

# What is an Equity Lens?

A Primer for Local Governments

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## What is an Equity Lens?

An equity lens is a framework that introduces a set of questions to be brought forward when planning and making decisions about new policies, programs or initiatives. Applying an equity lens means continually asking:

- ❖ Who will benefit from a policy, program, initiative or service?
- ❖ Who might be excluded from those benefits and why? Indeed, who might be harmed?
- ❖ How might some population groups be unfairly burdened today or in the future? How might existing privilege be further entrenched?
- ❖ Have important decisions been made with the direct input of those who will be most affected by that decision?
- ❖ From whose perspective are you evaluating the ‘success’ of your project or policy?

Committing to using an equity lens also means demonstrating the courage to uncover power differences among individuals or groups involved in the process, acknowledging privilege, and working to dismantle the systemic barriers that can make it difficult for some community members to participate in, and benefit from, local decision-making processes. An equitable planning and development process reaches community members who may not contribute regularly to local planning and decision-making. The result can be policies and strategies that are more responsive to local needs.

## Why Use an Equity Lens?

Routine use of an equity lens explicitly integrates equity into governmental operations and ensures that City services, programs, budgets, resources, grants and decisions result in equitable outcomes for everyone. There is a strong economic, political, and environmental case to be made for equity at the local level. Targeting solutions that meet the needs of all groups in our communities, but especially those most disadvantaged, can benefit all.

Communities that are more equitable are stronger economically. Greater economic equity gives more people the opportunity to participate in the local economy at a higher level, and that adds strength to the economy. A growing set of US research highlights that the underlying reasons for these economic gains make sense: persistent inequities, especially those associated with income and/or race, make it challenging for significant portions of the population to realize their potential and therefore contribute fully to the economy<sup>i</sup>. The process is also important; broad, equitable community engagement is linked to a thriving, resilient economy.<sup>ii</sup>

### What is Equity?

Equity is the fair distribution of opportunities, power, and resources to meet the needs of all people, regardless of age, ability, gender, culture or background.

*“This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.” (Policy Link, 2019)*

More equitable communities and societies are healthier. Decades of international research

demonstrates that communities with greater levels of inequity are also more likely to struggle with higher rates of crime. Higher rates of inequity are also linked with residents who have worse physical and mental health and who are less connected to each other and to their community<sup>iii,iv</sup>.

The use of an equity lens is consistent with a comprehensive approach to sustainability. Defining sustainability beyond a “green” / environmental approach, by adding in the other two Es (economy and equity), allows for a stronger, more integrated triple-bottom line approach that benefits all<sup>v</sup>.

Using an equity lens is consistent with principles and action towards reconciliation. One of the essential components of authentic efforts towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada is to recognize the ongoing legacies of colonialism, and the ways in which racism and discrimination continue to lead to gaps between the well-being of Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous populations. The process of using an equity lens can help to uncover these injustices and foster greater learning and connection for all.

### **How can Local Governments Apply an Equity Lens?**

Thinking about applying an equity lens can be daunting – but it’s okay to start with one project and grow from there. There are several tools and resources available to help apply an equity lens to planning work. In general, these tools suggest the following components to consider:

1. Create opportunities for people from all walks of life to participate in planning and decision-making processes. Design those opportunities so that priority populations can participate and fully engage in the process. This will take some creative planning - a process I call “extreme outreach”.
  - *Example:* As part of the planning for the City of Vernon’s Child Friendly City project, an engagement process was designed and delivered by and for children and youth. The youth participated in focus groups and informal meetings, a community forum, and an asset mapping exercise to identify current youth-friendly places in the city, as well as places that need improvement. The result is the Youthful Vernon Strategy.
  - *Tool:* PlanH Healthy Community Engagement Action Guide for Local Governments, prepared by BC Healthy Communities.
2. Ensure diversity and inclusivity in the workplace, through explicit policies, leadership, training and continuous learning for every staff member at every level.
  - *Example / Tool:* In 2017 Edmonton City Council passed a motion to implement mandatory Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) e-learning training for senior leaders in the Administration and for City Councillors by end of 2018. Council also directed that staff in role-specific positions, predominantly in the areas of research, policy and program development, human resource and communication, receive in-depth, City of Edmonton-customized GBA+ training.
  - *Example:* The City of Saskatoon has been recognized for its priorities on reconciliation, inclusion, and diversity. For example, the City introduced mandatory Aboriginal Awareness training and offers a Truth and Reconciliation Resource Kit to promote and encourage ongoing learning. The City also furthers employee understanding through

