient as the province's climate continues to change.

Background

A clear definition of roles and responsibilities is of central importance to climate change policy. Input from federal government agencies with regards to climate change policies has been limited to describing current and future climate change impacts as well as trends at the national and regional levels^{1,2}. The BC provincial government has been increasingly involved

¹ Lemmen, D.S., Warren, F.J., Lacroix, J., & Bush, E. (ed.). (2008). From impacts to adaptation: Canada in a changing climate 2007. 448 pgs. Natural Resources Canada, Ottawa. Retrieved October 7, 2008 from http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/assess/2007/index_e.php.

² Health Canada. (2005). Climate change: Preparing for the health impacts. Health Policy Research, (11). Retrieved October 2008 from <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/sr-sr/pubs/hpr-rpms/bull/2005-climat/index-eng.php>.

in providing climate-change policy leadership. As the local organizational bodies of the province, municipal governments take the lead in building and tailoring climate change policies. For example, the province has partnered with the Union of BC Municipalities and local governments in GHG mitigation strategies through the BC Climate Action Charter³. The province has also funded climate change adaptation pilot projects within a number of local governments. As a result, a few BC municipalities (e.g. Kimberley and the District of Elkford) have emerged as leaders in adaptation. However, the majority of municipalities are currently not preparing for the consequences of climate change.

The processes of reducing GHGs and preparing for the impacts of climate change at the municipal scale have health and well-being benefits. For example, policies promoting activity-based transportation such as walking and biking and local food consumption promote healthy lifestyles while also mitigating GHGs. Moreover, climate change adaptation strategies identify and protect vulnerable groups from health consequences of climate-related emergencies. Although the *2008 BC Public Health Act* identifies how relationships can be created between local governments and public health officials, to date no partnership between health authorities and local governments has emerged to tackle climate change policies in BC. Regional Health Authorities are focused on reducing their own, corporate GHG emissions, and are currently not involved in strategies framed as 'climate change adaptation'. Nevertheless, regional health authorities have expertise that could be tapped by municipalities to enhance health promotion and protection in climate change policies and public engagement strategies.

Recommendations

While municipalities in BC are showing leadership in planning and initiating climate change policies, neglecting to develop partnerships with public health organizations will constrain realization of health co-benefits of mitigation and adaptation. Thus, development of strong partnerships between municipalities and regional health authorities should be considered essential. Along these lines, three options exist.

First, health authorities could provide "top-down" regional input into the municipal climate change strategies in their areas. The regional health authority programs, through the BC Public Health Act could initiate public health action and create expertise at the regional level. However, because municipalities are the primary leaders in local strategies, this approach may threaten local initiatives by diffusing responsibility to higher levels of government.

A second option is municipally implemented community-based engagement frameworks⁴. This "bottom-up" approach focuses on local actions that empower community members and strengthen social capital. Community-based strategies have been employed by many of the BC municipalities in pilot adaptation programs, but the pilot programs have not resulted in relationships with public health officials.

³ See "The British Columbia Climate Action Charter". Retrieved March 25, 2010 from <http://www.ubcm.ca/assets/library/Policy~Topics/Environment/Climate~Change/British%20Columbia%20Climate%20Action%20Charter.pdf#search=%22climate%20change%22>

⁴ For example see Ebi, K. L., & Semenza, J. C. (2008). Community-based adaptation to the health impacts of climate change. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 35(5), 501-507.

A final option is a mix of both “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches. Municipalities would remain the leaders in implementing local climate change initiatives while the BC Ministry of Health would have staff available with expertise in climate-change mitigation and adaptation policies to liaise with municipal leaders. This option will require effective leadership, partnership-building strategies, and provision of appropriate resources in both the regional health authorities and the local municipal governments.

Conclusion

A mix of both regional health authority “top-down” and local government “bottom-up” approaches would ultimately have the greatest health and well-being impacts in BC communities. It is recommended that the provincial government maintain and expand climate-change adaptation pilot projects while continuing to encourage GHG mitigation initiatives with local governments. The BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport could develop a climate change program, which focuses on developing expertise in policy and understanding of the local health impacts of climate change. Such a program would need to work with the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport in order to develop contacts in each of the regional health authorities that would engage with community members and municipal officials. By instigating development of strong partnerships between public health authorities and municipalities, policies can be designed that take more firmly into account the health implications of climate change in British Columbia. This approach will assist in building healthier, more sustainable communities.