

# ICABCCI

Integrated Climate Action  
for BC Communities Initiative

## Learning Together Webinar Series Summary

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# Climate Change, Equity, and COVID-19: Considerations in a Changing World



**ACT** Adaptation to  
Climate Change Team





## Acknowledgments

This is the summary of a two-part webinar series, **Learning Together: Climate Action and Equity**, prepared and delivered in May/June 2020 by the Integrated Climate Action for BC Communities Initiative (ICABCCI) team at ACT (the Adaptation to Climate Change Team) in the Faculty of Environment at Simon Fraser University (SFU).

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ACT extends thanks to two invaluable ICABCCI advisors for their insights and significant contributions to these webinars: **Dr. Edward Cameron**, international climate justice expert, and **Emanuel Machado**, Chief Administrative and Resiliency Officer for the Town of Gibsons, BC.

ACT would also like to thank members of our **ICABCCI partner communities** for their participation and discussion in the webinars.

ACT gratefully acknowledges the support of the **Real Estate Foundation of BC** and **SFU's Faculty of Environment** for the development of this publication.

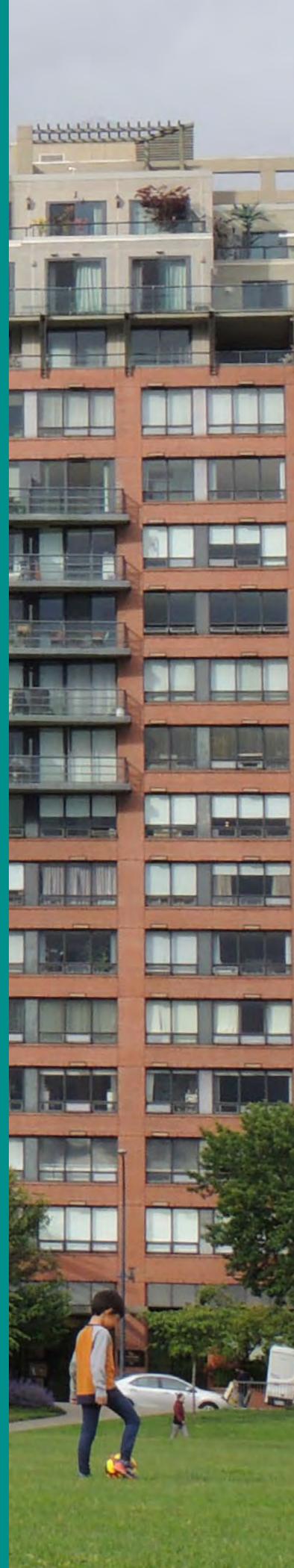
This report was written on the unceded and traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, specifically the shared territories of the **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish)**, **Tsleil-Waututh, x̓m̓əθk̓'əy̓əm (Musqueam)**, **Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Matsqui, Katzie, and Semiahmoo First Nations**.

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of people across the world, disrupting economies, shifting how people interact with each other, and potentially delaying plans to meet climate goals at all levels of government. Local governments already facing capacity issues have been required to pivot rapidly to cope with these challenges and address the social vulnerabilities highlighted by the pandemic, many of which, like the connections between respiratory health and air quality, are reflected in climate risk assessments.

Around the world, awareness is growing that recovery from this global disruption may offer an opportunity to build back better. Low carbon resilience (LCR) approaches that consider how to adapt our systems and infrastructure to climate impacts while transitioning toward a zero carbon economy are crucial to this endeavour, and must be made integral if efforts to plan, invest, and build resilience into the future are to be effective.

The Integrated Climate Action for BC Communities Initiative (ICABCCI), an initiative of ACT (the Adaptation to Climate Change Team) at Simon Fraser University, is working with local government partners across BC to integrate LCR into their decision processes. Following the onset of the pandemic, ICABCCI planned and hosted two webinars – one with our core partner network of local governments and one for a national public audience – focused on ways to learn together about the impacts of COVID-19 and what our responses can teach us about moving forward under changing conditions. Both webinars focused on impacts pertaining to social vulnerability and equity, which have emerged as one of the most pressing concerns of the pandemic, and how to respond in ways that meet current needs while helping to build long-term low carbon resilience.

