



# CASE STUDY | SOCIAL INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN VANCOUVER

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Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Community Economic Development Strategy proactively and innovatively leverages the neighbourhood's talents, assets, and ambition. It supports residents to access a continuum of employment and income generation opportunities, improves the health of the local economy, and creates a safe and inclusive community for all.

## THE CITY OF VANCOUVER<sup>1</sup>

Vancouver is the eighth largest city in Canada. While beautiful and diverse, its poverty rate is higher than most similarly sized cities in Canada, and higher than that of the Metro Vancouver region. The city is "grappling with an affordability crisis, including high and persistent rates of poverty and significant population health struggles related to mental health and addictions."<sup>2</sup>

One in five Vancouver residents is living in poverty, based on the low-income measure after-tax. While visible poverty is concentrated in lower income neighbourhoods such as the Downtown Eastside (DTES), where amongst other challenges, there is "an over concentration of people with severe mental health and addictions conditions living in poor quality housing,"<sup>3</sup> poverty infiltrates the city's population at large.

Cost of living is outpacing incomes, with childcare, housing and food costs having all increased 30-40% since 2008. Housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and a growing number of working Vancouverites, many of whom are working more than one job, struggle to make ends meet.

<sup>1</sup> <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/prosperity-for-all-through-a-healthy-communities-approach.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/prosperity-for-all-through-a-healthy-communities-approach.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/prosperity-for-all-through-a-healthy-communities-approach.pdf>



Many of the issues in the Downtown Eastside are in plain sight: crumbling infrastructure, neglected buildings, people facing a variety of mental health issues, addictions, and homelessness. Yet these visible problems are only the tip of the iceberg. There are invisible forces at play that are impossible to see just walking down the street. There are examples of resiliency, unlikely collaborations, and a strong sense of community. The DTES is truly a unique neighbourhood, for better or for worse. This uniqueness provides an opportunity for innovation.

– Austin Lui, Project Coordinator, LEDlab



## VANCOUVER'S HEALTHY COMMUNITIES APPROACH TO POVERTY REDUCTION AND PROSPERITY FOR ALL<sup>4</sup>

The City of Vancouver's holistic approach to poverty reduction is based on its evidence-based Healthy City Strategy (HCS). This strategy re-thinks and re-frames poverty reduction with a comprehensive healthy communities approach, and with a vision of healthy communities for all. It recognizes the complexities of poverty and the need for change to occur not only within, but across systems.

Vancouver's HCS is a long-term plan for health and well-being that is based on social determinants of health. It describes 13 social determinants, each one interconnected and interdependent on the others, and in whole representing the 'basket of goods' fundamental for the health and well-being of all individuals and communities.

Building on decades of work since the initiation of the Health Communities movement in the 1980s, the HCS includes a robust, diverse set of targets and indicators to create a strong measurement framework. It brings together public health, sustainable development and international justice and equity related goals.

### The 13 Social Determinants of Vancouver's Healthy City Strategy

1. Housing
2. Food
3. Access to health and social services
4. Ability to makes ends meet
5. Education
6. Safety and inclusion
7. Connections with others
8. Access to arts, culture, and self-expression
9. Active living
10. Access to nature
11. Transportation
12. Environments to thrive in
13. Effective collaborative leadership

<sup>4</sup> [http://council.vancouver.ca/20141029/documents/ptec1\\_appendix\\_a\\_final.pdf](http://council.vancouver.ca/20141029/documents/ptec1_appendix_a_final.pdf)

Vancouver's strategy holds human rights and universality as foundational principles. It keeps people at the centre, considering inequity from the perspective of the Individual's lived experience, and applies an intersectional lens.

In combatting the stigmatization, racism, sexism, and prejudice that contribute to poverty, the City's strategy recognizes and addresses the fact that while poverty affects everyone, some people are affected more often and more deeply than others.



It is committed to a strong reconciliation focus that recognizes the historical discrimination of Aboriginal people and impacts of colonization. The strategy also recognizes the trauma that impacts many different communities and individuals, including refugees and women who are victims of violence.

