

Participation catalyzing change: A case for tenant participation in BC Housing's planning for sustainability as a means to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviors

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Introduction

BC Housing is a provincial crown agency under the Ministry of Energy and Mines (Minister Responsible for Housing), and is mandated to fulfill the government's commitment to the development, management and administration of subsidized housing as reflected in an order-in-Council under the Housing Act establishing the BC Housing in 1967 (BC Housing, 2007a). In the last five years, the Province of British Columbia has set out to tackle the issue of climate change, and under the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Target Act introduced in 2007, BC Housing must become a carbon neutral organization by the end of June 2011 (BC Housing, 2010a). In 2008, BC Housing introduced the *livegreen* plan as BC Housing's sustainability strategy, providing a roadmap to help fight climate change by reducing the environmental footprint of new and existing social housing in BC (BC Housing, 2010a). The *livegreen* plan was created through an employee engagement process, and has resulted in a large number of green-energy retrofits, reductions in housing energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, new buildings being constructed to LEED standards, and the fostering of environmentally sustainable behaviors for BC Housing employees (BC Housing, 2010a). To further reduce BC Housing's environmental footprint BC Housing is now looking for a way to engage its tenants in environmentally sustainable behaviors; this report outlines some initial findings for a means to reach this goal. To facilitate and engage its tenants in environmentally sustainable behaviors, BC Housing must incorporate meaningful tenant engagement into its planning and decision-making processes for actions, programs and policies.

Behavioral Change

There has been a wide range of strategies that have attempted to find ways to encourage energy efficient behavior (Ashby *et. al.*, 2010). However, there is no general population program model for behavior change that has been shown to effectively motivate households to make long-run changes in energy behaviors (Carroll & Berger, 2008). In terms of how to effectively encourage sustainable tenant behaviors this poses a problem for BC Housing, as they manage a wide variety of different household types in

communities throughout the province (see Figure 1). Households managed by BC Housing account for almost 6% of the province's total housing stock, and operate a full housing continuum that extends from emergency shelter and housing for the homeless through to affordable rental housing and homeownership (BC Housing, 2007a).



Figure 1. The BC Housing continuum (BC Housing, 2007a).

While no general model for behavior change has been found, education and learning has shown to be an effective means to encourage persisting behavioral change in low-income households like those provided by BC Housing (Carol & Berger, 2008). One must however be cautious when analyzing this statement, as the traditional teacher-student dichotomy is a political and authoritarian relationship rather than a truly educational one; education is a two-way process where both the teacher learns and the learner teaches (Freire, 1970). Those acting in the role of the teacher must recognize that their fundamental objective is to work alongside the people for “the recovery of the people's stolen humanity”, not to “win the people over” to their side (Freire, 1970)

Borrowing from the field of resource and environmental management, we find that participation is conducive to broad-based individual and social learning that enables a transition to sustainability (Fitzpatrick & Sinclair, 2003; Sims & Sinclair, 2008; Sinclair & Diduck, 2009; Sinclair, Diduck & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Webler, Kastenholz & Ortwin, 1995). This interdisciplinary approach may be unconventional within the field of social behavioral studies, however the link to resource management is appropriate as the

'Sustainability Principles' outlined in BC Housing's *livegreen* plan apply a resource lens to sustainability (BC housing, 2010b).

This link also works at a broader scale of definition as both social housing policy and environmental resource management lie within the field of planning, which is any process of preparing a program or policy, of determining or deciding a course of action, or of implementing development (Hanna, 2009). One could go as far as to argue that other studies have failed to come to a general population model to affect environmental behavioral change because they have been limited to conventional behavioral psychology approaches. Such an approach questions how to change the behaviors of actors in a system, whereas a participation approach borrowed from the realm of resource-management looks at the bigger picture of how the system itself influences the behaviors of the actors within it.

During the redevelopment of the Reagent Park community housing complex in Toronto, planners found immeasurable benefits from adopting an educational, participatory model process, including education about the democratic structures of Canadian society, participation in civic life and about their community (Meagher & Boston, 2003). Surely, this same type of learning would translate to environmental behavioral learning if a participatory framework is used in planning for sustainability.

