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Integrated community sustainability planning in Atlantic Canada: Green-washing an infrastructure agenda

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Abstract:

In 2005 the Canadian federal government initiated a New Deal for Cities and Communities. The program, which involved bilateral agreements with provincial governments, promised substantial funding to municipalities to promote integrated community sustainability through capacity building and infrastructure renewal. We evaluate the content of sustainability plans and the processes that produced them in one region: Atlantic Canada. The findings suggest that although the state mandate and funding resources produced a large number of sustainability plans, changing national political priorities and local desperation for economic and population growth undermined the program's initial commitment to and potential for environmental and social sustainability.

Key words: Canada, capacity building, governance, infrastructure, state mandate, sustainability

Introduction

Twenty years ago, Campbell (1996, 304) wrote that, “In the battle of big public ideas, sustainability has won: the task of the coming years is simply to work out the details and to narrow the gap between its theory and practice.” Krause, Feiock, and Hawkins (2014) suggested that sustainability has become an increasingly common objective for local government. Indeed, sustainability initiatives have appeared across Europe (Adolfsson Jorby 2002; Kveton et al. 2014; Smardon 2008) and in many US cities (Jepson 2004; Portney 2005). Yet some communities have not taken up sustainability (Holman 2014). Moreover, Saha and Paterson (2008) argued that governments’ commitment to sustainability may remain weak: in some cases, “sustainable development is just a buzzword or another name for traditional good planning practices” (Saha and Paterson 2008, 35).

Relatively few governments have created explicit mechanisms to require cities to promote sustainability. Recent experience in Canada, however, provides an opportunity to evaluate a nation-wide initiative that mandated “sustainability plans” for every municipality seeking access to desperately needed infrastructure renewal funds, generated through a federal tax on gasoline. In the May 2005 budget, the Canadian federal government under centrist Liberal party leadership announced a “New Deal for Canadian Cities and Communities” (Bradford 2007a; Taylor and Bradford 2015). The program, which would help municipal governments address deteriorating infrastructure such as water systems (Harchaoui, Tarkhani, and Warren 2004), constituted a new federal urban policy with a social sustainability agenda attached (Bradford 2007b). Canada’s New Deal would facilitate gas tax transfers for communities that produced Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs) and capital investment plans linking municipal budgets to sustainability objectives and specific infrastructure projects. In positioning the program, the government explained, “Guided by a new vision, and supported with new investments, the New Deal is re-imagining and re-inventing how governments work together for the social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability of cities and communities across Canada” (Bradford 2007b, 9, citing a government statement from 2005). By 2006, each of Canada’s provinces and territories signed bilateral agreements with the Government of Canada to outline mechanisms to transfer the gas tax funding to local municipalities. During the initial deployment of the program, however, Canadians elected a new right-of-center Conservative government committed to government accountability, “open federalism”, and a neoliberal agenda (Bradford 2007b; Phillips 2006). Although it continued to fund infrastructure spending and support preparation of sustainability plans, the new federal government shifted the focus, philosophy, and operation of the program in ways that affected what was produced and how planners responded. In this article, we evaluate experience with the operationalization of sustainability planning in one region of Canada, looking at the plans produced and considering practitioners’ perceptions of the process and plan content. Did the national mandate for sustainability plans generate progress towards sustainability or did it green-wash infrastructure plans: that is, dress up conventional plans for sewers or roads in a discourse of environmental and social responsibility? We discuss the way program requirements changed over time, highlight features of the plans produced, and reflect on practitioners’ frustrations with the results. The findings suggest that while a state mandate and funding can produce local sustainability plans, a lasting and meaningful commitment to long-term sustainability requires more.

To contain the scope of analysis, our study focuses on Atlantic Canada’s four provinces: New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador (hereafter called Newfoundland), Nova Scotia, and

Prince Edward Island. Atlantic Canada is often described as a have-not region with resource-based economies. Its population is relatively small, rural, aging, and growing more slowly than the national average. Newfoundland has benefitted from offshore petroleum development during the last decade, but the other provinces have less robust economies and experience high unemployment and out-migration from rural areas. After three centuries of European occupation and with thousands of kilometers of coastline bordering the Atlantic Ocean, the region faces significant environmental and social challenges such as sea level rise, an aging population, and resource depletion. Under Canadian law local governments have limited fiscal capacity to generate revenues, so they rely on property taxes and service fees for income: consequently, they are chronically under-funded. Not surprisingly, then, these four provinces signed on quickly to take advantage of opportunities to access gas tax transfers from the national government.

We draw on two main sources of data for analysis. Through an internet search and contact with local and provincial officials in fall 2014, we collected sustainability plans (ICSPs) from municipalities in the four provinces (Table 1): 51 from Nova Scotia, 10 from Prince Edward Island, seven¹ from New Brunswick, and 99 from Newfoundland (Beed 2014). We analyzed 167 plans in total, from a universe believed to include about 180. We examined their key features and policies, processes used to generate them, and the types of projects they proposed. Serendipitously, we discovered that planners talked about ICSPs in interview data we had previously collected from some of the communities for another component of our research program. In summer 2014, we interviewed planners from five urban regions across Canada about challenges to and strategies for coordinating land-use planning². Those interviews included 15 planners in Nova Scotia and 13 in Newfoundland. When we analyzed that interview data we noted that five of the Nova Scotia planners and 12 of the Newfoundland planners talked about ICSPs in response to questions asking them about how funding programs of other levels of government had stimulated the preparation of plans (Harper and Wheeler 2015). Their transcribed responses provided robust data about planners' often skeptical perceptions about the effectiveness of sustainability planning.

