



Issue Brief 4: Facilitators and Barriers to Municipal Sustainability

A wide range of facilitators and barriers affect the future of municipalities

Governing Sustainable Municipalities

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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.

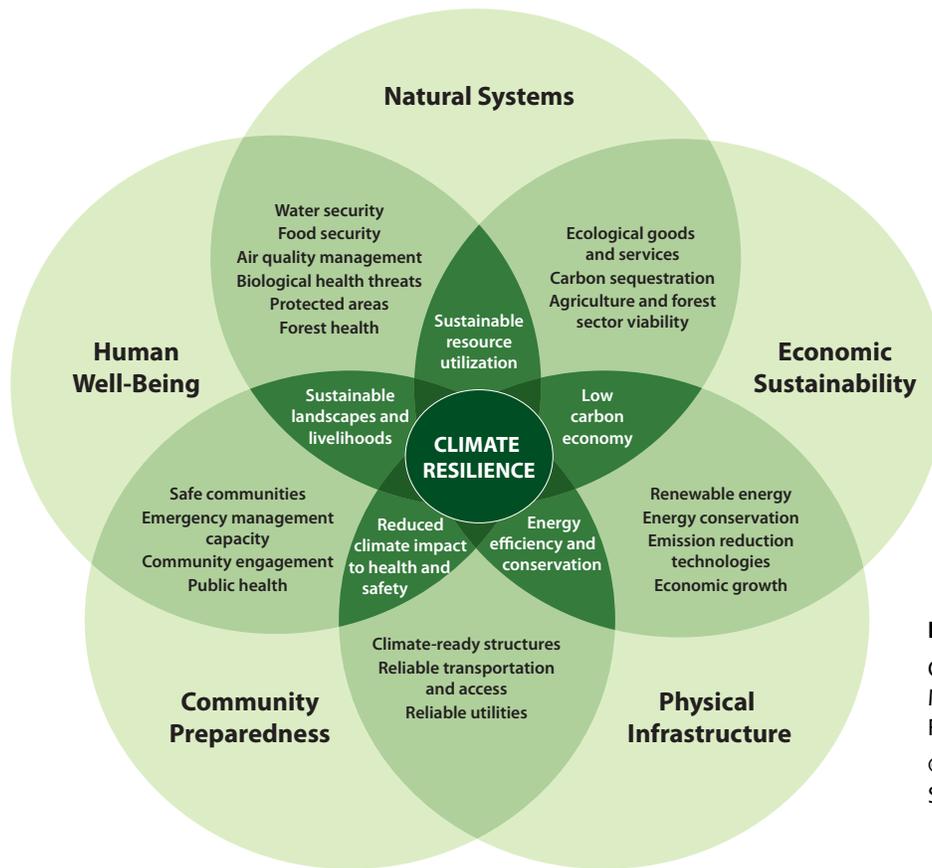


Figure 2:
Climate Resilience Measurement Framework
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What can municipalities do?

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).

Facilitators and barriers affecting the sustainability of Saskatchewan’s municipalities

Several common factors affect municipal sustainability, including regulation, policy guidelines, collaborations, and information management (McKerlie, 2003; Neumann & Hack, 2020; Hamin *et al.*, 2014). In British Columbia, barriers include an unclear understanding of sustainability, poor funding, and competition among municipalities (McLean & Borén, 2015). However, the same factors can sometimes facilitate balanced development (Burch, 2010). For example, the organizational culture can either prevent or enable actions for efficient waste management, depending on whether it promotes collaboration and innovation, or competition. High-level directives that encourage innovation and collaboration are particularly important within municipalities.

The Governing Sustainable Municipalities (GSM) project identified similar barriers and facilitators in Saskatchewan, and likewise found that the same factors can be barriers or facilitators depending on the context. The project identified 10 factors that can be assigned to the governance domain, the social domain, or the capacity-building domain (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Ten factors identified as facilitators and barriers to Saskatchewan’s vision of municipal sustainability.

Governance-related facilitators and barriers



Figure 4: Factors identified as governance-related facilitators and barriers to Saskatchewan’s vision of municipal sustainability.

Planning

Long-term strategic plans, including innovations and succession planning, are key facilitators that guide the sustainable development of municipalities (Baynham & Stevens, 2014). These robust plans should be developed by councils that are open-minded and receptive to new ideas to ensure that plans are translated into actions. A lack of planning can lead to reactive rather than proactive projects, which often focus on short-term rather than long-term considerations (Baynham & Stevens, 2014; Stuart *et al.*, 2016). In Saskatchewan, a long-term planning approach focusing on community needs has been included in the Statements of Provincial Interest Regulations, providing a regulatory framework for municipalities (Gov. of Saskatchewan, 2012).