Participation

So, what is “participation”? Arnstein defines participation as the redistribution of power that enables the “have-not” citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future (1969). BC Housing serves Arnstein’s “have-nots”, including:

- Individuals who are homeless
- Frail seniors and individuals with special needs
- Aboriginal individuals and families
- Women and children fleeing violence
- Low-income seniors and families (BC Housing, 2007b)

Indeed, the provision of housing to those in need acts towards Arnstein's definition; BC Housing provides housing with support services in order to lead healthier lives that allow them to participate more fully in their communities (BC Housing, 2007b). While the provision of these services is an important step in encouraging better social cohesion and inclusive broader social processes, why not start right in their own community? Paulo Freire, a highly recognized education theorist, argued that the poor can and should be enabled to conduct their own analysis of their own realities (Chambers, 1994). He too was an advocate for education as an effective means to promote change, but recognized that for it to take effect the poor must be their own example in the struggle to create that change (Freire, 1970). Indeed, this makes sense, as it is the tenants of BC Housing who have the greatest contextual understanding of what it is that influences their behaviors, and through participation can therefore contribute greatly to determining effective means for change.

An established avenue of tenant participation and power may be even-more crucial due to the popularity of mixed-income design trends in the redevelopment of existing and the creation of new social housing stock in BC. New and emerging studies are finding that such "revitalization" affects residents' political networks and ability to influence governance decisions, and stands to create significant power imbalances between the new majority of residents paying market rent for their housing, and the minority of tenants in subsidized housing (August & Walks, 2010). If participation is the means through which broad-based individual and social learning enabling a transition to sustainability occurs, the popularity of mixed-income housing can in fact act in opposition to the goals of increased environmentally sustainable behaviors for tenants of BC Housing.

Participation in the BC Housing sustainability context

Participation in planning in particular is the strategy by which the "have-nots" join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set and programs are operated (Arnstein, 1969). This would mean that tenant participation would ideally be implemented at all levels of BC Housing's operations. However, if the priority is to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviors, then tenant participation should be first integrated into planning for sustainability through the *livegreen* plan.

In fact, it is surprising that BC Housing has not already included a tenant participation program in their *livegreen* plan, as the plan includes such an avenue of employee engagement but fails to facilitate tenants as stakeholders important to the decision-making process. One of the priorities of the *livegreen* plan is to “empower employees”, but similarly empowered tenants is notably lacking from this list of priorities (BC Housing, 2010b).

Employee engagement in BC Housing’s *livegreen* plan is facilitated through the *livegreen* Employee Council. The *livegreen* Employee Council follows a traditional volunteer governance model, and is comprised of a chair, vice-chair and secretary, as well as members-at-large (BC Housing, 2010a). Positions are held for two-year terms and are filled through a nomination and election process; all BC Housing employees around the province are able to participate (BC Housing, 2010a). Successes of the council thus far include fostering employee engagement for sustainability practices through the introduction of an employee survey measuring individual sustainability practices, numerous Lunch & Learns, Bike to Work campaigns, the distribution of “green” cleaning products, and the launch of the *livegreen* intranet (BC Housing, 2010b). The council and their activities have maintained a high level of employee engagement and satisfaction (BC Housing, 2010b).

It is important to note the differences in the context of engaging employees versus tenants. Engaging employees within the work place has a different context of communication and of motivations, so it is unlikely the engagement model could be directly adapted from BC Housing’s Employee Council. However, considering the successes of the Employee Council and that engagement in general is already established as part of the *livegreen* plan, developing a tenant engagement program into the *livegreen* plan shows promise.

Similar to BC Housing’s approach to engaging its employees, Toronto Community Housing identifies “empowered tenants” as part of their community plan and has had success in their development of such a council for local elected tenant representatives (Piccinato, 2009). Toronto Community Housing (TCH) believes that their tenant engagement strategy is an important way to build relationships (TCH, 2010), which is important in the context of fostering a culture of sustainability; Uzzell and Badenas argue

that long-term environmental behavior must be located in the relationships that exist between people (2002). When using this example it is important to note the unique context and needs of BC Housing's tenants. In BC, social housing developments are scattered across towns and cities province-wide rather than being concentrated like they are in Toronto, and the BC social housing population tends to have more barriers and be in need of higher level of support. Because of these differences it is unlikely that a model used with TCH could be directly applied to BC Housing. However, this does not mean that BC Housing cannot develop their own participation strategy to also empower their tenants, in particular with regards to fostering environmentally sustainable behavior.