Table 1: Number of municipalities and plans available for analysis
Goes about here

We begin by briefly reviewing the meaning and application of sustainability in planning before discussing the process for developing sustainability plans in Atlantic Canada. We examine who produced ICSPs, the forms plans took, and elements of their contents. By evaluating how ICSPs addressed the complexities of sustainability we hope to contribute to greater understanding of the (in)effectiveness of state mandates in promoting sustainability. The final section of the article considers the implications of the findings to suggest that state mandates are necessary but not sufficient to advance sustainability.

Planning for sustainability

Canadian planners began discussing sustainable development with great enthusiasm following the release of the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987). The Commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 43). Following widespread media interest, Maurice Strong, a Canadian member of the Commission, stimulated public discussion about sustainability.³ In 1988, the federal government created a National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy. The Roundtable’s principal mission during its 25-year tenure was to advise the government on sustainability issues. Major cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Calgary added sustainability to their policies for promoting livability, bioregionalism, and compact form (Calgary 1995; Punter 2004; Royal Commission 1992). Thus the language of sustainability rapidly infiltrated planning rhetoric and influenced Canadian planning practice (Grant 1994).

Sustainability planning provides a synthetic philosophy for managing resources efficiently, linking local decision-making with broader jurisdictions, considering all members of the community, engaging in long-term thinking, and minimizing environmental disruption (Selman 1995; Wheeler 2000). In early writing about sustainability, authors often likened sustainability to a three-legged stool, with environment, economy, and society being equally important supports (Dawe and Ryan 2003). The stool metaphor gave way to three pillars or the “three Es” of environment, economy, and equity (Jepson 2004; Opp and Saunders 2012; Saha and Paterson 2008). As Krause, Feiock, and Hawkins (2014, 3) explained,

Sustainability bridges human needs with ecological well-being and is generally accepted as comprising environmental, economic, and social components. These three pillars have been used extensively to frame research on local sustainability in a variety of disciplines, including public administration and policy.

While sustainability offers the promise of development alongside environmental protection and social equity, in practice economic outcomes have often dominated political agendas (Wang, Hawkins, and Berman 2014). Policies may minimize environmental concerns (Dawe and Ryan 2003) and plans may underrepresent or ignore the third pillar of social equity (Agyeman 2008; Opp and Saunders 2012; Saha and Paterson 2008). Grant, Manuel, and Joudrey (1996) argued for greater public engagement to address environmental and social sustainability concerns, but Adolfsson Jorby (2002) countered that democracy cannot guarantee sustainability.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, economists and planners began to consider another dimension—culture—that could support sustainability (Jeannotte and Duxbury 2012). Writing about the significance of the “creative class”—including musicians, artists, and filmmakers alongside scientists and technology workers—Richard Florida (2002) highlighted the role of cultural industries and activities in enabling urban economic development. Cultural work was seen as contributing to quality of life and prosperity without generating the negative environmental implications of traditional industries. Agenda 21 for Culture (United Cities and Local Governments n.d., 2011) resulted from an international conference in Barcelona in 2004, providing a strong basis for advancing culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability.

Several studies have examined sustainability planning in practice (Adolfsson Jorby 2002). Berke and Conroy (2000) found that US plans that explicitly referenced sustainability did not differ dramatically in policies from those that made no effort to discuss sustainability. Plans referencing sustainability did not take a balanced approach to the three Es, but tended to focus on livability (Berke and Conroy 2000). As sustainability objectives increasingly influenced US planning practice, some authors questioned the depth of the political commitment to sustainability (Angotti 2008a, 2008b; Staley 2006). Berke (2002, 34) argued that, “If sustainability is to move beyond a vague idealism, the task ahead for planners and activists, especially at the local level where most authority to manage and control development is lodged, is to translate theory to practice.” Yet two decades after it has become a common planning principle, sustainability has proven elusive. “On the one hand, sustainable development signifies the normative ideal of generating a better world. On the other, in the process of addressing and resolving problems it often results in the realisation of other problems, if not also the preservation of current problems (e.g. capitalist relations)” (Carr 2015, 99).

The potential of achieving visionary objectives through sustainability planning may depend on the strength of the planning mandates given to communities. Several studies (Berke and French 1994; Burby and Dalton 1994; Conroy and Berke 2004; Dalton and Burby 1994) suggested that state-level planning mandates affect the quality of plans: a clear and strong mandate can influence local policies and practices. As Deyle and Smith (1998) noted, however, state mandates are only as good as the local political will to back them and robust means to enforce compliance. The scale and pace of growth (Wheeler 2009), the dynamics of development markets (Grant 2009), and limited staff capacity (Hawkins and Wang 2012) may affect prospects for realizing sustainable outcomes. In their recent study, Homsy and Warner (2015) found that a multi-level governance environment, where upper levels of government enhance the capacity of fiscally-strapped local governments to deal with complex environmental issues, can facilitate sustainability policies. As we examine the experience of Atlantic Canada, we consider how the multi-governance environment created to manage and implement the gas tax transfer did or did not advance integrated community sustainability planning in the region.