### The Learning Together Process

The central goals of the Learning Together webinar series were to facilitate dialogue about the changes experienced in local government, share learnings, and identify strategic opportunities for action. Expert speakers from the municipal and climate justice spheres discussed the importance of climate action and equity in the context of both community recovery and resilience over time, with a focus on minimizing risk by building the capacity of the most vulnerable.

- Webinar One, *Pandemic Learnings: Strengths, Weaknesses & Opportunities*, hosted on May 22, 2020, focused on ways COVID-19 had affected ICABCCI's partner communities. The webinar provided a platform for ICABCCI LCR champions to engage in dialogue and share experiences with their peers and featured a presentation from ICABCCI advisor and partner community champion Emanuel Machado, Chief Resiliency Officer for the Town of Gibsons, BC. The discussion included details of and learnings from each community's

response to the pandemic, how local climate action has been affected, and the role that ICABCCI can play in helping to move each community forward to the next stages of recovery while building in LCR.

- Webinar Two, *Building Community Resilience: Climate Action and Equity*, hosted on June 10, 2020, was attended by participants from all levels of government, the private sector, NGOs and academia from across Canada, and featured a keynote speech from international climate justice expert and ICABCCI advisor, Dr. Edward Cameron. The webinar focused on the intersection of climate action and equity and explored the need to consider strategies that serve both in order to advance short- and long-term community-level low carbon resilience.

This report provides a summary of the high-level learnings taken from these webinars. It explores opportunities for embedding a deeper concept of resilience in a post-COVID 19 world, recognizing that recovery means selecting strengths and transforming weaknesses from the previous system. The outcomes point to the role that both climate action and a focus on equity can and should play in this planning and highlight the fact that we now have an opportunity to leap forward through strategic pandemic recovery efforts.

**ICABCCI partner communities:**

City of Port Moody, District of Summerland, City of Nelson, City of Surrey, Village of Slokan, Village of Silverton, City of Revelstoke, Town of Gibsons, City of Salmon Arm, City of Colwood, City of Vancouver, City of Prince George, Tsleil-Waututh Nation



## FOUR CRITICAL THEMES IN THE COVID-19 – CLIMATE CHANGE CONVERGENCE

Discussions in Webinar One identified four themes that emphasize the convergence between climate change and COVID-19, highlighting the need to invest in integrated climate action during the pandemic response and recovery period.

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*“The trick is to make climate change planning part of what we do, not a separate part of everything else.” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

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*“The concept of inviting nature back in really resonated with people, and it’s this type of bold and aggressive action that is needed for climate action. If we don’t mobilize quickly with climate change like we’ve done with COVID-19, we won’t see the type of impact that we need.” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

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### 1. Cascading and compounding risks and vulnerabilities resulting from COVID-19 and climate change.

Climate risks, such as wildfires, heat waves or floods, are being layered on top of the public health and economic risks fueled by COVID-19, each exacerbating the other. The pandemic has uncovered strengths in our communities – in preparedness, governance and agility – as well as acute vulnerabilities, for instance, among the elderly, Indigenous peoples and other racialized and marginalized groups, women, the chronically ill, and those with low or unstable income. Bolstering these strengths and addressing these vulnerabilities will also help to protect against the cascading and compounding risks associated with climate change and help communities leap forward toward overall community resilience in both the short and long term.