Participation defined further: Tokenism vs. meaningful engagement

It is important to note the difference between true, meaningful participation, and tokenism that has often been used as a substitute for participation to enable power-holders to “cure” and “educate” the participants (Arnstein, 1969). Using her work with American federal urban renewal, anti-poverty and Model Cities programs, Arnstein conceptualizes the different levels of participation through the analogy of a ladder (see Figure 2).

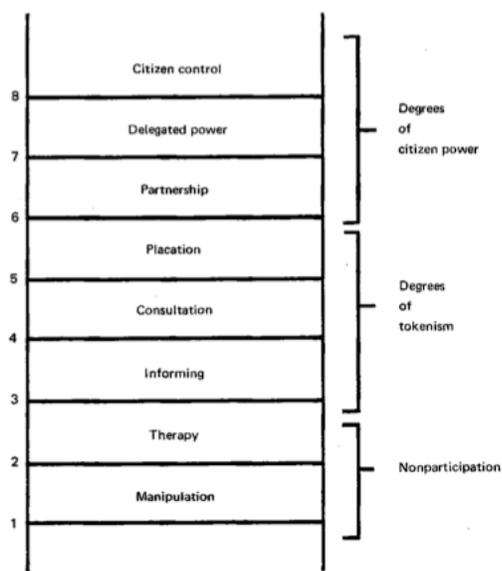


Figure 2. Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969).

Indeed the implementation of meaningful participation represented by Arnstein's upper rungs may prove to be a challenge. Previous attempts at tenant participation by BC Housing have demonstrated actions that equate to Arnstein's lower rungs (Thompson, 2010). Even in the resource-management field where this concept is borrowed from, true meaningful participation in decision-making remains elusive (Sinclair & Diduck, 2009).

Application

There is a wide range of different methods that can be used for public engagement in decision-making, and these different methods relate back to the different levels of participation described by Arnstein's ladder (See Table 1).

| Level and Type of Engagement | Methods of Engagement |
|--|--|
| <p>1 Sharing Information</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brochures or newsletters • Posters or displays in public places • Letters, flyers or mail-outs • Press releases for local radio and television • Advertisements, notifications or articles in local newspaper or electronic media • Website • Face to face meetings |
| <p>2 Consultation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Feedback forms or questionnaires • Structured one to one interviews (face to face / telephone) • Surveys • Focus groups • Documents / vision papers • Stakeholder meetings • Public meetings or forums • Roundtables • e-engagement and satellite technologies |
| <p>3 and 4 Planning Together and Acting Together</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder meetings • Seminars or workshops • In-depth interviews and discussions • Advisory committees, area councils, or steering committees • Taskforces or planning groups • Strategic alliances or formal agreements • Visioning • e-engagement and satellite technologies |
| <p>5 Community Directed</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community development e.g., 'Local Area Development' • Public authorities • Devolution |

Table 1. Methods of engagement and their corresponding levels of participation (Manitoba Family Services, 2008a).

While the higher levels of participation are more likely to lead to the types of broad-based social learning that would enable a transition to sustainability, it is important to

note that it is not the case that the higher level of engagement is the goal at all times, nor would it be practical. However, developing standards for where the different levels are appropriate should be a participatory process itself.

For example, TCH established an elected Tenant Engagement Reference Committee to advise TCH on tenant engagement issues and make recommendations as to where tenants should provide input into specific areas of the engagement system (TCH, 2010). Again, because of the contextual differences, BC Housing would likely have difficulty directly adapting this model, however it does show that engagement processes themselves can be successfully used to establish a framework to determine where these different levels of engagement are more or less appropriate.

Considering that engagement models should be developed through a participatory process, and given the wide scope of the BC Housing continuum, recommending a specific model for engagement is outside the scope of this report. It is however valuable to identify themes and best practices that have led to successful tenant engagement in other situations.

Themes and Best Practices

As mentioned above, because of the unique geographic context and needs of the BC Housing tenant population, it is unlikely that any one model used elsewhere can be adapted directly to implement tenant engagement into BC Housing's operations. However, drawing on examples from other community engagement programs and policies, we can identify themes that lead to successful tenant engagement and create a list of best practices to act as a guide for the development of a tenant engagement framework for BC Housing. This section draws these themes from two examples, the redevelopment of TCH's Regent Park, and information gathered during the development of a community engagement framework for Manitoba Housing and Family Services.