Funding

Funding streams that are accessible, consistent, and predictable are likely to facilitate sustainability initiatives. But such initiatives can be expensive, with some having long payback periods or ongoing maintenance requirements (Stoney & Graham, 2009; Chenier, 2009). Engagement with sustainable development is restricted in many municipalities due to the lack of funding (Gov. of Canada, 2019), which means that all available resources are required to maintain essential services. The 2005 Gas Tax Fund in Canada allowed municipalities to strengthen their sustainability efforts, including a requirement to prepare Integrated Sustainable Community Plans (ISCPs) that have increased the momentum of municipal sustainability initiatives in Canada (Stoney & Graham, 2009; Chenier, 2009; Stuart *et al.*, 2016). However, if funding becomes inconsistent, or if the funding conditions are unclear or too rigid, sustainability initiatives can stall. This may occur for political reasons, such as shifting leadership priorities (Datta & Hurlbert, 2019; Pattison-Williams *et al.*, 2018).

Legislation

Legislation, regulation, and policy (such as procurement practices and governance processes) have a significant impact on the ability of municipalities to engage with sustainability initiatives. They can provide structure and uniformity but they can also be restrictive and perceived as irrelevant in the local context (for further information, see GSM Final and Summary Reports, 2023). Public policies that do not integrate sustainability as part of a holistic approach tend to hinder sustainability initiatives in the long run (Araos *et al.*, 2016; Few *et al.*, 2011).

Social



Figure 5: Factors identified as social facilitators and barriers to Saskatchewan's vision of municipal sustainability.sustainability.

Authenticity

A community's sense of authenticity is important for the identification and preservation of the local culture and environment (Callaghan & Colton, 2007). Place-based governance can therefore help to engage communities, strengthening the sense of belonging and motivating individuals to become more involved with municipal activities and initiatives, including sustainability (Bradford, 2005).

Community

Municipalities must understand the needs and concerns of their communities and build good relationships with them. A sense of community encourages new residents to stay and engage with local sustainability initiatives (for further information, see GSM Final and Summary Reports, 2023). Administrative leadership plays an important role in facilitating and promoting community cooperation and collaboration, meaningful engagement, and strong and trusting relationships with stakeholders (Florini & Pauli, 2018). The sense of community must grow organically as a form of self-determination and should not be seen as a form of indoctrination imposed from the outside (Holmes *et al.*, 2019; Strand & Næss, 2017).

Partnerships

Municipalities are increasingly expected to take on more diverse roles and responsibilities, which spread their resources thinly and may therefore hinder sustainability initiatives (Calder & Beckie, 2011). Partnerships offer a way forward to overcome such obstacles, using approaches such as joint funding, knowledge sharing, and networking opportunities (Calder & Beckie, 2011; Leung, 2009). However, partnerships must be managed carefully to avoid tensions caused by changes of personnel, political direction, or budget allocations. Sustainable development requires comprehensive regional, provincial, federal, and international partnerships (Batista *et al.*, 2021; McLean & Borén, 2015). The establishment of partnerships between nearby municipalities, allowing them to pool their resources, is an effective strategy to achieve sustainability (McLarty *et al.*, 2014).

Communication

Open and transparent communication with residents and taxpayers is necessary for municipalities to achieve their sustainability targets (Mayers *et al.*, 2021; Kearney *et al.*, 2007). The value of good communication within municipal governments, and between municipalities and stakeholders, can be facilitated by establishing

communities of practice (informal groups where government officials, professionals, and community stakeholders come together to learn from each other). Such groups help to overcome communication barriers, especially with residents that lack access to technology and other underserved groups. Progress on municipal sustainability requires collaboration and effective communication involving the national, provincial, and local levels of government (Aikens & McKenzie, 2021; Hursh *et al.*, 2015; McKenzie, 2012; McKenzie *et al.*, 2015). This helps to translate policies into actions at the local level to promote sustainable communities (Kinzer, 2018).

Outreach

Many communities are diverse, with various cultures, religions, languages, gender identities, accessibility requirements, and long-held traditional connections to the land. Underserved groups in the community may be marginalized or even excluded when utilizing standard governance engagement methods (Mayers *et al.*, 2021). Municipalities have an ethical responsibility to ensure that all members of its community can engage with sustainability initiatives if they wish. Additional efforts may therefore be necessary to support their inclusion. Outreach activities that promote nuanced conversations about sustainability are appropriate for local communities (Venneman *et al.*, 2022).

Capacity Building



Figure 6: Factors identified as capacity building facilitators and barriers to Saskatchewan’s vision of municipal sustainability.

Skills

Knowledge and skills capacity is a major factor driving the success or failure of sustainable development (Cohen, 2017; Pavlova, 2013). Municipalities must have a sufficient number of trained and skilled personnel for sustainability initiatives to be successful (Turvey *et al.*, 2018). Without such training, staff will be unable to capture the opportunities available to their municipality, such as sustainability grants. The development of new skills at the local level is also essential to drive local economic, social, and environmental longevity initiatives that involve new technologies, new planning guidelines, and new investments (Antoshkina & Shmeleva, 2020).