### 2. The benefits of low carbon resilience (LCR) interventions.

LCR approaches have benefits for risks associated with both the pandemic and climate change. For example, transitioning to electric vehicles and car-free streets mean less tailpipe emissions that form lung-damaging ground level ozone in extreme heat events, providing crucial benefits for respiratory health in both contexts. The presence of green space, such as parks and other forms of green infrastructure and natural assets, improves local air quality, moderates the urban heat island effect, and has emerged as a crucial community benefit during the pandemic, offering mental and physical health benefits for all with access to them during lockdown. Investing in nature-based solutions also reduces climate change impacts such as flooding and extreme heat while sequestering carbon, protecting biodiversity, and avoiding emissions associated with grey infrastructure construction and replacement.

### 3. The urgent case for investment in social resilience.

Applying an LCR lens to investment, planning, and project prioritization can help advance decisions that protect people, the environment, and local economies. Likewise, pandemic responses have revealed that investments in social infrastructure, such as support services and non-profits, help build critical adaptive capacity within communities. These benefits can be amplified if they include a strategic focus on benefitting those who are vulnerable to climate hazards. Investing in social resilience is a proactive community strategy that can avoid costs and damages exacerbated by inequity and alleviate pressure on critical systems during crises.

### 4. The increasing value of partnerships in cities and across regions.

The pandemic has expanded the mandates and requirements of local governments while reducing the resources available to them. Innovative partnerships with NGOs, the private sector, academic institutions and community groups can help fill gaps that federal and provincial governments cannot manage or in which they do not have jurisdiction.

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has given us experiences (e.g. living with less) and reinforced new behaviours (e.g. working from home), which if we can maintain at least to some degree, can help us with addressing climate change.”*

~ ICABCCI Champion

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## THREE KEY CONCERNS ABOUT COVID-19 AND CLIMATE CAPACITY IN ICABCCI PARTNER COMMUNITIES

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*“[I’ve felt] frustration -- the recovery planning has been led by council and emergency management, and climate change discussions have been left out of the recovery planning phase.” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

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*“[I feel] torn in two directions. On the one hand, it’s perceived that now is not the time to talk about climate change, but on the other hand it’s business as usual, and we’re still required to be getting our work done in the same time frames as before.” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

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ICABCCI community partners identified the following three areas as key concerns resulting from COVID-19 in terms of their capacity to advance the climate action planning they are engaged in.

### 1. Budget cuts and capacity limitations.

A majority of communities found that funds have been limited or cut for climate-related work, and projects and programs have been pushed aside, especially in smaller communities. This has resulted in budget cuts, staff lay-offs and reduced hours, thereby reducing the capacity of several of ICABCCI partners. Some of ICABCCI’s LCR champions had their hours scaled back, while others, typically on grant funding, were kept on to continue with their climate action planning work, but in a fundamentally altered organization focused on emergency management.

### 2. Community engagements halted or disrupted.

Planning dependent on public engagement and interactions with key stakeholders has largely been disrupted. Communities’ transition to and experience with online engagement has been agile in some cases and cumbersome in others: slow technical capacity and/or overall pandemic-related fatigue were cited as barriers.

### 3. Delays across the board.

Project timelines have shifted, policy-making opportunities have been delayed, and organizational processes have slowed, interrupting climate action decisions and opportunities to advance LCR. Few community partners view this as a permanent situation, but it poses challenges nevertheless.



## FOUR KEY INSIGHTS FROM ICABCCI PARTNER COMMUNITIES' COVID-19 RESPONSE

Partners shared key learnings and insights derived from their COVID-19 response that have relevance for LCR and climate action planning.

### 1. Municipalities can be nimble.

Despite the challenges outlined above, many of our community champions were impressed with how quickly their community was able to mobilize and meet a variety of different needs, proving that local governments can be nimble and responsive.

### 2. Emergency services and climate action tend to operate in silos; linkages need to be better understood and actioned.