The TCH example comes from a report that was provided to TCH by Sean Meagher and Tony Boston, two planners/consultants that were hired to oversee tenant engagement for the redevelopment of the Regent Park complex. This example is valuable as it provides feedback on the engagement process from the point of view of the planner, based on hands-on experience. The Manitoba examples come from five community focus

groups that were held exploring the adequacy of Manitoba Housing and Family Services' Community Engagement Framework (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). The focus groups were held with a cross section of community interests, including advocates and service providers of housing, women, Aboriginal persons, persons living in poverty, and members of rural communities (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). These findings are valuable as they provide direct feedback from the other point of view -- the users of their services.

Participation should begin early

Early participation has benefits for both tenants and planners. Participants in Manitoba's focus groups believed that being engaged by government at the very beginning of planning for programs or projects alleviated issues of power differentials and mistrust towards a lack of accountability of government (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). It also demonstrates good faith on the part of government and sends the message to community that their input is valuable (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). Meagher and Boston found that early consultations in the end saved them a lot of time and energy (2003). Early consultation set some clear directions, and helped orient the work so that later consultation was more efficient (Meagher & Boston, 2003). The feedback provided them greater insight into the demographic data they had to work with, which they argue would have led them astray without said feedback (Meagher & Boston, 2003).

Accept what is being offered

While not all the data or feedback provided to them during consultation was valuable, Meagher and Boston made a point to collect all data that was provided to them; even data that could be marked as irrelevant, repetitive or obvious was respected (2003). If they had refused, it likely would have resulted in tenants not trusting to hear anything but what the planners want to hear (Meagher & Boston, 2003). They found value in accepting what was being offered as it created a context of respect and a pace that allowed people the time to express the full range of their opinions (Meagher & Boston,

2003).

Expectations should be clear and include follow-up

Participants in Manitoba's focus groups noted consultation fatigue due to tokenism as a threat to successful engagement (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). To overcome this barrier, participants suggested that parameters with expectation levels be set out very clearly, so that participating tenants enter engagement with very clear understandings of their role and of the government's follow-up commitments (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). In other words, it should be clearly understood what level of participation is being sought. Participants noted that reporting back on community engagement outcomes, and letting the community know how the information they have provided is being used builds trust as it involves information sharing, transparency, and open communication (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b).

Meagher and Boston found that checking back in was always worth it, even when they were on the right track (2003). Follow-up reassured everyone of their commitment to listening to the tenants' input and increased everyone's confidence in the process (Meagher & Boston, 2003).

Knowledgeable staff is key

One suggestion that resulted from Manitoba's focus groups is that civil servant staff be trained specifically in community consultation (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). Their recommendations included incorporating humility and sensitivity training so staff members learn to anticipate and successfully handle community needs, and training for how to listen to community groups and citizens when they vent their frustrations and move forward in spite of them (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). A suggestion to incorporate community engagement competencies in job descriptions and hiring practices was also made (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). Note that organization-wide training would also facilitate strong interdepartmental communication, which Meagher and Boston found to be critical (2003, see Strong Communication)

Meagher and Boston found it valuable to draw on the human resources within the community itself; they found that these resources far exceeded what they could have obtained from even skilled professionals (Meagher & Boston, 2003). Even with obligations to support people's skills development the time required for training, they found the depth of understanding, the wealth of skills and the appreciation of local networks within the community invaluable (Meagher & Boston, 2003). They also note that hiring within the community provided tenants with work experience, demonstrating TCH's commitment to community development, both economic and social (Meagher & Boston, 2003).

Strong Government-Community and interdepartmental Communication

Meagher and Boston note the value in covering all of their "communication bases", as they found a number of unexpected trends in how communication occurred (2003). For example, communities that self-identified as fluent in English consumed the most non-English materials, and that residents were eager to use the web rather than the phone (Meagher & Boston, 2003). Also along these same lines, the importance of respecting the unique language needs of citizens was raised by participants in Manitoba's focus groups (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). Participants also noted the use of Jargon as a barrier to successful engagement, and that plain language with clear definitions should be used wherever possible (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). Participants also noted that a lack in successful information sharing can result in a lack of respect (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b).

