Issue Brief 1: Municipalities and Sustainability

Municipal involvement is needed to achieve a sustainable Saskatchewan

Governing Sustainable Municipalities

Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy

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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

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Authors:

Michaela Lynds, Tanvir Ahmed, Rafael Morales-Guzman, Bobbie Balicki, Loleen Berdahl, Margot Hurlbert, Jeremy Rayner & Shamas Ul Deen

Governments, industry, communities, and the public are increasingly prioritizing their preparations for the future. National governments across the world are developing plans and policies to ensure that their countries continue to thrive, but municipal efforts are just as important to ensure that local communities operate effectively today, and in the years to come, by preserving their unique characteristics and authenticity.

Why do municipalities need to prepare for the future?

Residents want their communities to thrive and become stronger in the future. Local governments therefore develop plans and policies to make this possible. The plans and policies must balance many different aspects of the governance framework, taking into account the unique social, environmental, and economic aspects of each community. Local governments are best placed to understand how these aspects interact and change.

One way to visualize this balance is to think of a stool with three legs (Figure 1). The seat is the community, and each leg represents a different supporting pillar: environmental, social, and economic. If one leg is shorter, weaker, or missing, the stool will be unstable. Similarly, a community that is economically robust but has an inhospitable environment, or weak social cohesion due to the lack of recreational facilities or friendly play areas, is likely to grow smaller as families move away in search of more supportive neighbourhoods. The ability to maintain a good balance over time by considering how the three areas interact is known as sustainability.

Sustainability is a useful word to describe what municipalities are doing when they put plans and policies in place to preserve the community now and into the future. A sustainable municipality can strengthen the economy, often driven by local purchasing and production networks, while maintaining environmental benefits such as access to green spaces, clean water and air, and rich biodiversity. Sustainability projects also bring people together, helping to build strong communities that are less vulnerable to change. Some of the core concepts of sustainable development are already in current legislation, such as *The Cities Act* (2002; p. 15) which states that the purpose of cities is *"...to foster economic, social and environmental well-being."*

Figure 1:
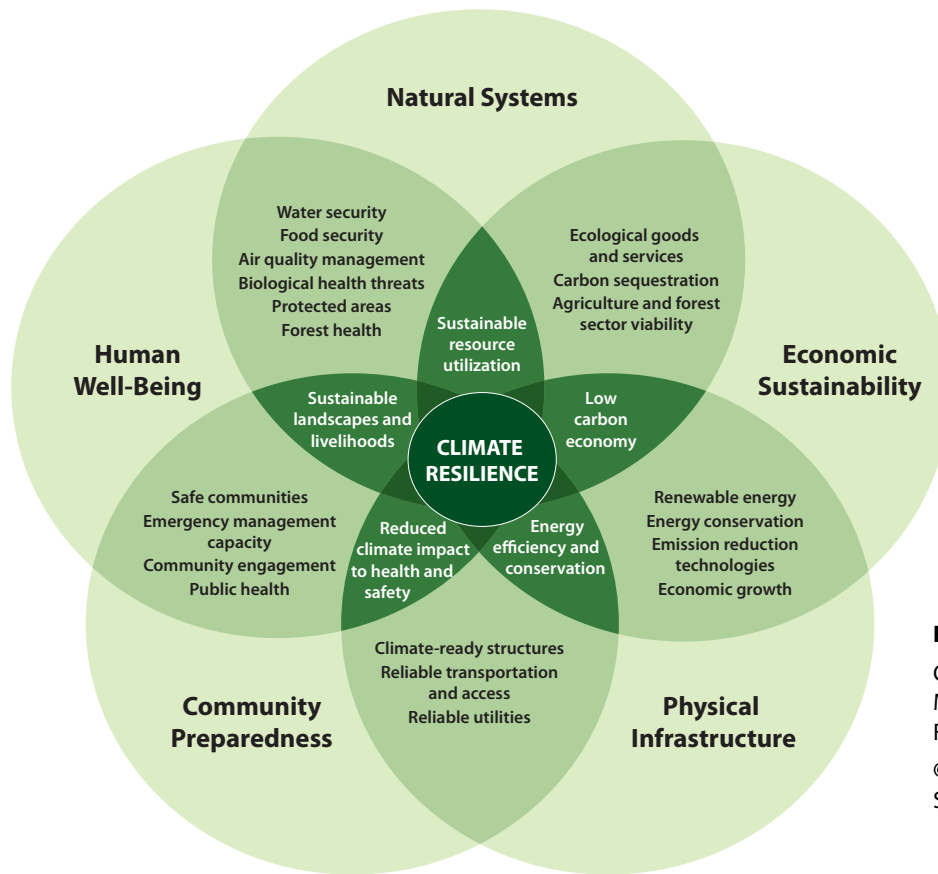A strong community visualized as a three-legged stool.

Figure 2:

Climate Resilience Measurement Framework

©Government of Saskatchewan

What can municipalities do?