The notions of hazard, risk, adaptation, and resilience are central to both emergency management and climate action, yet the two are largely managed separately at the local government level. Emergency management focuses on the prevention, management, response, and recovery of immediate hazards such as floods, wildfires, landslides, droughts, etc.; however, climate change is accelerating and magnifying those hazards and the risks they pose, and in some cases, as in that of sea level rise, creating new ones. While much climate planning is based on projected trends in the frequency and magnitude of hazards and extreme events, it is increasingly clear that these impacts are not just a future problem, but are already affecting us, and that climate risk management should therefore be included in current emergency management protocols, policy and planning. By expanding the concept of resilience to strategically address both processes, we can strengthen community responses to shocks such as COVID-19 and develop proactive solutions that limit the extent and cost of both current and future impacts.

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*...we can make resources available, we can be nimble, and take those learnings and apply them to climate change. It's proof that it can be done, and we can't forget what we learned in all of this. We're hoping for the space and bandwidth to handle more than COVID-19.”*

*~ ICABCCI Champion*

As of 2020, the Province of BC has updated its Hazard, Risk, and Vulnerability Analysis (HRVA) to require municipalities to include projected climate impacts in their risk assessments for emergency management. ICABCCI is exploring approaches for streamlining efforts between emergency management and climate action planning to help communities build capacity while also saving time and money.



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*“The city has been slow to recognize some of the most important needs, like the food system, and there is a need to improve the resiliency of the system.” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

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*“I made the connection between COVID-19 and climate risk and Council appreciated the connection –‘flattening the emissions curve!’” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

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### **3. Food insecurity is a concern in municipalities, especially as climate changes, revealing systemic gaps and the importance of partnerships.**

Disruptions to global supply chains from climate impacts such as extreme heat, and/or flooding and drought, coupled with impacts of the pandemic such as job losses and business interruptions, are compounding community vulnerability, notably in the area of food security. In many local governments, there is a window of opportunity to support policies and programs that enable local food production, which has the potential to reduce transportation emissions and contribute to community and regional economies. Food security is therefore an important strategy for building low carbon and resilient communities.

### **4. Tourism-reliant towns have been significantly impacted.**

The tourism sector has been impacted by COVID-19 in several ways. Many municipalities are hoping to make up for drastic losses in international visits by attracting local tourists but are concerned about these visitors contributing to the spread of the virus. Many smaller shops and restaurants have been closed at some point throughout the pandemic, reducing tourist options and aspects of local appeal. The tourism sector is also frequently impacted by climate change-driven events such as flooding, wildfires, and changes in snowpack. Generating strategic alternative approaches that respond to these challenges and support local and seasonal businesses, such as ‘buy local’ campaigns and innovative re-thinks of existing attractions, is a crucial way to build resilience.



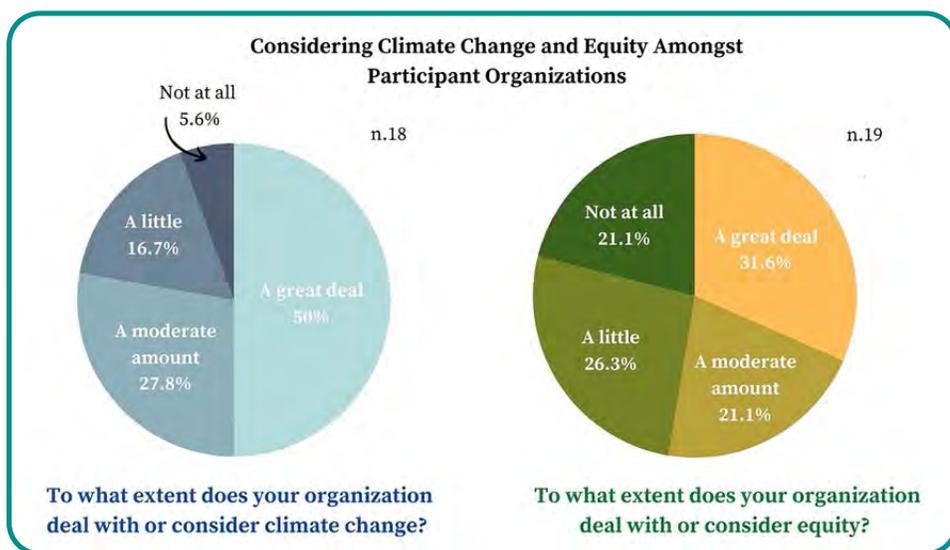
## THREE KEY INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN CLIMATE (IN)ACTION AND (IN)EQUITY