Toward integrated community sustainability planning in Canada

In 2002, at the annual national conference of mayors, Canada’s federal government introduced the idea of a New Deal for Cities (soon revised to add “and Communities”), a way for governments to work together to promote the social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability of communities (Bradford 2007a). For the better part of a decade, municipal leaders had called for an urban agenda with greater resources to deal with mounting infrastructure deficits. Between 2002 and 2005, the New Deal for Cities and Communities took shape, proposing mechanisms for multi-level governance (through agreements between the federal and provincial governments, and then between provinces and municipalities), and promising funding from federal gas tax revenues to facilitate capacity building and infrastructure projects. Underscoring the program was the idea of integrated planning for community sustainability (Holden 2012; Prime Minister’s Advisory Committee 2005). The four provinces in Atlantic Canada signed gas tax funding agreements with the Government of Canada in 2005 and 2006. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island made agreements under the New

Deal for Cities and Communities. Newfoundland was delayed in its process, however. It finalized its agreement with the new national Conservative government, which hastily dropped the “New Deal” rhetoric from the program, and added a provision about Newfoundland’s focus on waste management issues (Table 2). Progressive ideas about a new urban agenda (associated with the Liberal party) yielded to Conservative party concerns about accountability – highlighted because of publicity about previous government spending scandals -- as the new federal government focussed on developing action plans to strengthen the economy through targeting infrastructure building.

Table 2: Changes in Agreement wording following the transition in federal government
Goes about here

The federal/provincial agreements set out conditions under which revenues (over C\$1 billion annually across Canada) would transfer from the federal to provincial and then to local governments. Embedded in a discourse and process for “integrated sustainability planning”, the gas tax transfer would provide a guaranteed revenue stream to municipalities to assist them in updating or improving infrastructure. Announcing the program in 2005, the Minister said:

Funds from the gas tax will be directed at environmentally sustainable municipal infrastructure, such as public transit, water and wastewater systems, community energy systems, solid waste management, rehabilitation of roads and bridges, and capacity building. These investments will help Canada’s cities and communities improve the quality of the environment, through reduced greenhouse gas emissions and cleaner air and water. (Godfrey 2005, 1)

The agreements with different provinces shared many similarities, but revealed some interesting differences. To build capacity in local government, the agreements made extraordinary expenses associated with sustainability planning an eligible expense for funding. Several provinces, including Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island, created guidelines and facilitated processes to help communities prepare ICSPs. New Brunswick allowed communities to use green plans or other plans to meet the program requirements. Agreements also differed in the nature of community engagement anticipated. The Canada-New Brunswick (2005, 6) agreement described sustainability plans as “*developed by* New Brunswick community members, and provid[ing] direction for the community to realize sustainability objectives it has for the environmental, cultural, social and economic dimensions of its identity” (emphasis added). By contrast, the Canada-Nova Scotia (2005, 5) and Canada-Newfoundland (2006, 6) agreements described the ICSP as “a long-term plan, *developed in consultation with* community members” (emphasis added). Provincial governments influenced the way that the program planning proceeded.

The process initially required ICSPs to acknowledge social, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability, yet the requirement that funded projects promote cleaner water, cleaner air, or reduced greenhouse gas emissions favoured physical projects, and provided relatively little opportunity for spending on social or cultural sustainability (Holden 2012). With a more intense focus on capacity-building—perhaps because of the large number of small

municipalities in the province-- the Canada-Newfoundland agreement added governance as a fifth pillar of sustainability. Provincial guidance documents explained:

For the ICSP the area of governance will refer to the ability to manage and operate a municipality. The idea of sustainability for municipal governance includes issues of administrative capacity, availability of elected officials, committee structures, adoption of solid planning and decision making policies, compliance with all legislative requirements for municipalities as well as financial viability. (Municipal Affairs 2009a, 7)

Program objectives tightened over time as the Conservative government brought in additional infrastructure renewal programs and amended the original gas tax transfer agreements. The principle of funding environmentally sustainable infrastructure gave way to promising predictable funding for infrastructure investments (Table 3). While sustainability discourse dominated the early agreements, the revised agreements discussed sustainability only in the context of listing integrated community sustainability plans as an eligible expense in the capacity-building category. Despite the philosophical changes initiated by the federal government, municipalities continued to produce ICSPs or other plans to meet the program requirements in the period from 2007 through 2010. In the next section we discuss the processes provinces developed to manage and monitor the tax transfers, and the kinds of ICSPs that resulted.