Finally, it prioritizes universal over targeted approaches, addressing the root causes of poverty and their systematic reinforcement through public policy and public spending.

## APPLYING THE HEALTHY CITIES STRATEGY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CANADIAN POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

**“ In this time of hyper-prosperity, cities around the world continue to grapple with poverty and inequity. The rapid urban growth experienced by so many cities only seems to have exacerbated the challenge. Local government can play an important role in poverty reduction, but we cannot address this challenge on our own – we need the cooperation of other orders of government.”**

**– Sadhu A. Johnston, Vancouver City Manager**

In July 2017, the City of Vancouver submitted recommendations for the Federal Government's Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy. Throughout June of 2017, City staff engaged with 70 different organizations active on poverty reduction and related issues including the HCS Leadership Table.

Through workshops and roundtable sessions, the input received shaped content for the City's submission using the HCS as a model. This input also laid the foundation for further work the City is committed to, including the creation of a municipal poverty reduction strategy planned for release later in 2018.

The City's submission, *Prosperity for All through a Healthy Communities Approach*, presented the following recommendations to the federal government:

1. **Ensure that basic needs are met** by working with local, provincial and territorial partners to invest in housing, provide affordable quality childcare, and support access to affordable, healthy food;
2. **Provide adequate health and social supports**, especially for people with mental health concerns and addictions and their families;
3. **Support people to make ends meet - and get people to and from work** - through a commitment to making affordable and sustainable transportation against Living Wage benchmarks, while involving the private sector through partnership models to achieve objectives;
4. **Create environments where everyone feels safe and included**, with a focus on Reconciliation, and meaningfully involve people with lived experience, non-profit agencies, and communities to be part of collective action at local, provincial and national orders of government; and,
5. **Inspire collaborative leadership and coordination across the country**. Specifically, create a vision for poverty reduction and legislate a national strategy to sustain a long-term vision for Healthy Communities across Canada and invest in funding for research and measurement to ensure a robust, independent evaluation that holds all levels of government accountable.



## VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (PHASE II)<sup>5</sup>

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Community Economic Development Strategy (Phase II) serves as the Incomes and Livelihoods section of their poverty reduction strategy. It looks at community economic development in a radical new way, and applies the goals of improving the economic health of the DTES and reducing poverty in its communities.

The DTES CED strategy is comprised of nine core ideas and 22 actions that were built on many years of partnerships that support social innovation, social enterprise and other local economic initiatives. It was built on Phase I, the DTES Plan, which adopted in 2015, focused on creating jobs, growing the number of local businesses, reducing the neighbourhood's unemployment rate, and reducing storefront vacancy rates. This Phase included creation of social housing, a street market and an urban farm.

<sup>5</sup> <http://council.vancouver.ca/20161130/documents/pspc2.pdf>

The 2017 (Phase II) strategy was co-created by staff and the Community Economic Development Strategic Action Committee (CEDSAC), which is comprised up of 35 community groups, businesses and local stakeholders. It was informed by extensive community workshops, roundtable discussions and committee deliberations that identified opportunities to be leveraged through coordination, capacity building, and key investments.

The CED strategy ties best into two goals of the HCS: Making Ends Meet and Working Well, and Being and Feeling Safe and Included. Targets under these goals include increasing neighbourhood median incomes by at least 3% every year, reducing the local poverty rate of 61% by 75%, and increasing community sense of belonging from 58% to 68%.

The strategy also recognizes City of Reconciliation<sup>6</sup> and Truth and Reconciliation goals, including:

