

## Visionary Communities: Project Description & Theory of Change Final Version as of February 2024

### **Description:**

*Visionary Communities (VC): advancing desired neighbourhood futures* is a 4-year, SSHRC Insight-funded project (\$300,000 over 2023-27) guided by a [Connected Communities Approach \(CCA\)](#) operationalized through a community-university partnership. Our on the ground goal is to enhance conditions for just sustainable futures desired by Kingston-Galloway Orton (KGO) neighbourhood residents and nonprofit organizations. Our ultimate aim is to contribute to transformative change and sustainability transitions - large-scale systems changes for just, vibrant, healthy, safe, sustainable, and climate-friendly neighbourhoods- throughout the City of Toronto that are authentically grounded in community(ies) aspirations and actions.

By working closely with residents, grassroots organizations, and community groups and partners in KGO to surface areas of momentum where groups are already at work we will come to understand the priorities,visions, and strengths such collectives have for the neighbourhood, as well as a sense of collective needs, challenges and strengths.Through this deeper understanding we, we will contribute to meaningful place-based solutions identified and sought by community members themselves. By sharing our approach and the learning it generates with our partners at the City of Toronto and through the City's Climate Advisory Group (CAG), we see an exciting opportunity to mobilize community knowledge in such a way that it informs community engagement in other neighbourhoods and shapes climate policy and the implementation of solutions at the City scale, including the (relational) accountability of the City and formal institutions to the communities they serve.

### **Challenge Area:**

The challenge prompting this project is multifold:

- Racialized and lower income communities such as KGO tend to be most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, yet least responsible for its cause. Furthermore, these same communities tend to be excluded from the design, implementation and evaluation of climate policies and solutions yet are the ones who tend to be most adversely affected by these. This illuminates the need for a climate justice lens in engaging communities on climate and any proposed solutions, and ensuring communities have power to make decisions and determine solutions that work for them. Simply put, climate change and sustainability issues more broadly will not be successfully addressed unless equity, social and racial justice are defining characteristics of the work, and built-in deeply from the beginning.

- Relatedly, climate action or other narrowly defined aspects of sustainability may not be the leading concern of residents; competing priorities for affordability, housing, food, transport, racial justice, safety, livelihoods, health etc. may be of equal or greater concern, so engagement and any proposed solutions should centre those concerns (i.e., *reframe of climate benefits as co-benefits to the realization of community aspirations*). Engagements and solutions should also build on locally driven solutions, attend to residents' hopes and desires (e.g., re: joy, connection, community imagination); their ideas, knowledge and experience; as well as the affective experiences they have of climate change (e.g., "Poetry of the future"). Our approach is asset-based which is a way of orienting to see and contribute to the assets in the community - knowledge, know-how, social capital, relationships, care for each other, etc.
- Collaborative multi-actor involvement is essential for addressing complex, urgent sustainability challenges, which underscores the need to bridge various communities, universities, policymakers, non-profits, and residents using knowledge co-production and co-creation approaches
- This points to a need for co-production at two key scales: 1) neighbourhood scale engagement that surfaces and advances priorities and desired futures of community members; and 2) city scale engagement that connects visions and aspirations from multiple communities to equitable, community-centred, climate policymaking and solutions.

### **Purpose statement:**

Through a Connected Communities approach and processes of co-production grounded in authentic relationships, VC supports neighbourhood aspirations for just futures in KGO that truly reflect the priorities of residents, while advancing climate and sustainability goals. Together, project participants (researchers, community development practitioners, grassroots groups, residents) will explore, design, test, and iterate solutions to community-defined challenges by building on and enhancing community assets (relationships, knowledges, experiences). Lessons learned along the way will inform just sustainable futures in the City of Toronto that are authentically grounded in community(ies) aspirations and actions.

### **Principles:**

- **Do no harm**
- **Commit to and promote anti-racism**, social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, reconciliation
- **Collaborate reciprocally** so all involved experience mutual benefit
- **Adopt a community growth mindset** where failure doesn't exist- only opportunities for learning
- **Respect, celebrate, and braid differences** - worlds, worldviews, disciplines, lived experiences, desires

- **Move at the pace of trust and community**, and ground all planning and action in authentic relationships
- **Embrace emergence by staying focused on our purpose and principles and adapting our actions as new situations, knowledge and learning get introduced**

### **Assumptions informing VC:**

In launching VC, the program designers share a set of assumptions about the value of or need for this project, and how its activities will create the desired changes to create that value and meet those needs and aspirations. The creation of a theory of change and a developmental approach to evaluating VC prompts ongoing surfacing and critical reflection of assumptions, and possible course corrections down the road if our assumptions prove incorrect / incomplete.

