



Characterizing desired futures of Canadian communities



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ABSTRACT

In sustainability research and practice, one method widely used in exploration is visioning, in which desirable sustainable futures are articulated and explored in depth. Communities across Canada have used this method to develop collective desirable futures, in many cases to provide an end goal for local sustainable development. In this paper, we conduct a meta-analysis of desired futures created by communities across Canada with the aim of identifying regional commonalities according to the three pillars of sustainability, social, environmental, and economic. Although sustainability demands a balance between its social, economic and environmental components, Canadians futures apparently place the greatest importance on social aspects with 338 desires against 222 and 230 respectively for economic and environmental sustainability. Community (105); Infrastructure, development, and transportation (126); and Natural environment (157) are the categories most frequently recorded within each of the three components of sustainability. The metaanalysis also noted significant differences amongst regions. The study was conducted in the context of an initiative known as the Sustainable Canada Dialogues that mobilized 60 + scholars from across the country around a consensus on science based, viable solutions for greenhouse gas reduction. Our results suggest that climate policy that simultaneously reduces greenhouse gas emissions while enhancing some of the key aspects of social sustainability would be attractive to many Canadians.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has initially been defined in the context of the long-term viability and integrity of human societies and natural systems, such that the needs of present and future generations can be met (Brundtland, 1987). Thus the future is inherently central in sustainability theory and research. The highly complex and uncertain nature of the future challenges our ability to plan for and achieve sustainable societies. And this may be increasingly challenging as time progresses; it has been suggested that the future is becoming even less certain under accelerating and unprecedented rates of global change (Banister & Hickman, 2013). Traditional methods of forecasting the future by extrapolating trends forward in time reveal that our current trajectory is unsustainable and leads to a state of irreversible environmental damage (IPCC, 2014). In this light, many alternative methods for systematically thinking about the future have gained popularity in sustainability research. These methods often involve the creation of various possible and/or desirable futures that are different from the most likely scenario, therein exploring uncertainty and providing insight into the drivers of change (Peterson, Cumming, & Carpenter, 2003).

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Visioning is one in a suite of participatory methods that have been implemented in addressing complex human-environmental problems (see [Salter, Robinson, & Wiek, 2010](#) for a review). It is used to create such desired futures that have become a key tool in sustainability research. In the sustainability context, visioning is the process of formulating desirable and sustainable future states, i.e. visions ([Iwaniec & Wiek, 2014](#)). Visions are thus distinct from predictions, as they represent the open-ended values and desires of participants irrespective of current conditions. In this exploratory approach to investigating a highly complex future, it is beneficial to include a diversity of expert, stakeholder, and public input in the desired futures to incorporate a range of understanding and alternative forms of knowledge ([Robinson & Cole, 2014](#); [Salter et al., 2010](#)). In this sense, [Robinson and Cole \(2014\)](#) propose that sustainability can be thought of as “the emergent property of a conversation about desired futures that is informed by some understanding of the ecological, social and economic consequences of different courses of action.”

Collaborative desirable future states are becoming more widely recognized as influential and an effective stimulus for change in the sustainability discourse ([Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014](#); [Wilkinson & Mangalagiu, 2012](#)). Visions provide an end state or goal for development that actively avoids undesirable outcomes ([Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014](#)). Additionally, the participatory visioning process itself serves to empower participants, build capacity and accountability, develop support for the outcome, and incorporate alternative perspectives in planning ([Larsen, Gunnarsson-Östling, & Westholm, 2011](#); [Peterson et al., 2003](#); [Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014](#)). Many cities, companies, and organizations have recognized the benefits of both the visioning process and the vision itself, and have crafted visions to guide future development and planning ([Connelly, Markey, & Roseland, 2009](#); [Wiek and Iwaniec, 2014](#)).

These visions are useful tools in development towards a more sustainable future for the organizations and communities in which they are created. However, they may also be compiled and compared to inform policy and development at a broader scale. Common desires may indeed be useful to illustrate what a shared sustainable future might look like and provide a foundation for the planning needed to achieve it. A synthesis of visions may offer insights into the common desires of communities across a region, in a way that mirrors the synthesis of ideas within the individual visions. Herein, a meta-analysis of community-based visions from across Canada is conducted to characterize desired futures of Canadians. To our knowledge the analysis is the first of its kind conducted on visions in Canada, and it aims to serve as a novel tool in sustainability planning and practice.

Our meta-analysis was conducted in the context of an initiative known as the Sustainable Canada Dialogues that mobilized 60+ scholars from across the country around a consensus on science-based, viable solutions for greenhouse gas reduction. *Acting on Climate Change: Solutions from Canadian Scholars*, the position paper launched by the Sustainable Canada Dialogues in 2015, proposes that because sustainability can improve environmental, social and economic well-being, the transition to a low-carbon and sustainable society represents a positive opportunity for change. By mobilizing society around technical and social innovations it provides the possibility for all citizens to act on the future at hand, and as such should be informed by the desired futures of Canadians in order to inspire action.

2. Research methods

A qualitative meta-analysis of community vision reports conducted in Canada and published after 2000 was carried out to compare Canadians' desired futures. These reports document community-based projects that have used input from public participation to summarize communities' desired futures. To identify existing community vision reports, the keywords searched in Google and Google Scholar were: vision*, sustainability, community, municipality, participatory research, and (desire*) future*. Two websites found during the search, The Natural Step Canada and Share the Wheel, have lists of community-based visioning projects; these lists were searched within the respective websites, in addition to the Google search.

The reports were selected initially for the meta-analysis based on the following criteria: (1) explicitly discussed sustainability and (2) used visioning or similar participatory methods aimed at articulating participants' values and desires for the future.¹ Reports that include a community vision but do not specify or provide details on a participatory method were excluded, as were plans that articulate a vision for only a specific element of a community, such as urban design. Reports in which possible future scenarios were created by experts and presented to participants, although useful in ways which are discussed later, were excluded in the interest of comparing participants' unrestricted values and desires. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the processes through which community visions were formulated likely involve some degree of expert involvement and influence.

The number of reports fitting the criteria varied between provinces and territories. A maximum of five reports per province or territory were included. More than five suitable reports were found from British Columbia and Québec, and the first five municipalities to be identified during the search were included. This method of inclusion was chosen due to time constraints, however it is recognized that this may bias the data in favour of visions that are best known and/or most frequently cited. At times numerous visioning reports were found from the same regional municipality; for example, in the Regional Municipality of Halifax the VisionHRM project includes visioning done in seven different communities. To choose

¹ Similar participatory methods employed in creating community visions include conversations and interviews, youth workshops, active events, public displays and booths, online engagement, round table discussion, questionnaires and surveys.

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