Table 3: Changes in principles with renewal of agreements in Nova Scotia
Goes about here

ICSPs in Atlantic Canada

Each province developed guidance documents, frameworks, or templates to help communities develop ICSPs and to apply for gas tax funding (e.g., Municipal Affairs 2009b, 2009c; Service Nova Scotia 2007; Prince Edward Island 2007a, 2007b).⁴ The Federation of Canadian Municipalities coordinated a green planning initiative used by New Brunswick (FCM 2015), while the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities prepared a follow-up guide for implementing ICSPs (Lindberg et al. 2013). The detailed advice available to municipalities reflected local realities. First, communities had to produce ICSPs relatively quickly to facilitate funding transfers. Second, many local governments lacked staff capacity to engage in planning. Working expeditiously to get plans in place required considerable commitment. All communities had to engage the public in the sustainability planning process, but the agreements and guidance did not specify minimum requirements or suggested mechanisms: strategies for community involvement varied from ads in newspapers calling for comments, to citizen-committees actually crafting documents.

Our search for sustainability plans located 167 documents. Local governments had options about how to produce ICSPs, whether as stand-alone documents or as parts of other plans (Table 4). Almost three-quarters of Atlantic Canadian communities prepared new stand-alone documents. The New Brunswick agreement indicated the province's commitment to using development plans for the purpose: "Integrated Community Sustainability Plans will build on current planning practices. The Oversight Committee will examine how the principles of Integrated Sustainability Community Plans can be incorporated into the Community Growth Strategies of each Community Economic Development Agency" (Canada-New Brunswick 2005, 40). New

Brunswick's ICSPs included "green" plans and a sustainable tourism plan (New Brunswick 2015).⁵

Table 4: Format of the ICSP or sustainability plan

Goes about here

Provincial guidance in Newfoundland used the process to engage small communities in planning: "Remember that while the ICSP is a requirement of the Gas Tax Agreement it is also a tremendous opportunity to begin and refine long term planning based around the goals of developing sustainable communities" (Municipal Affairs 2009c, 2). To reduce costs and create economies of scale in Newfoundland, small communities often collaborated to create joint ICSPs: for instance, the communities of Bay L'Argent, St Bernard's-Jacques Fontaine, Little Bay East (total population 950) produced a collaborative ICSP (Edwards and Associates 2010a). The smallest community submitting an ICSP, Little Bay Island in Newfoundland (Tract 2010) had fewer than 100 residents, while the largest city in the region (Halifax, Nova Scotia, with 390,000 people) submitted its regional plan as its ICSP (Halifax 2006).

The federal-provincial agreements defined acceptable expenses for capacity-building, which included preparing ICSPs. Local governments generally could not claim overhead or salaries for current staff but could seek funds to hire consultants or contract staff.⁶ Since communities had to produce ICSPs by 2010, and guidance materials for producing them only became available in 2009 in some jurisdictions, the pace of planning activities was fierce. The process created a booming industry for planning consultants, with some firms producing many plans. Table 5 indicates that consultants had a hand in drafting half the plans prepared. In Newfoundland, over 60% of plans involved consultants. By contrast, in Nova Scotia in-house and contract staff produced over 80% of ICSPs. The agreements did not provide long-term funding for implementing and monitoring the plans produced. Only ICSPs adopted through official municipal plans had a legislated framework for implementation.

Table 5: Who prepared the ICSP?

Goes about here

The character and quality of the plans varied widely. More than half the plans did not define sustainability: those that did generally took the safe route, using the well-known Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987) definition (e.g. the plan for Saint John, New Brunswick by Dillon Consulting 2008, 5). Some plans, like Summerside's in Prince Edward Island, subordinated sustainability: "The Plan strives to strike a balance between the needs of the greater community and the demands of sustainable development" (Summerside 2008, 8). ICSPs most commonly and fulsomely addressed economic development objectives. For instance, the ICSP for one Prince Edward Island community sought sustainable growth: "The Town of Cornwall is a vibrant and well-planned community. Embracing urban and rural, we have a great respect for the environment and the land upon which we depend. We encourage and support sustainable growth to enhance the well-being of our community" (Cornwall 2009, 7). Approaches to sustainability varied, but provincial guidance documents (e.g. Service Nova Scotia 2007, 12) noted that "the ICSP should link its goals and actions as well as any capital infrastructure investments, to the sustainable outcomes of cleaner air, cleaner water, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions".

The stand-alone plans following provincial templates typically included elements such as population profiles and vision statements. Some vision statements reflected particular local concerns and the desire for growth, while many offered generic visions of health, safety, and quality of life (Table 6).

Table 6 - Types of visions from a sample of Newfoundland plans

Goes about here

The ICSPs identified objectives or aims to guide the projects selected. Table 7 illustrates sample objectives from the plans. The plans generally considered the environmental dimensions of sustainability well, but gave less attention to the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability. Some plans combined the social and cultural pillars. About 10% of the ICSPs omitted discussing the cultural pillar. Outside Newfoundland, few ICSPs addressed governance issues.