Municipal governments have jurisdiction over land use planning, zoning, and property taxation within their boundaries. They also have strong connections with the people, organizations and businesses in their communities – those most affected by sustainability issues, who are therefore known as stakeholders. Municipal governments exert a significant degree of control over the speed and transparency of administrative decision-making and policy implementation and can act as hubs for local partnerships (Teixeira et al., 2022). Forward-looking initiatives include new technologies, planning guidelines and investments, with municipal governments leading the promotion and advancement of such ventures (Antoshkina & Shmeleva, 2020).

Provincial Government of Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan has a growth plan that aims to build on private capital investment by $16 billion

annually and invest $30 billion in infrastructure. The plan also looks at projects and initiatives such as small modular reactor technology using Saskatchewan's uranium resources. This will ensure that growth leads to a better quality of life for Saskatchewan families and communities (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2019). On 1 January 2021, the Government of Saskatchewan included a community health and well-being category in its Statements of Provincial Interest Regulations, providing for the first time a regulatory framework for municipalities to address community needs. The provincial government has also published the Climate Resilience Measurement Framework (Figure 2), which proposes indicators for five areas: human well-being, community preparedness, physical infrastructure, economic sustainability, and natural systems (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2018).

How can all of Saskatchewan's municipal governments contribute when they are so different?

Saskatchewan has 766 municipal governments differing in size and access to resources (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2023), but they all have the authority to undertake and support sustainable development initiatives. Municipalities play a key role in many areas, such as economic development, stewardship of water resources, transportation systems, land use planning, and the management of assets and waste. Much of the work required to achieve sustainable development may therefore involve the expansion or adaptation of basic municipal functions that already exist rather than the establishment of entirely new projects. Every municipality, regardless of size, will be affected by climate change. For larger municipalities, the effects may include floodwater damage due to inadequate drainage infrastructure, whereas smaller municipalities may face prolonged drought and higher wind speeds causing the devastation of local agriculture (Yusa et al., 2015).

Progress towards sustainable development is strongly influenced by the local area and the unique characteristics that define it. Policy research that classifies municipalities in this manner can contribute to more meaningful outcomes for citizens and policymakers. For our research, we assigned municipalities to four categories based on their key characteristics and the relevant legislation (Table 1).

Table 1: Categorization of municipalities

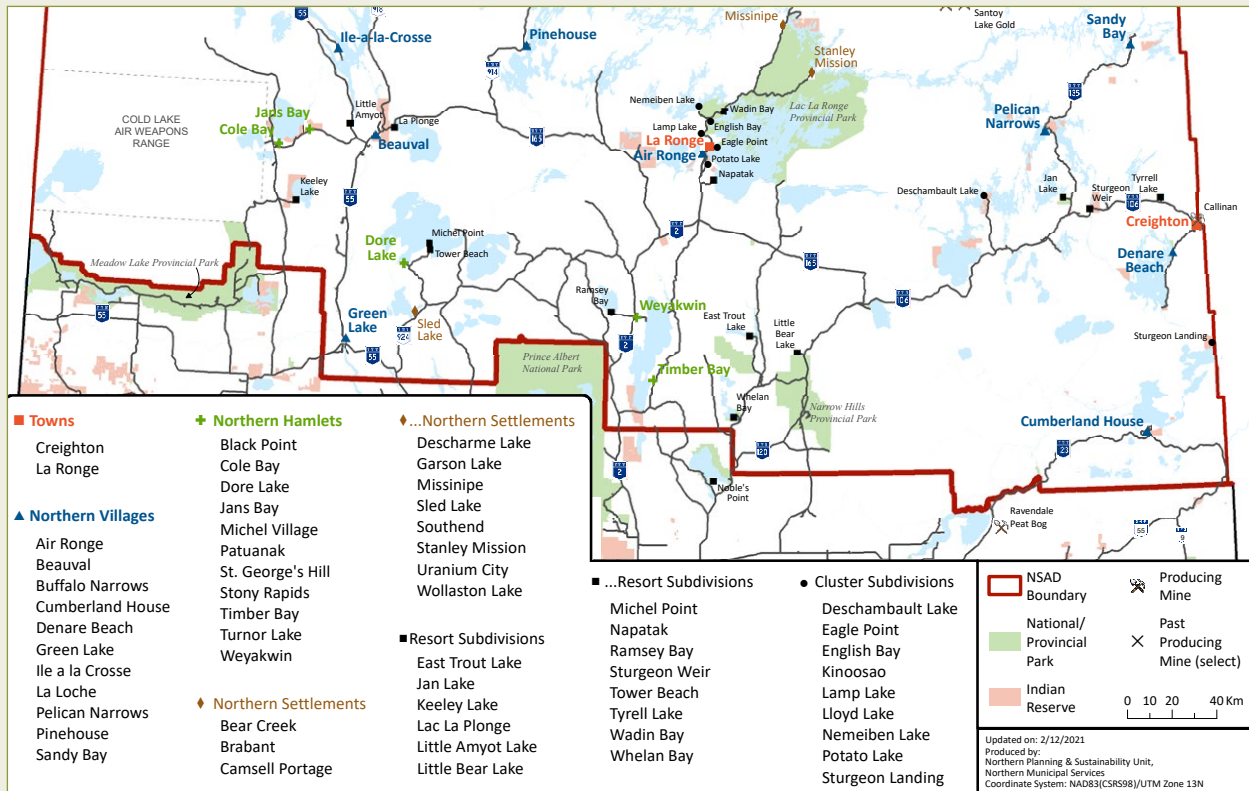| Category	Municipality Act	Municipal Association	Characteristics
Cities	The Cities Act (2002)	Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA)	The capital city of Regina has a population of 226,404 (Economic Development Regina, 2021) and the city of Saskatoon has a population of 266,141 (Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Association, 2021). Combined, they account for ~40% of the provincial population (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2022).
Small Urban	The Municipalities Act (2005)	Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM)	Towns within small urban municipalities are often regional service centres for the infrastructure that supports the province's large industrial sectors, such as mining.
Rural	The Municipalities Act (2005)	Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM)	The rural areas of Saskatchewan are well-known for their high agricultural productivity and exports.
North	The Northern Municipalities Act (2010)	New North	The Northern Saskatchewan Administration District (NSAD) covers 49% of the provincial land area but accounts for only ~3% of Saskatchewan residents (Northern Municipal Services, 2022). The NSAD has a mixed industrial and traditional subsistence-based economy, based on its abundant natural resources. Its border with southern Saskatchewan is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Border of the Northern Saskatchewan Administration District ©NSAD