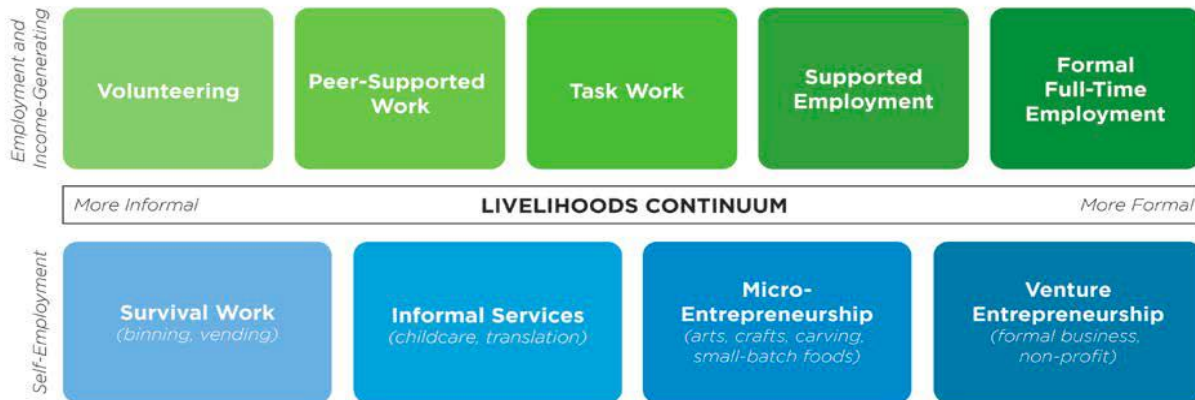
- Increasing Aboriginal ownership of business assets;
- Building capacity of local Aboriginal organizations to engage on social hiring and social procurement;
- Creating opportunities for career advancement for Aboriginal youth; and,
- Seeking ways to incorporate Indigenous economic ideas and values in local economy goals and outcomes.



<sup>6</sup> <http://council.vancouver.ca/20141028/documents/rr1.pdf>

## NINE CORE IDEAS OF THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE CED STRATEGY (PHASE II)<sup>7</sup>

1. **Seeing the local economy as a Livelihoods Continuum**, where employment and income generating opportunities are sought, and pathways are created through Social Innovation Hubs that strengthen links along the continuum.



2. **Acknowledging the important role of Low-Income Self-Employment and Inclusive/Supported Employment** along the continuum, overcoming the poverty traps that residents face in light of stagnant welfare rates and limited earnings exemptions.
3. **Practicing an Asset Based Approach to CED** that leverages community strengths and resources and maximizes emerging opportunities, including: its local social enterprise centre; nearby anchor institutions; diverse and creative local population; city-owned properties; community centres and neighbourhood houses; non-profit sector; business associations; and community benefit agreements.
4. **Animating Social Innovation Hubs** where community partners find low-barrier and income generating opportunities for residents and assist them to navigate pathways along the continuum.
5. **Addressing Community Retail Needs through Social Purpose Real Estate** collaborations and incentives to retain important community assets that are under threat of displacement while attracting new ventures to the area that fit with resident needs.
6. **Increasing Incomes and Reducing Poverty** by making connections between advocacy work on poverty with work to create inclusive low-barrier income and employment opportunities.
7. **Leveraging Community Benefits Agreements to Grow the Social Enterprise Sector and Revitalize Industrial Lands** by exploring ways to help further localize the labour, services and material procurement needs of major development projects expected in the near future.

<sup>7</sup> <http://council.vancouver.ca/20161130/documents/pspc2.pdf>

8. **Stewardship and Activation of Public Spaces** to create animated, inclusive and engaging public spaces that support an enhanced business environment.
9. **Building Organizational Capacity and Fostering Partnerships** to assist the community in implementing and monitoring the plan, developing further programming and projects and communicating success and learnings.

### VANCOUVER’S CED STRATEGY IN ACTION: EASTSIDE WORKS

Eastside Works is a safe and welcoming space that fills a gap around employment in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. This low-barrier income generation hub is operated from a City of Vancouver owned commercial property at 57 East Hastings St.

Eastside Works was developed following an extensive and authentic community consultation process that engaged over 80 residents, volunteers, and staff, and where more than 40 agencies and non-profit social enterprises crafted its vision. Its culture of collaboration has been retained throughout the project’s implementation and delivery. EMBERS who acts as the curator for this project connects community partners who share skills, knowledge, expertise and resources. Together, they ensure the success of Eastside Works by applying the power of collective action to reach shared goals.

Eastside Works helps individuals to find work, regardless of where they are at on the income generation continuum. Staff support clients to navigate the resources they need to earn income, for example by offering workshops and training, connecting them with job opportunities that suit individual needs and capacities, and supporting local entrepreneurs to sell their products.