- various training initiatives, covering topics such as cultural bridging, understanding invisible disabilities, and inclusive practice for LGBT+ identities.
3. Use many sources and types of data, gathered with the assistance of community partners, to better understand the diversity of the community and the day-to-day lives of residents. Health authorities can be good partners in the effort to find and understand data.
    - *Examples:* The City of Vancouver is using the My Health My Community (MHMC) data to inform their Healthy City Strategy. The District of Hope worked with Fraser Health and other community partners to examine inequities in their community and design community-based strategies. In both cities, MHMC data helps staff understand what areas need further attention, what policies need to be updated and where more resources are needed to move the plan forward.
  4. Carefully examine proposed policies or initiatives to understand the potential impacts of those initiatives regarding access, equity, and inclusion for diverse communities and groups that experience racism, discrimination and prejudice.
    - *Example:* The City of Toronto is implementing the Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism. The implementation of this five-year plan, 2018-2022, includes 22 recommendations and 80 actions to address five issue areas: children and youth development; health and community services; job and income supports; policing and the justice system; and community engagement and Black leadership.
    - *Example:* Seattle's Pedestrian Masterplan was developed with an understanding that some neighborhoods were in greater disrepair than others and would therefore have different levels of investment. Improvements were prioritized based on equity measures, including community data on income, car ownership, disability, and health.
    - *Tools:* Health Impact Assessment is a systematic, six-step process that determines the potential health and well-being effects of a proposed plan, policy or project. There are many guidebooks and toolkits for planners available, including one from Metro Vancouver. Equity-focused HIAs are also available.
  5. Ensure that all stakeholders and anyone likely to be impacted by the initiative receive information about it and are able respond. Communicate information in clear, direct, easy to understand ways, and use several communication tools, including video, graphics and sound. Use a variety of communication channels to prevent unintended exclusions.
    - *Example:* The Strathcona Community Health Network prepared a housing needs assessment for the Strathcona Regional District in 2018. The project team gathered a wide variety of types of data, both quantitative and qualitative, weaving the lived experience of community members into the numbers. The result was a formal report with a series of community snapshots – brief, infographic-heavy documents that blended numbers with quotes and stories from community members.
    - *Tools:* The Berkeley Media Studies Group offers resources to develop communication strategies that support equity and social justice, including ideas and case studies about framing and media advocacy.

6. Continually evaluate the new policies or initiatives developed, the process of developing them, and the equity framework itself. Seek to understand using a wide variety of types of data and knowledge – from statistics to stories. The effectiveness of an inclusive policy, once implemented, is measured by the extent to which it creates an environment within which all stakeholders feel included and empowered to access resources, opportunities, and see themselves reflected.
  - *Tool:* The [Municipal Evaluation Toolkit: Measuring Inclusion](#), from the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, offers a tool to give municipalities and communities a way to measure how welcoming and inclusive they are from several angles. The Toolkit also helps communities to plan their next steps and evaluate their actions.
  - *Tools:* [Racial Equity Tools](#) offers a wide variety of tips, case studies and general resources about how to learn from and document local-level work towards equity.

## Aspects to Consider When Designing an Equity Lens

Developing an equity lens doesn't necessarily have to be complicated or take a long time. Fortunately, we have tools from other provinces and countries that we can borrow from and adapt. The starting point is gathering information about the current inequities that exist within the community. When gathering and analyzing that data, it's important to use an intersectional approach. Multiple forms of discrimination can intersect and have a compound effect. For instance, a white woman is penalized by her gender but has the advantage of race, while an Indigenous woman is disadvantaged by her gender and her race. Without considering intersectionality, actions that aim to address injustice towards one group may end up perpetuating systems of inequities towards other groups.

It's also important to consider 4 types of equity<sup>vi</sup> when designing an equity lens framework:

- *Procedural equity* – inclusive, accessible, authentic engagement and representation in decision-making;
- *Distributional equity* – fair distribution of benefits and burdens across all segments of a community, prioritizing those with highest need;
- *Structural equity* – decisions are made with a recognition of the historical, cultural, and institutional dynamics and structures that have routinely advantaged privileged groups;
- *Transgenerational equity* – decisions consider generational impacts and don't result in unfair burdens on future generations.

Using an equity lens does not stifle growth or serve as an impediment to development. Instead, considering equity in local decision making creates and extends opportunities to each member of the community, recognizes the needs and capacities of community members, and acts to ensure that inequities are not unintentionally worsened.

Finally, using an equity lens does not mean that we pour all our resources into supporting those neighbourhoods or groups that are struggling most. Equity initiatives can sometimes become very narrow in focus and strive to improve the lives of those at the lowest end of the gradient (people experiencing homelessness, frail seniors, people living in poverty), but research has shown that these targeted efforts don't work over the long-term. Similarly, universal strategies don't work

either, because they assume that we all have the same needs. Research from the UK has demonstrated that, to achieve the most improvement in health and well-being for the greatest number of people, we need to offer resources and supports for all population groups, in proportion to their level of need. This is known as proportionate universalism<sup>vii</sup>.