Education

Public awareness and education can foster a community that understands and supports a sustainable approach to development (Wamsler, 2020; Turvey *et al.*, 2018). Cooperation between governments, stakeholders, and provincial organizations can help to make educational resources more accessible to people who are willing to support sustainability initiatives, which can include training for professional qualifications and positions, or simple volunteering. The inclusion of underserved groups in such educational programs will improve their engagement in municipal planning and decision-making processes (for further information, see GSM Final and Summary Reports, 2023).

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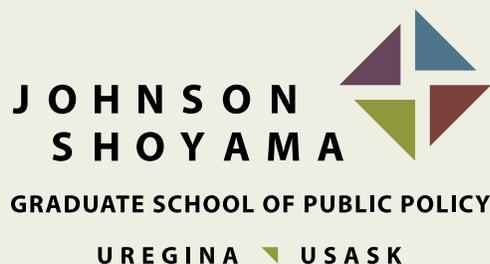
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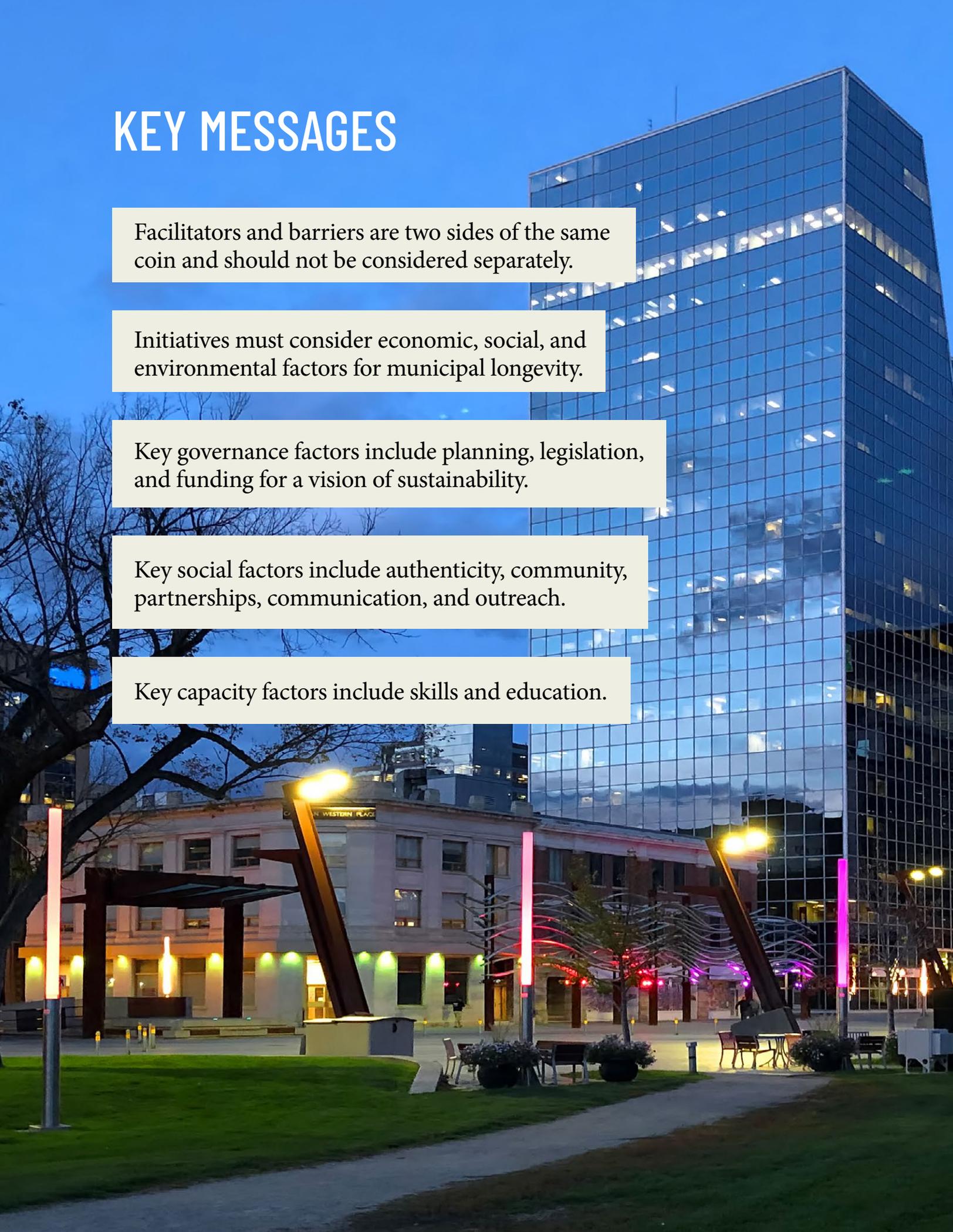
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For more information on the Governing Sustainable Municipalities project, please visit www.jsgs-gsm.ca.

KEY MESSAGES



Facilitators and barriers are two sides of the same coin and should not be considered separately.

Initiatives must consider economic, social, and environmental factors for municipal longevity.

Key governance factors include planning, legislation, and funding for a vision of sustainability.

Key social factors include authenticity, community, partnerships, communication, and outreach.

Key capacity factors include skills and education.