



Affordable Housing in Nova Scotia *and the* United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

*This is the first in a series of briefs that summarize the collective learning generated from five **People's Schools on Affordable Housing and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**.*

What is a People's School?

The People's School is a forum for group learning grounded in the knowledge and experience of the people on an issue of mutual interest. Through storytelling, reflecting on new learning, and discussing connections, the People's School provides a space for fostering new ideas and renewing commitments for group action.

Why the SDGs?

There have been many international initiatives over the years addressing a wide range of issues such as poverty, climate crisis, violence, and gender inequality. The United Nations now recognize that the complexities of these challenges require a much more collaborative and networked approach to overcome the root causes of suffering and environmental degradation around the world. In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched to help guide actions from local to national levels by 2030, in the form of 17 key focus areas - or goals. What distinguishes this approach is the more determined desire to ensure the changes are grounded in and led by communities (Schnurr, 2021).

The housing crisis in Nova Scotia is impacted by factors beyond the shortage of housing stock. People who are working to increase safe, accessible housing options in their communities see many issues that relate to housing insecurity. Identifying and articulating the links between affordable housing and the SDGs can help identify priorities for changes in multiple areas.

This online People’s School series focuses on five goals as they relate to affordable housing in Nova Scotia:



It should be noted that Goal 17, Partnerships, is woven throughout, as collaboration is critical factor in finding pathways to achieving these goals together.



References:

Government of Canada. (2019). *Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy* <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/agenda-2030/national-strategy.html>

Schnurr, L. (2021). *10: A Guide for Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals in Your Community*, Tamarack Institute. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/ten-guide-sdgs-2021>

People’s School on Affordable Housing and Poverty

On March 30, 2022, the first People’s School in this series explored the links between poverty and housing insecurity in Nova Scotia, highlighted what is being done in communities across the province, and identified priorities for action to ensure “no one is left behind”, echoing the call to action from Agenda 2030. Participants brought diverse experiences from many sectors across the province including public health, anti-poverty coalitions, housing associations, non-profits, local government, support agencies, and co-operatives, while others joined as concerned citizens. Christine Saulnier, Nova Scotia Director for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives participated in the discussions and offered her analysis of the stories participants shared throughout the evening.



Analysis: Understanding the Connections

Stories were shared of what poverty looks like today in Nova Scotia, and how these examples are linked to housing. Low wages, inadequate income supports, bureaucratic procedures and conflicting policies across government departments make it difficult for people to navigate what services are available. Participants expressed frustration of “single-focus” actions and “silos” that are ineffective because they do not develop a holistic or coordinated approach to assist people facing housing insecurity.

Statistical data and other surveys used in decision making are often outdated and do not reflect the pandemic’s effect on the most marginalized populations in our province. Median income measures are disputed, which means that the formulas used to determine “affordable rents” are not in line with the reality of the income levels of those who are in greatest housing need. The limited number of years set for private developers to offer affordable units within their housing developments was raised as a concern by participants who noted that, in contrast, housing created by non-profit and co-op housing are committed to affordability in perpetuity.

The lack of affordable housing stock has become even more pronounced with the hot housing market, fueled by pandemic-related demand for properties across the affordability spectrum. As one participant noted, this is not just an issue of poverty. In this context, those with the lowest incomes are even more impacted by a lack of choice and power. Participants described the lack of oversight regarding substandard housing. Tenants are unable to move to safer accommodations, and are unable to access other social and financial supports. Participants differentiated between rural and urban experiences of housing insecurity, noting the often “hidden” aspect of homelessness in rural areas, and other contributing factors such as poor transportation infrastructure.

Christine Saulnier reflected on the stories she heard, reiterating that the data that informs policy is outdated, and does not capture the impact of the situation in the way that these stories do. The examples shared are not merely “anecdotal” as Saulnier noted, there are too many stories such as these. People need to keep telling them to raise awareness. Definitions of “affordability” are also unrealistic. Increasing investments in housing that is “outside” the market, such as nonprofit and co-op housing, is desperately needed. The persistence of stigma linked to ethnicity, gender identity, health, employment status and “the hard to house” multiplies the barriers many people are facing. When housing is in short supply across the spectrum, the most marginalized bear the brunt.



Actions: Community-Based Solutions

Three key themes emerged from the discussions of community efforts in the affordable housing sector.

Addressing stigma and discrimination: There is an ongoing need to raise awareness of discrimination and violation of the regulations that should be protecting tenants, and to identify conflicting policies that deny access to services and supports. Identifying these issues also increases the visibility of the need for navigation supports for both those who are precariously housed and for those who are now in appropriate accommodations but may require supports. Youth and newcomers also face eligibility issues when they do not have established credit ratings, references, and other community connections to assist.

Wrap-around supports: Community-led solutions enable people to identify and integrate services and supports that are most needed in their locality, and to respond to other impacts of poverty such as energy costs, food security, access to education and health services. When access to safe housing is coordinated with these other services, people can be supported meaningfully to break the cycle of poverty.

Non-market housing: Participants shared examples of co-operative and non-profit housing options that created space for housing solutions that are not driven by market forces. That said, non-market housing stock is very limited and many of the older buildings need repair and energy efficiency upgrades. Communities who identify properties that can be renovated to create non-market housing options, such as former schools and other buildings in their localities, are thwarted by policy and funding regimes not designed for their scale or type of property development: “Why is it so long for community sector to move things as opposed to the private developers?”

Accountability: Priorities for Sustainable Change

Linking the challenges highlighted with the stories of progress helped draw out a number of priority areas to achieve more sustainable improvements in housing security in Nova Scotia.

Co-ordinated government responses: Integrated approaches are required not only at the community level, but within the different layers of government as well. In discussions, calls were repeated to break down “silos” to confront the perception of government departments not “owning” responsibility and deflecting with “not my department” responses. As one participant summarized, “where we get stuck is we think of it as a single issue rather than a mix of topics.” Participants encouraged more conversations with municipal leaders and more active engagement with different levels of government for awareness raising and action.



Addressing root causes of poverty: Demonstrating the links between poverty and housing insecurity places the emphasis on the urgent need to reduce poverty in our communities. The stigma of poverty and of current income assistance programs that are disjointed and inadequate have been noted as ongoing challenges. Calls for some model of guaranteed basic income provisions have grown since people could see the relief resulting from income supports provided through the government's pandemic-response funding initiatives. "When the government wants to do something, they can do it."

Multi-sector engagement in addressing barriers to housing solutions:

In addition to strengthening direct collaboration with governments, participants discussed the need to engage with different sectors, including property owners, landlords, developers, short-term rental owners, etc. Successful housing initiatives have drawn upon collaboration of those possessing the myriad of skills required, including contractors, architects, people with expertise in grant writing, accounting, and organizational management.

Community-based knowledge mobilization: There is a great need for community-based research and analysis, and access to this information to foster creative solutions, and for community organizations to play an active role. Working with local media was also highlighted to share stories and "get the lived experience out" so more people in communities know what is happening and can bring new ideas to effect change.

Housing built must create community: Returning to the point that the availability of housing stock alone will not address the deep inequities many people continue to face. Participants reiterated the necessity of integrating tangible supports and activities that empower residents to have a voice and participate in shaping their communities. This is key to sustainability.

Concluding notes on the People's School Process

Attendees were invited to share their feedback after the session. Their responses reflected the key themes emerging from the discussions. Notably, participants highlighted the importance of the stories of initiatives across to the province that helped to increase their understanding of the issues, and to learn of actions that are making a difference: "The real people with real knowledge." They appreciated the opportunity to make connections with others on areas of mutual interest: "Collaboration is the way forward!"



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