Table 7: Sample ICSP objectives and aims

Goes about here

The bilateral agreements defined fundable projects to include services (such as water, wastewater, solid waste, and community energy systems) and transportation (such as transit buses, transportation technologies, and active transportation infrastructure). Significant infrastructure issues—such as the need to replace a water treatment plant in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia (Lunenburg Council 2010)—meant that large, physical projects often dominated local agendas. The federal framework for Newfoundland envisioned projects dealing with roads, tourism, affordable housing, and heritage buildings as examples for improving sustainability (Municipal Affairs 2009a). Despite the stated intention of the program to focus on improvements to air and water quality and to reduce GHG emissions, the list of output indicators for New Brunswick identified traditional infrastructure projects such as roads and bridges (Capital Management Engineering 2011). Few projects listed in plans spoke explicitly to environmental sustainability aims. Proposed projects rarely promised direct contributions to social or cultural sustainability. ICSPs that did propose projects for all the sustainability pillars sometimes proffered aspirational goals such as “to become a more sustainable and complete community” (Figure 1). With the change in federal government philosophy explicit by the time communities produced their ICSPs, not surprisingly many projects proposed focused on repairs or improvements to conventional infrastructure assets.

Figure 1: Example Newfoundland community environmental projects (Tract 2010, 24)

Goes about here

Time-lines of the ICSPs ranged from three years—arguably not a long window for sustainability—to 150 years⁷. In Newfoundland, municipalities were directed to detail a five-year outlook while visioning for up to 50 years into the future: almost half the plans there took a 10-year or greater view, while 10 percent looked 20 years or more ahead. In Nova Scotia, just under half the plans took a 20-year or longer outlook and in New Brunswick five of seven plans took a 20 to 40-year view. None of the plans from Prince Edward Island exceeded an 18-year view. Time-lines often seemed rather arbitrary. It is not yet clear whether any of the provinces will initiate periodic reviews of the ICSPs.

Planners' perspectives on the sustainability plans

When we discovered that interviews we had conducted with planners in the Halifax area of Nova Scotia and the St John's region of Newfoundland (for a related project on integrating multiple plans) contained many comments about ICSPs, we systematically analyzed that data to supplement our document review. Of 28 planners interviewed, 17 raised sustainability plans when asked about factors leading to a greater number of plans in recent years. Concerns about ICSPs proved especially salient among Newfoundland planners. Ten of the planners (two from Nova Scotia and eight from Newfoundland) made negative comments about the ICSP process or the content of the plans.

Only three planners, all working for provincial governments, offered positive perspectives on ICSPs. One planner in Nova Scotia (HRM08m) cited the ICSPs as a "success story", noting that councillors in some communities regularly turn to their ICSPs to help inform decisions. Two provincial planners – one in Newfoundland (SJ06m) and one in Nova Scotia (HRM12m)– described the process as "carrot and stick," whereby communities had to make plans to get the tax money. Provincial planners saw the process as positive because it initiated comprehensive planning in communities that previously had not addressed land use issues.

Four planners (two provincial, one municipal, and one consultant) offered generally neutral comments about the ICSPs. For instance, a Newfoundland provincial planner (SJ09f) expressed faith in the exercise.

We have integrated community sustainability plans here... The ICSP, you know, given the push and movement towards sustainability, to use a buzz word I guess, in general, has led the government to use the tactic of the mandatory ICSPs for the gas tax. In the hopes that, you know, the plans will be implemented, the planning process will be beneficial to the community ... I imagine it certainly opened their eyes to what planning is. I would hope so, anyway, that it was educational in that sense.

The most common remarks from planners proved negative. Four provincial planners, four municipal planners, and two consultant planners expressed concerns. A Nova Scotia provincial planner (HRM04f) doubted the depth of local government commitment to sustainability.

People did ICSPs that I think...that are just a whole lot of lip-service, a lot of green-washing. ... So it was just kind of planning for the sake of getting some money, I think, for a lot of communities. Which is unfortunate because it had the ability to, if it had that regulatory component, to really kind of shape the way that communities are developing.

Eight of 13 planners interviewed in Newfoundland were skeptical about the ICSPs. Two provincial planners suggested that communities treated the ICSP process as a check list they needed to meet to get their tax fund money. One (SJ13f) explained:

I do think it is kind of ticking boxes. That's what I'm seeing. You know, the plans often are only as good as the legislation because those are the minimum requirements. And I think we see all too often just the bare minimum. ... But when we do see really good planning policies and really well-written plans and regulations, you notice it, because it's not that often that we see those plans, unfortunately.

Municipal planners criticized a process that generated extra work for limited gains. A Newfoundland planner (SJ04m) opined:

We have the federal government's sustainability plan, a very different process. That's kind of been thrown on top of what we do as well. And we respond to that only because it is a requirement of the gas tax... I find ... we seem to always have to respond to something.

... *Q: To what extent has meeting funding requirements, for example the federal gas tax funding, contributed to the development of plans?*

SJ04m: Well that was a case where we had to do it, and we did it. Did we need to do it? In my municipality's case, no, we didn't. But we had to do it because it was a funding requirement.