How can municipalities prepare for sustainability initiatives?

To ensure the success of sustainable development initiatives, municipalities must be well prepared, with a strong commitment from everyone involved, including political leaders, council members, municipal employees, and other stakeholders in the community. Municipalities require appropriate policies, plans, and programs, as well as sufficient capacity and resources. Success also requires the formation of effective partnerships and an integrated governance structure that incorporates feedback at regular intervals. The more municipalities are prepared and equipped, the more likely they are to achieve their local objectives.

Capacity planning can have a significant effect on progress towards sustainable development (Cuthill, 2002). Planners and policymakers in large municipalities often dedicate more time to governance and related activities such as stakeholder management, whereas governance tasks in small urban and rural municipalities are likely to overlap with other roles. A detailed plan is therefore invaluable. A collaborative municipal governance structure should also ensure internal accountability by including the community. Open access to reports, progress updates, and a feedback mechanism can also increase community involvement (Kawakubo & Murakami, 2020).

How can the community and stakeholders get involved?

Community engagement and ownership of sustainability initiatives is essential for success. The implementation of forward-thinking policies can make the municipality a more attractive place and can improve community wellbeing and quality of life (Wilderink *et al.*, 2020). Community engagement can also provide a valuable source of local knowledge and experience, which will benefit planners, policymakers, and local municipal representatives (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Other stakeholders, such as non-profit and voluntary organizations, researchers, and industries, should also be included during all stages of sustainability initiatives to ensure successful outcomes.

How do municipalities monitor progress and assessment?

Regular monitoring and tracking are necessary to maintain a focus on the goals of sustainability initiatives and to identify and overcome any barriers. An effective monitoring strategy designed in partnership with local stakeholders should include tasks such as developing local indicators, defining the variables in local settings, selecting appropriate measurement techniques, assigning roles and responsibilities, and a transparent reporting schedule with public access to reports.

(Adapted from Green Municipal Fund, 2016)

Give me an example!

In 2009, the City of Cranbrook in British Columbia needed to update its wastewater treatment plant. It decided on a sustainable design that would recycle and reuse all the effluent, and last at least 50 years. This municipal facility was completed in 2011 and features aerated ponds and UV disinfection for effluent processing, and the resulting water is used to irrigate forage land and a waterfowl nesting area. The irrigated land now produces ~3600 tons of hay, with a value of more than $1.2 million per year. The irrigated waterfowl nesting area is a popular bird-watching and recreational area, when previously it was an unhygienic eyesore. The city credits its success to long-term thinking, collaboration, and innovation. Its advice to other municipalities is to think differently rather than accept conventional approaches .

For more information on the Governing Sustainable Municipalities project, please visit **www.jsgs-gsm.ca**.

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KEY MESSAGES

All municipalities have the authority to undertake and support sustainability initiatives.

Sustainable development benefits society, the environment, and the economy.

All municipalities will be affected by climate change, but sustainable development can help to mitigate these effects.

Working towards sustainable development can help to build strong partnerships with stakeholders.

Much of the work to be done towards sustainable development falls under municipal functions that may already exist or may only need adjustment.

The local community should be encouraged to participate actively in sustainable development, helping to achieve goals that benefit their community and others, now and into the future.