#### Assumptions about value and need for this project:

We assume there is an interest on the part of residents and organizations in KGO in the additional resources VC can bring to bear (i.e., funding, faculty, students, relationships) in tackling its biggest self-defined challenges while amplifying and enhancing the neighbourhood's strengths and assets. We assume this interest means many residents and community groups may like to participate in co-creating VC; however, we also recognize there are many competing demands on time and resources for participating. As such, our strategies for working with members (individuals and groups) of the community must be grounded in authentic trust-based relationships, build on locally driven initiatives and render meaning, value, remuneration, and enjoyment to project participants. Finally, we believe that the complexity of the challenges related to realizing community aspirations for a sustainable future call for a multi-pronged and relational approach to partnership. Here we will draw on and apply learnings from the longstanding partnership Storefront has had with the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC). (See [Learnings from the KGO-UTSC Partnership](#))

#### Assumptions about how change happens:

Social practice theory informs our assumptions about how change happens. In contrast to conventional, individualistic, and rationalist approaches to behaviour change (i.e., raising awareness will change behaviour), social practice theory de-centres individuals from analyses, and turns attention instead towards the social and collective organization of practices. Practices are broad cultural entities made up of competences, meanings, cultural expectations, and materials that shape individuals' perceptions, interpretations, habits, and actions within the world. Accordingly, VC adopts a Connected Community Approach

(CCA)- a set of principles and practices that support the authentic and meaningful connection of people who want to make a positive impact in their community. By using the Connected Community Approach, an individual, organization or group can help weave together the community building efforts of institutions and funders, grassroots groups and social service organizations, strengthening social capital, social fabric and ultimately, the resilience of their community. See:

<https://connectedcommunities.ca/files/128/CCA-10Keys.pdf>

Our assumptions about the value of VC and how change happens, inform a theory of change which is a living document for us to critically reflect on, test and modify our assumptions, enabling project iteration over time.

## Theory of Change

If we use the Connected Community Approach to guide us to	It will lead to:	As a result, over time, we expect to begin to see:	So that ultimately
<p><b>Co-produce</b> a university-community led project in and with the KGO community</p> <p><b>Understand the local context</b>, realities, strategies, and initiatives in the KGO community – recognizing there are many “communities” (KGO is not homogenous)</p> <p>Commit to <b>anti-racist policies and practices</b> in all aspects of the project</p> <p>Provide meaningful, <b>tangible support and resources</b> to local, grassroots strategies and initiatives</p> <p><b>Learn from community lived experience and integrate local knowledge, wisdom and lived experience with addressing sustainability challenges</b> (e.g., climate adaptation and mitigation, finding community-solutions to safety, affordability, food and energy security etc.) knowledge and learning from various sources</p> <p><b>Build the capacity of project actors to engage meaningfully in community</b>, including working with people from key demographic segments (e.g. youth)</p>	<p>Grounded impact pathways (bundles of strategies) that illuminate residents’ own aspirations for the future of their neighbourhood</p> <p>Authentic and meaningful relationships within the community (with people from various community segments and demographics) and across scales (grassroots to policy)</p> <p>Deep learning about what it takes to facilitate multi-scale sustainability solutions grounded in community</p> <p>Hope among students, researchers, practitioners, and community members</p> <p>Increased capacity for multiple players at multiple scales to use the Connected Community Approach to guide community centred strategy and action</p> <p>Tangible benefit for local actors (defined by them)</p>	<p><b>Mindsets shift:</b></p> <p>Increased understanding of the value of centring community in sustainability and climate adaptation/mitigation planning and action</p> <p>Institutional cultural changes; shifts in ways of understanding problems and solutions</p> <p>KGO residents and groups gain a deeper understanding of climate change and sustainability issues as such issues relate to their areas of lived expertise and community-focused work</p> <hr/> <p><b>Practices will be adapted so that:</b></p> <p>Reciprocal learning between communities and researchers become more of a norm</p> <p>Researchers use the Connected Community Approach in meaningful ways inside and outside of the project</p> <p>City will connect their climate action and resilience strategies to their own community development, emergency management, anti-Black racism and Indigenous action plans etc.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Power dynamics will begin to change:</b></p>	<p>VC catalyzes just sustainability futures that are authentically grounded in community and advanced at both the KGO neighbourhood and city of Toronto scales.</p>