A Newfoundland planning consultant (SJ01f) who worked on many ICSPs blasted the initiative: "it's just the flavour of the week, where there's some money around to do them. The integrated community sustainability plan, what a farce! You can quote me on that." Another planner described the process as "rushed", with smaller towns getting "squeezed" into doing plans (SJ07m). Consultant planners were especially critical of the plans. A former consultant planner in Nova Scotia (HRM04f) described problems with the process:

I don't think the end result became ... any kind of meaningful plan. And I worked on a bunch as a consultant for different municipalities. And I will tell you that it was a whole lot of me in a back room writing plans for communities that were adopted that really are just going to be shelved so they can get the money. It's unfortunate and sad.

Some planners expressed grave doubts about whether the ICSPs deliver sustainability. A municipal planner in Newfoundland (SJ04m) criticized his own community's choices for project priorities: "We took our gas tax money and built roads. And that's not sustainable." One consultant planner in Newfoundland (SJ10f) argued that sustainability requires density, yet few communities were moving away from sprawl. A Newfoundland consultant (SJ10f) elaborated on the content problem.

If you see any ICSPs, they're almost hilarious to read because it's like a brochure on the community, essentially, with "we will try to do garbage collection ethically," or something like that. Really odd things that don't make any sense. And again, no policy implications at all for those plans.

Although planners in Atlantic Canada supported the principle of sustainability, many of those interviewed did not see the ICSP program as representing a significant achievement in that direction.

Sustainability discourse, infrastructure projects

Canada's sustainability planning initiative provided a successful process to identify local infrastructure spending priorities but generally did not advance sustainability in ways intended by those who originally fashioned the New Deal for Cities and Communities. The templates used to facilitate ICSP preparation meant that the stand-alone plans often became formulaic. Many included generic visions of the kind now commonplace in plans, as they advanced growth

objectives. The sustainability plans often articulated aspirations for an environmentally and socially responsible future, yet short time-lines for the plans and the absence of mechanisms for implementation reduced many to preambles for infrastructure priority lists. Although some communities took their ICSPs seriously, others shelved theirs as a requirement completed.

Conroy and Berke (2004, 1394) acknowledged that “State-level planning mandates are an effective but incomplete means for promoting sustainable development at the local level.” Homsy and Warner (2015) suggested that state governments can increase adoption of sustainability policies by providing incentives and technical advice to local governments. The ICSP process not only followed a state mandate—shared by multiple levels of government—but delivered a funding envelope to enable local governments projects to build capacity (through creating sustainability plans) and to support environmentally sustainable municipal infrastructure. Canada’s New Deal for Cities and Communities employed the discourse of sustainability, provided resources to local governments for planning, and in a nominal way embedded sustainability principles into national infrastructure planning processes. It began as a noble and ambitious program. As we have illustrated for Atlantic Canada, however, changes in political commitment, and issues with the processes used to produce and implement plans, meant that sustainability planning fell short of achieving its potential. The program helped local governments address infrastructure needs and provided the means for small communities to engage in planning. Requiring municipalities to produce sustainability plans for such a specific agenda, however, seems unlikely to produce long-term transformation, especially on pillars related to social and cultural dimensions of sustainability. The agreements facilitated the continuing process in neoliberal regimes whereby upper levels of government with extensive capacity to generate revenues download responsibilities to lower levels of government that lacked capacity to address concerns (Kelly and Caputo 2011). The federal government capitalized on small communities’ desperate desires for local economic development and growth. Although advocates hoped the New Deal legislation and the ICSP process could deliver comprehensive sustainability planning, instead the program generated vague visions, green-washed infrastructure plans, and a spate of conventional infrastructure projects.

As Carr (2015) noted, sustainability programs benefit some interests more than others. Funding for infrastructure projects benefitted Canadian construction companies, and helped make small communities more attractive for business and tourism. Preparing ICSPs employed countless planning consultants, but created extra work for municipal and provincial planners and for community residents. Planners subsequently find themselves with more plans to coordinate and manage. In the “glass half empty” assessment, more plans landed on shelves collecting dust, and more people became skeptical of communities’ ability to plan for sustainability. In the “glass half full” scenario, communities with limited previous experience with planning had an opportunity to develop strategies to make rational choices about their future. Given that economies in Atlantic Canada depend on resource-based industries that draw on non-renewable resources or over-exploited natural systems, we may not be surprised to see that arguably more sustainable strategies such as using renewable energy often got less traction than conventional outcomes such as paving roads.

Like Homsy and Warner (2015, 64), we could conclude that “The results of this study illustrate the importance of state government in increasing the adoption of sustainability policies among

municipalities.” Canada’s ICSP process produced a surfeit of sustainability plans (Alberta Centre 2015) such that the nation at first glance appears progressive. Our analysis of the plans and interviews with planners in Atlantic Canada, however, revealed the weaknesses of the program. The change of federal government in the first year of the sustainability planning initiative began to undermine the political will that must underpin sustainable planning activities at all scales. Desperate economic conditions in Atlantic Canada led local governments to see the process as an opportunity to facilitate growth rather than to conduct a comprehensive analysis of what sustainability could mean for them. To succeed in the long-term, sustainability planning requires strong and continuing political commitment at all levels: from federal to local governments. Without political will to do the work necessary to transform our relationship with the environment, governments do little more than pay lip service to sustainability even as they adopt what they have called “sustainability” plans. Narrowing the gap between theory and practice that Campbell (1996) identified in sustainability planning two decades ago is proving more challenging than many had hoped.

