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Social Sustainability in Vancouver

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Executive Summary

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At present, Vancouver is one of Canada's largest and most influential cities, boasting a spectacular natural landscape, a temperate climate, and a strong economy. Identified as the most livable city in the world in 2005, Vancouver also ranks high with respect to personal safety, health care, arts and culture, diversity, education, and infrastructure. Overall, Vancouver is a thriving world-class metropolis, and the envy of many other cities around the world for its beauty, culture of innovation, eco-sensitive practices and policies, and multicultural population. As such, it is the second most popular destination in Canada for new immigrants, particularly those from China and South Asia.

With a view to maintaining high quality of life in Vancouver, in 2002, Vancouver City Council adopted principles for environmental, economic, and social sustainability as a basis for city actions and operations. The object of sustainability planning is to ensure that Vancouver becomes a community that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. As defined by the City of Vancouver, social sustainability reflects three primary outcomes: residents' basic needs – including housing, health care, food, jobs, income, and safety – are met; residents develop their personal capacity and fully participate in, contribute to, and benefit from all aspects of community; and communities have the capacity to foster and support social inclusion on all dimensions and the positive development of all residents. Social sustainability assumes a certain level of equality among all residents, and growth that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society. It implies that diverse groups and cultural practices are integrated in a just and equitable fashion, and this is reflected in all aspects of economic, social, political, and cultural life in the city. These assumptions and implications reflect a social inclusion framework or strategy for change toward fairness and equity for all members of society, in all aspects of life.

Yet, current and emerging social and economic trends suggest that Vancouver is moving away from, rather than toward, social inclusion and social sustainability:

- The gap between Vancouver's rich and poor is growing as evident in the facts that the adult and child poverty levels are among the highest in Canada, and food and housing insecurity is on the rise. In addition, the proportion of residents living below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) exceeds 25% in more than half of the City of Vancouver's neighbourhoods. There is also a troubling correlation between poverty and visible minority or Aboriginal status.
- Vancouver's Aboriginal and highly-educated immigrant populations continue to experience labour market exclusion, and Aboriginal peoples continue to suffer the consequences of ongoing overt racism and exclusion on many fronts.
- One in ten workers in Greater Vancouver lives below LICO – by far the highest incidence of working poor of any major city in Canada. A growing schism is emerging between high-skill, well-paid jobs and low-skill, poorly-paid, precarious jobs which, in conjunction with other trends, suggests increasing income disparity and, for many, decreasing income security over time. These changes may increase the depth of poverty experienced by some lower-income segments of society, including young people who lack post-secondary education and members of lone-parent households.

- Housing costs have spiralled beyond the reach of middle-income individuals and families, non-market housing for Vancouver's most marginalized residents has been evaporating, and homelessness has more than doubled in recent years. Housing affordability issues are also forcing low-income families to congregate in neighbourhoods that, at best, lack the features and amenities that benefit and support children and parents and, at worst, place children at risk on many dimensions.

If these trends continue along their current trajectories, the number of children, youth, adults, and families who suffer social and economic exclusion will increase, further threatening Vancouver's long-term social sustainability over time.

Population growth and changing demography may further compound Vancouver's social sustainability challenges. Over the next 25 years, Vancouver's population is expected to rise by 18% to 710,989; Greater Vancouver's population will escalate by 32% to 2.88 million. Most of this growth will be driven by in-migration and particularly immigration, rather than birth rates. Greater Vancouver is likely to continue to be one of the major Canadian destinations of choice for immigrants who come from a wide spectrum of countries, and bring with them a rich variety of cultures, languages, and backgrounds. In addition, due to population aging, in 25 years the population of both Greater Vancouver and the City of Vancouver will be dominated by people of middle age and older, with proportionately fewer children and youth.

As the population ages, seniors' health issues will assume increasing prominence. Advances in medicine may further extend the average lifespan, especially among upper-income and educated people. However, these advances are unlikely to fully address the illnesses and disabilities that generally accompany old age. Seniors' health will also become more of a social concern. For example, the fact that women are having children later in life adds to family pressures, as they struggle to care for both their children and their aging parents. In some Vancouver communities, up to 55% of seniors are living alone. This trend is expected to continue indefinitely among the Canadian-born population although, in some ethnocultural groups, it is more common for extended families to live together. Demand for supported living and long-term care facilities for seniors with varied cultural backgrounds and levels of English-language proficiency is, however, likely to rise over time. In addition, the political clout exercised by a growing number of seniors may shift social and education spending priorities away from children and youth to issues of greater concern to seniors, such as safety, security and health care.

An increasing proportion of the population comprised of immigrants, most of them members of visible minority groups, will offer both opportunities and challenges for Vancouver's social sustainability over time. Immigrants bring with them a rich tapestry of languages and cultures that will continue to boost Vancouver's cultural capital and, if the city can continue to attract young and highly-educated immigrants, will help to sustain both the labour force and the number of children and youth in the city. However, negative consequences may ensue if immigrant children and youth can not obtain adequate English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and educational programs to enable them to succeed in school and beyond, and if newcomers are not provided with the settlement and integration supports they require. Immigrant-serving organizations, many of which are not-

for-profit agencies, will be challenged to meet burgeoning needs. In recent years, there has been much discussion among ethnocultural organizations about strained capacity in a context of limited funding and increasing demand. Whether settlement and other agencies will be able to accommodate significantly more clients depends on the extent to which their capacity is increased through additional funding and support.

Moreover, if skilled immigrant workers can not secure employment which matches and rewards their talents and education levels, many individuals will simply migrate to other cities or countries which recognize and reward their talents. Finally, if the current trajectory of increasing poverty among immigrants continues, it will perpetuate and heighten social exclusion among an increasingly significant proportion of the population, perhaps even creating a disenfranchised immigrant underclass.

In the coming years, the City of Vancouver will also be challenged to explore new approaches to representing and engaging citizens given the changing demographics and, probably, growing social exclusion. A range of institutions, including municipal and provincial governments, will need to open new avenues for participation, particularly for immigrants, in all aspects of civic life, from electoral politics to community organizations, schools, and local institutions.

Threats to social sustainability in Vancouver are real and imminent. The social vision to which Vancouver aspires will require renewed investment in initiatives to ensure that residents' basic needs are met, that residents can develop their personal capacity, and that communities foster the social inclusion and positive development of all residents. Recognition of, and appreciation for, the contributions that all residents can make to the city will be vital first steps. Rebuilding the buffers against the hardships of poverty will benefit all residents of Vancouver, regardless of their income level.

Clearly, it is beyond the scope and financial capacity of a municipality to foster social inclusion and to address the broad range of challenges which threaten Vancouver's social sustainability. Initiatives of this breadth and magnitude can not be accomplished by the City of Vancouver alone. Sustained governmental intervention at the federal and provincial levels is needed to reduce individual and family poverty and ensure a basic quality of life via adequate health care, education, income, settlement programs, and social services which, concurrently, foster social mobility and reduce and prevent spatially-concentrated poverty. This means that there is a compelling need for local action to raise public awareness, influence national and provincial policy agendas, and ensure the coordination of structural measures with urban and other place-based initiatives within the City of Vancouver and Greater Vancouver.

Moreover, all three levels of government must work in collaboration with the local not-for-profit and private sectors to find and implement timely and effective solutions. Fortunately, there exist many examples of cross-sectoral collaborations in Vancouver and elsewhere in Canada that are tackling and mitigating problems similar to those which are emerging in Vancouver. The time to take action is now. Otherwise, Vancouver may be at risk of pervasive urban decay and social exclusion in the coming years.