Meagher and Boston also note that communication and coordination of activities among various staff to be crucial, as it is hard to accommodate a complex community with varied expectations when the people involved in outreach are not fully apprised of each other's activities and opportunities (2003). A clear plan with clear roles and ongoing updates is absolutely necessary (Meagher & Boston, 2003).

Incorporate outside services

Meagher and Boston found agency participation to be crucial, highly effective in engaging a particular group, and consider it a top priority (Meagher & Boston, 2003). They noted that the data and information agencies have is sometimes more reliable than other institutional data (Meagher & Boston, 2003). Participants in Manitoba's focus groups also found value in prioritizing outreach to more vulnerable groups through partnerships with organizations that already have strong relationships with these people, since trust has already been established there (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). This trust can pave the way for a more open dialogue among government, community stakeholders, and the most vulnerable, disenfranchised citizens. BC Housing already works with a number of community partners where these partnerships could facilitate participation (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b).

It should be flexible

Participants in Manitoba's focus groups noted the need for government flexibility in its approach to community engagement, resulting in engagement that fits the needs of the specific population with whom they are working (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). This is particularly important in the BC Housing context given the unique nature and geographic distribution of its tenants, as well as the continuum of different services provided. As noted earlier, different levels of engagement will be more or less appropriate for different levels of planning and implementation.

Long-term commitment

Participants in Manitoba's focus groups on their community engagement framework indicated a lack of long-term commitment as a major concern (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). Participants stated that they often do not see a lot of results from their participation, and expressed that they believed that there were a lot of reports out there they were sure were "gathering dust" (Manitoba Family Services, 2008b). This

theme extends further beyond the need for follow-up (see *Expectations should be clear and include follow-up*); ironically, the Manitoba Family Services example in itself is an example of the need for long-term commitment. In 2009, Manitoba Family Services and Housing was restructured in to two separate departments, the Department of Housing and Community Development and the Department Family Services and Consumer Affairs. Reference to work that went into developing the community engagement framework is notably absent from any more recent publications. The higher levels of Arnstein's ladder of participation would speak to longer-term commitment, as devolved programs are more self-governing and self-directed and would thus be more resilient to changing government priorities and restructuring.

Charting a Path Forward

As mentioned above, recommending a specific model to implement tenant engagement is outside the scope of this paper. However, using the list of best practices above, BC Housing can begin taking steps forward to develop such a model. A first step might be to begin with a survey open to all tenants presenting the idea about developing a tenant engagement model, asking for their feedback and thoughts. The survey could be done by mail, by an open forum online, or through a number of different media. This survey should be transparent and honest; in particular, in addressing the challenges BC Housing faces in implementing a tenant engagement process (the geographic distribution of tenants, the continuum of different services, the different levels of support often needed by tenants) as it may reveal useful and unique insights into how to address these challenges. This would be a good first step, as it would follow the recommended best practice of "participation should begin early" mentioned above, and allow the development of the model to be guided by tenant engagement right from the beginning. BC Housing can then use the feedback obtained from this survey to begin developing several engagement models to present to tenants for further feedback. BC housing could also look to its community partners who have experience dealing with BC's unique social housing population for advice. Another path forward for BC Housing would be to develop a training module for its employees that addresses tenant engagement.

Conclusion

With education and learning as an effective means to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviors in low-income households (Carol & Berger, 2008), and participation being conducive to the broad-based individual and social learning required for a transition to sustainability (Fitzpatrick & Sinclair, 2003; Sims & Sinclair, 2008; Sinclair & Diduck, 2009; Sinclair, Diduck & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Webler, Kastenholz & Ortwin, 1995), BC Housing should develop a tenant engagement program to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviors of its tenants. Because of the unique geographic distribution of its services throughout the province, and because of the special needs of its tenants, it is unlikely that a participation model could be directly adopted from other similar organizations. However, this list of best practices can be used as a starting point to develop a tenant engagement process for BC Housing to incorporate into its *livegreen* plan. With stakeholder engagement, through the *livegreen* Employee Council, already being a fundamental part of the creation and development of the *livegreen* plan, once an engagement framework is developed it should be relatively straight-forward to adapt this previously overlooked stakeholder group into the process. The potential for success in such a program reaches beyond simply reducing the environmental footprint of BC Housing, as it embeds ways for the disenfranchised to take a larger role in society directly within the operations of BC Housing. In this way, BC Housing can act as a means as well as an end to having its tenants participate more fully in their communities.

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