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Table 1: Number of municipalities and plans available for analysis

	Number of municipalities*	Number of ICSPs analysed
New Brunswick	107	7
Newfoundland	280	99
Nova Scotia	54	51
Prince Edward Island	12	10
Total:	453	167

Note: *The number of municipalities is fluctuating in Nova Scotia, as some recently dissolved to join larger districts. Large areas of New Brunswick are unincorporated. Prince Edward Island village communities are not included in the count: they are covered by a provincial ICSP.

Table 2: Changes in Agreement wording following the transition in federal government

Canada-Nova Scotia Agreement, 23 September 2005, 2	Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Agreement, 1 August 2006, 2
<p>PREAMBLE</p> <p>WHEREAS Canada and Nova Scotia wish to cooperate in making a transformative difference in the sustainability and future prosperity of Municipalities in Nova Scotia and for Canada’s future.</p> <p>WHEREAS The New Deal for Cities and Communities will engage governments and stakeholders in purposeful partnerships, foster sustainable cities and communities across Canada and enable all Canadians to achieve a higher quality of life and standard of living.</p> <p>WHEREAS Canada and Nova Scotia have agreed to cooperate <i>under the New Deal for Cities and Communities which is</i> based on a long-term vision of sustainability and which integrates four interdependent dimensions: economic, environmental, social and cultural.</p> <p>WHEREAS the Government of Canada’s Budget 2005 outlined an intent to provide provinces and territories an amount equivalent to a portion of the federal excise tax on gasoline.</p> <p>WHEREAS this agreement includes the specific provisions on the Gas Tax for Environmentally Sustainable Municipal Infrastructure to primarily support environmental sustainability objectives <i>under a New Deal for Cities and Communities.</i></p> <p>WHEREAS this Agreement reflects the scope of expected areas of cooperation <i>under a New Deal for Cities and Communities and</i> for which Canada and Nova Scotia may enter into separate agreements, including possible tripartite agreements, to support sustainability objectives.</p> <p><i>WHEREAS the Gas Tax Transfer is consistent with the Nova Scotia objectives of partnering to promote effective local government and healthy and vibrant Nova Scotia communities.</i></p>	<p>PREAMBLE</p> <p>WHEREAS Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador wish to cooperate in making a transformative difference in the sustainability and future prosperity of cities and communities in Newfoundland and Labrador and for Canada’s future.</p> <p>WHEREAS this Agreement will engage governments and stakeholders in purposeful partnerships, foster sustainable cities and communities across Canada and enable all Canadians to achieve a higher quality of life and standard of living.</p> <p>WHEREAS Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador have agreed to cooperate based on a long-term vision of sustainability and which integrates four interdependent dimensions: economic, environmental, social and cultural.</p> <p>WHEREAS the Government of Canada’s Budget 2005 outlined an intent to provide provinces and territories an amount equivalent to a portion of the federal excise tax on gasoline.</p> <p>WHEREAS this Agreement includes the specific provisions on the Gas Tax for Environmentally Sustainable Municipal Infrastructure to primarily support environmental sustainability objectives.</p> <p><i>WHEREAS Newfoundland and Labrador is committed to provide regional solutions to addressing waste management issues through the implementation of the Provincial Waste Management strategy.</i></p> <p>WHEREAS this Agreement reflects the scope of expected areas of cooperation, and for which Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador may enter into separate agreements, including possible trilateral agreements, to support sustainability objectives.</p> <p><i>[Differences in the Preambles of the Agreements noted in italics]</i></p>

Table 3: Changes in principles with renewal of agreements in Nova Scotia

Canada-Nova Scotia 2005, 3	Canada-Nova Scotia 2008, 2
<p>Principle 4 – Promote long-term solutions: The two governments recognize the importance of this Agreement to achieving this vision and the shared vision of long-term, stable and predictable funding for Environmentally Sustainable Municipal Infrastructure.</p>	<p>Principle 4 - Long-term solutions: The GTF [Gas Tax Formula] provides predictable, long-term funding for communities, where communities choose projects locally and prioritize them according to their needs, while respecting the principle of incrementality and not displacing current infrastructure investments.</p>

Table 4: Format of the ICSP or sustainability plan

	Stand-alone plan	Covered by municipal plan	Added to municipal plan	Revised or new municipal plan	Unknown	Total
Nova Scotia	33	5	9	4	0	51
New Brunswick	7	0	0	0	0	7
Prince Edward Island	4	3	2	1	0	10
Newfoundland	79	2	12	5	1	99
Total	123	10	23	10	1	167
% of all ICSPs	73.7	6.0	13.8	6.0	0.6	100%

Table 5: Who prepared the ICSP?