## **What Other Cities Have Implemented an Equity Lens Framework?**

The idea of using an equity lens is still quite new in North America, but some cities have implemented new policies with the help of an equity lens or framework. Some city governments have chosen to implement these ideas on a larger scale and embed an equity or inclusion lens into their comprehensive plans, while others have focused on only one area of planning. Here are three good examples:

- ❖ Toronto, Ontario – The City of Toronto has developed an Equity Lens tool to assist in identifying and removing barriers for the city’s most marginalized populations. The Equity Lens is used to develop Equity Impact Statements, which are required for all major policies and reports to City Council. The City also uses an Equity Responsive Budgeting process, which ensures that equity, especially regarding gender, is considered in the City’s budget process.
- ❖ Portland, Oregon – in 2012, the City of Portland adopted the Portland Plan, which outlines strategies to guide the city for the following 25 years. The Plan’s core principle is equity, and it includes 20 actions that make up an equity framework. A 2017 progress report is available. The city of Portland has also incorporated equity considerations into their climate action plans, resulting in a Climate Action through Equity plan in 2016.
- ❖ Hamilton, Ontario – in February 2019, Hamilton City Council passed a motion to develop an action plan for the implementation of an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) lens. The implementation of the lens will include steps to integrate a consideration of equity into program development, service delivery, budgeting, business planning and prioritization. A draft Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Handbook is available.
- ❖ Ottawa, Ontario - In 2011, Ottawa’s Transit Commission prepared a review of bus routes and their frequency. Many members of the community brought their concerns to City Council about the potential impact of proposed changes in their neighbourhood. The community requested that a study be undertaken using an equity lens to consider the impact on groups of people who may be most at risk of exclusion. The study documented that the reductions had indeed a disproportionately negative impact on women, seniors, immigrants, people in poverty, youth and people with disabilities. As a result, the Transit Commission initiated a policy to apply an Equity and Inclusion Lens going forward in all their operations, and community groups work with them to help make sure that happens. A 2015 report provides an update.

## Resources

For more information about designing, implementing and evaluating an equity lens, see these helpful resources:

- City for All Women Initiative (2015). Advancing Equity and Inclusion: A Guide for Municipalities. Ottawa.
- BC Centre for Disease Control (2017). Fact Sheet: Supporting Equity through the Built Environment. Vancouver.
- Urban Sustainability Directors Network (2015). Equity Foundations: A USDN Capacity Building Program.
- American Planning Association (2019). Planning for Equity Policy Guide. Washington, DC.

Specific guidance is available for housing<sup>viii</sup>, transportation planning<sup>ix</sup> and parks planning<sup>x</sup>.

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*“Equity matters because it is only when all individuals and groups are included and valued that a municipality can benefit from the richness of different ways of living and understanding the world.” (City for All Women Initiative, 2015, p. 18)*

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- <sup>i</sup>Morgan, J. (2016). [Equity and Economic Development: What's the Connection?](#) University of North Carolina School of Government.
- <sup>ii</sup> Levine et al., (2013). Civic Health and the Economy: Making the Connection. *National Conference on Citizenship*. Retrieved from [https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/civic\\_health\\_and\\_the\\_economy.pdf](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/civic_health_and_the_economy.pdf).
- <sup>iii</sup> Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. London, UK: Penguin.
- <sup>iv</sup> World Health Organization on the Social Determinants of Health (2008). *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*. [https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/en/](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/en/)
- <sup>v</sup> Park, A. (2014). Equity in Sustainability: An Equity Scan of Local Government Sustainability Programs. Urban Sustainability Directors Network. [https://www.usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/usdn\\_equity\\_scan\\_sept\\_2014\\_final.pdf](https://www.usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/usdn_equity_scan_sept_2014_final.pdf).
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vii</sup> National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. (2013). Let's talk: Universal and targeted approaches to health equity. Antigonish, NS: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, St. Francis Xavier University. [http://nccdh.ca/images/uploads/Approaches\\_EN\\_Final.pdf](http://nccdh.ca/images/uploads/Approaches_EN_Final.pdf).
- <sup>viii</sup> BC Healthy Communities Society (2019). Healthy Housing Action Guide. PlanH and the BC Ministry of Health. <https://planh.ca/healthyhousing>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Litman, T. (2019). *Evaluating Transportation Equity Guidance for Incorporating Distributional Impacts in Transportation Planning*. Victoria Transport Policy Institute. <https://vtpi.org/equity.pdf>.
- <sup>x</sup> Metropolitan Council (2019). Regional Parks Equity Toolkit: Progressing Toward More Equitable Use of Regional Parks. St. Paul, Minnesota Metropolitan Council. <https://metrocouncil.org/Parks/Planning/Parks-Equity-Toolkit.aspx>.