Eastside Works’ innovative design brings the excellent work already being done in the community together under one roof. It takes a business approach to tackling complex problems and harnesses the vast amount of local knowledge and expertise available to meet community needs. The Hub is based on the principles of collaboration and inclusion, which are applied by a wide range of partnering agencies, businesses and residents. Overall, it provides a valuable community service by supporting its clients to meet basic needs, improve skills, and become more involved in their communities.

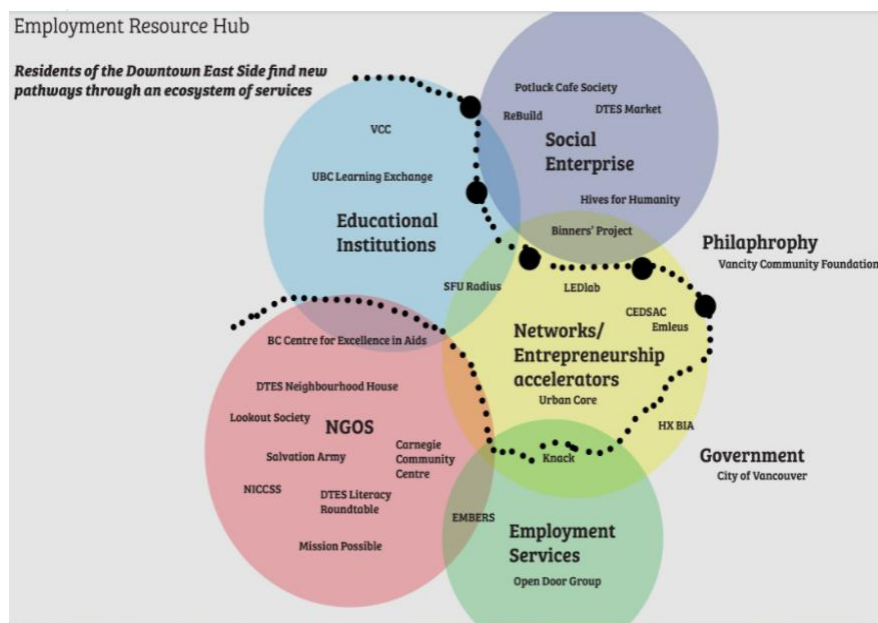


Figure 1: Source - [www.LEDlab.ca](http://www.LEDlab.ca)

## CONCLUSION

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is commonly seen as a neighbourhood of entrenched poverty that faces intractable challenges. Despite this, its residents bring real skill, knowledge, ambition and creativity to their community. The City's 2017 Downtown Eastside CED Strategy (Phase II) was designed to leverage this impressive range of talent, local assets, knowledge and experience.

The Phase II strategy takes a view of the local economy as a continuum of opportunity, from survival-work to formal employment, and creates a full range of employment and income generation opportunities for people of all genders, ethnicities, ages, and abilities. It supports its residents to navigate the local economy and access promising opportunities that meet them where they are at in their lives and careers.

The strategy's proactive and coordinated approach improves the health of the local economy, and forges new partnerships and collaborations. Its collection of strategic initiatives lends support to the City of Vancouver's Mayor's Task Force on Mental Health and Addictions priorities, incorporates City of Reconciliation and Truth and Reconciliation actions, and helps reach objectives of the Healthy City Strategy.

Overall, the strategy signals Vancouver's continued leadership in CED in North America and provides a comprehensive and cohesive vision that engages senior levels of government, funders, partners, and residents, in their journey of realizing the potential of the DTES as a healthy, safe, and inclusive community with opportunities for all.

## READ MORE

- [A Healthy City for All: Vancouver's Healthy City Strategy](#) (2014)
- [Prosperity for All through a Healthy Communities Approach: Vancouver's Recommendations to the Federal Government's National Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) (2017)
- [City of Vancouver Downtown Eastside Plan](#) (2014)
- [Downtown Eastside Community Economic Development Strategy Phase II](#) (2016)