	Consultant	Town staff with consultant	Town staff with residents	Unknown	Total
Nova Scotia	8	3	40	0	51
New Brunswick	3	3	1	0	7
Prince Edward Island	6	1	3	0	10
Newfoundland	49	11	33	6	99
Total	66	18	77	6	167
% of all ICSPs	39.5	10.8	46.1	3.6	100%

Table 6 - Types of visions from a sample of Newfoundland plans

<p><i>Municipal mandate stated ahead of the vision in most Newfoundland ICSPs</i> “We are obliged to collect taxes, provide services and represent the people we serve in accordance with the terms of our incorporation and provisions of the Municipalities Act.”</p>	<p><i>Generic vision</i> “To make Gaultois a town where residents have the choice to live and work while enjoying a quality of life equal to any other community in the province.” (Gaultois, population 179, produced by town and consultant) (Gaultois 2010, 5)</p>
<p><i>Growth vision</i> “The Town of Grand Bank will be a safe and healthy place that will engage it [sic] citizens, making it a vibrant community both socially and economically. With a strong foundation built upon respect, mutual support and open communication, the community can achieve its goals so that positive growth can be sustained. Combining our values with our vision of Grand Bank’s future promises to foster an environment where responsible citizens actively participate in the progress of their town.” (Grand Bank, population 2580; produced by consultant) (Edwards 2010b, 23)</p>	<p><i>Sustainability vision</i> “We envision Salmon Cove as a reinvigorated community whose citizens are involved and striving to create happy and productive lives for all who live here, including our children, our seniors, and our less well-off. We are endeavouring to build a modern town with clean drinking water and sewer services provided to every home. We are committed as a Council and as individuals to developing a cleaner and greener community. We have a rich history and spectacular natural surroundings that we cherish and will preserve.” (Salmon Cove, population 705; produced by town) (Salmon Cove 2010, 20)</p>
<p><i>Hopeful vision</i> “The Town of La Scie has a vision that is based on the community sustainability so that by the year 2015 it will be a better ,safer [sic] and more viable community for the people of this town. We would like to make our community a place where the youth don’t have to leave to get work. We would like a community where the citizens of the Town show more interest in the running of the town and running for the Election. We want to keep our culture alive to the youth and seniors of our town. We are going to try and see what can be done so that our community can meet it’s [sic] vision by 2015.” (La Scie, population 899; produced by town) (La Scie 2010, 6)</p>	<p><i>Specific projects vision</i> “Ten years from now, Massey Drive will be developed to its potential as being a community grown around promoting “Country living at its best!” We will accomplish this with the development of new playgrounds, resurfacing of our main road with the addition of sidewalks, crosswalk lights and street lamps, a multipurpose recreation complex and a new Town Council office. The new Council Office will consist of a Community Gathering Center, Fire Hall to support our growing Fire Department and fire protection needs, and a new Town Depot to support our staff. The combination of all of these priorities will create an extraordinary living experience in the Town of Massey Drive!” (Massey Drive, population 1170; produced by consultant) (Massey Drive 2010, 10)</p>

Table 7: Sample ICSP objectives and aims

Environmental	Social	Cultural	Economic	Governance
Adapt to climate change Protect water quality Designate areas for protection Reduce GHG emissions	Increase educational opportunities Provide recreational activities for youths and seniors Increase food security Improve housing availability	Promote heritage conservation Encourage cultural diversity Support museums and art centres Fund cultural and recreation spaces	Promote economic prosperity Revitalize downtown Attract new businesses Protect farmland Create sustainable local tax base	Ensure open communication with citizens Increase interest in municipal politics Ensure fiscally responsible budgeting

Notes:

¹ Fifteen economic development authorities in New Brunswick were required to produce ICSPs while towns were enabled to do so. Despite repeated contacts, we were unable to collect copies of guidance materials provided to communities or the complete set of ICSPs from New Brunswick. Only seven communities had made their ICSPs available online or provided them electronically while we were conducting the study. A recent list posted by the province lists 18 “integrated community sustainability plans and green plans in New Brunswick” (New Brunswick 2015, online). Based on all available evidence, we believe that there were no more than 180 ICSPs in the four provinces: we examined 94% of them.

² The interviews supported the broader themes of a research project within which our interest in ICSPs originated. For that research the team decided to focus interviews in St John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Halifax, Nova Scotia. No interviews were conducted in Prince Edward Island or New Brunswick. The question framework for the interviews was not specifically designed to elicit opinions on ICSPs. Interviews lasting from 20 to 90 minutes were conducted in person and recorded for transcription. We interviewed provincial, municipal, and consulting planners in both regions.

³ For more on Maurice Strong’s work see <http://www.mauricestrong.net/>.

⁴ NGOs and researchers also developed toolkits and best practices guidance for municipalities preparing ICSPs (Leung 2009; Ling Hanna, Dale 2009; Natural Step 2015).

⁵ Some provinces, like New Brunswick, worked through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to fund and coordinate the ICSP process via The Green Municipal Fund (FCM 2015). Municipalities often call these “green plans”.

⁶ To enhance the limited capacity for planning in Prince Edward Island, local governments were permitted to use gas tax funding to hire staff, with the level of funding diminishing over a 3-year period (Canada-Prince Edward Island 2005).

⁷ The one plan that discussed a 150-year timeline was in other ways relatively conventional in its visions, goals, and projects.