If we use the Connected Community Approach to guide us to	It will lead to:	As a result, over time, we expect to begin to see:	So that ultimately
<p><b>Intentionally connect our work with policy and strategy development at the City of Toronto</b></p> <p>Demonstrate the value, potential and results of the project <b>using multimedia approaches, experiential learning and sense-making</b> (e.g., through multi-sensory art, engagements, event, and opportunities for “community science”s)</p>	<p>Sharing and translating learnings for work at multiple scales</p> <p>An embedding or “normalization” of practices within The City of Toronto for better engaging with and in communities (relational accountability) and acting in ways that connect community development and equity to climate resilience and action</p>	<p>Communities, and especially communities that have been marginalized and racialized have real influence on City strategies and actions to address.</p> <p>Research instructions (and City policies and practices) adopt and deepen modes of relational accountability</p> <hr/> <p><b>Policies and resource flows</b></p> <p>Increased investment in community centred strategies in KGO and other NIAs</p> <p>Community centred approaches to climate mitigation/ adaptation are core to City Net Zero and Resilience Strategies</p> <p>Policies and resources will focus on contributing to capacity building at all levels (community, institutional, societal) levels.</p>	

## Partnership

Visionary Communities is a community-university led project that is funded in part by the City of Toronto.



## Governance Structure

### Core Steering Group:

- Members: John, Kim, Emily, Blake, Anne, Pamela, Paty, Cheryl
- Meeting regularity: 1 per month (i.e., first Wednesday of the month)
- Purpose: ethos of project, overview of the working groups/projects/activities

### Management Group

- Members: Kim, Sahar, Emily, Anne, John
- Meeting regularity: monthly
- Purpose: administration, project and university-related business (proposals, funding, etc.)

### Ad Hoc Working groups

- Members: task-specific
- Meeting regularity: schedule as needed
- Community-based projects, e.g., funding proposals, momentum surfacing, social network, understanding of working with community

### **Lessons for doing this transdisciplinary (cross sector/cross discipline /cross experience) work:**

In the absence of generally accepted standards and codified criteria of quality and evaluation for transdisciplinarity knowledge co-production, what follows are some lessons derived from our experience over a number of decades in working in teams to undertake research that was deeply interdisciplinary, and involved transdisciplinary knowledge co-production.

1. “There are many Toronto’s”

Whatever spatial [or temporal] scale is adopted, it is important to recognize that there are multiple human and non-human communities involved, each of which may perceive and understand that context (and the sustainability challenges and options it poses) quite differently. In practice this means paying attention to these differences in designing the research and engagement activities.

2. “There are many agendas”

Different partners will have different agendas, and it is vital they be named and surfaced. Academic researchers may want to test a theory, government partners may want to promote a policy direction, neighborhood partners may want to counteract oppressive policies or practices, etc. Early identification of purposes that directly address the priorities of multiple participants is crucial.

3. Deliver outcomes of interest to all partners

Once purposes have been identified it is important to articulate specific expected outcomes. Partnership processes are likely to be more effective if participants sense that their involvement will lead to change or a policy decision of some kind that is relevant to their pre-existing goals and understandings.

4. Be concrete

As a general rule, the more personal, local, concrete, and relevant the purpose, learning agenda, contribution, resources and roles are, the more likely people will want to engage.

5. 'No net increase' and 'mutual benefit'

Everyone is busy. Don't ask partners to do new work for the project (no net increase) but find ways to co-design work that addresses the already existing agenda of all partners (mutual benefit). To the extent possible, joint activities should both 'enhance the project' and 'build the community'

6. Work with and through trusted intermediaries

They have access to and are credible to multiple communities. As far as possible co-design work that adds to existing events and activities instead of adding new ones.

7. Connective tissue and research contributions

Use academic capabilities to add value to existing work in the community. Academic partners can add connective tissue to existing projects (e.g. connections to relevant work elsewhere), and provide useful research (e.g. project evaluation inventory of resources and options)

8. Recognize contributions, honor residents' expertise, and compensate for barriers to participation

Meaningful engagement processes demand monetary and non monetary resources to compensate participants for their time, expertise and expenses.

9. Build partners into the project governance and budget

True co-production requires governance models that share the responsibility and decision-making authority among the team, and provide resources for partner engagement and capacity-building commitments.



## Resources

Project Plan and Activities

Governance

The [Connected Communities Approach](#) explainer.

[Downsview Community Context Study](#) (well received by City) and [Storefront's Community Asset Mapping](#): need community needs assessment

The [Local Champions Network](#) - a network of 70 grassroots leaders from across Toronto's NIA