Three key conclusions emerged in Webinar Two about the intersections between climate action and equity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly highlighted the intersections between climate change impacts and action and social equity and justice. This section of the summary report highlights three key conclusions on these intersections that emerged during Webinar Two, which confirmed and reinforced the findings from Webinar One. A survey conducted with Webinar Two participants revealed that equity considerations have not received the same level of attention as climate action, and therefore that a crucial connection on building resilience is being missed. Investments in building a more just and equitable society will help to promote effective climate action through increasing overall resilience; the need to couple climate and equity approaches is clear and is demonstrated through the integrative thinking modeled in the LCR lens.



*“We live in the ‘decisive decade’, one of profound transformation: instead of returning to the conditions before COVID-19, we must pivot.” ~ Dr. Edward Cameron*



**Figure 1:** Results from a survey administered after ICABCCI's second Learning Together webinar show that, for a wide range of participants, climate change is considered and dealt with to a greater degree than equity.

### 1. Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic both exacerbate inequality.

Exposure and vulnerability to hazards are disproportionately skewed towards vulnerable populations with lower adaptive capacity, resulting in asymmetrical impacts. It is crucial to recognize and identify the compounding effects of climate change and inequality in public health and other emergencies in order to develop effective, equitable solutions and identify opportunities for preventative approaches.



## 2. Inequality and climate risk amplify one another due to structural discrimination and intersecting economic, social, cultural, political, and legal systems.

Research shows that low-income groups, the elderly, Indigenous peoples, and other racialized and marginalized groups, women, and the chronically ill are disproportionately affected the global pandemic. They are also, and will continue to be, among those disproportionately affected by climate change.

## 3. Improving equity of access to basic rights, such as safe, resilient and affordable housing, food security, and accessible childcare will have large-scale benefits.

Improving our collective adaptive capacity to withstand and recover from impacts is an investment in resilience to current and future climate impacts as well as the pandemic. Integrated climate action, if properly designed, can also improve the realization of rights, particularly economic and social rights. To achieve this requires a four-pronged approach designed to:

- Promote low carbon solutions to significantly reduce global emissions, and therefore future climate impacts, through bold collective action that prioritizes a just transition.
- Build community resilience to help manage unavoidable climate impacts, many of which are already upon us, with an emphasis on enhancing the capacity of vulnerable groups to anticipate, avoid, and recover from these risks.
- Pivot toward an inclusive economy and facilitate a just transition at the community and global scale, and improve access to financial goods and services, e.g., bank accounts and loans, to minimize the intertwined structural impacts of climate change, inequality, and vulnerability, and aid the transition toward a low carbon resilient future.
- Improve access to power and political conversations. Partisan politics are no longer tolerable. We need everyone engaged proactively in ways of moving governance forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Islam, S., & Winkel, J. (2017). Climate change and social inequality. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. [Paper No. 152]. Retrieved from: [https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152\\_2017.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Gardiner, B. (2020). Unequal impact: The deep links between racism and climate change. *Yale Environment 360*. Retrieved from: <https://e360.yale.edu/features/unequal-impact-the-deep-links-between-inequality-and-climate-change>

## FOUR KEY MESSAGES ABOUT CLIMATE ACTION IN THE COVID-19 RECOVERY PROCESS

Four key messages emerged over the course of the two webinars, based on a synthesis of the information shared by expert speakers and event participants.

### **1. Frame climate action as an entry point for risk management, cost savings, and building social, economic, and environmental resilience into the future.**

Municipalities will need to achieve more with less resources due to the economic and social impacts of COVID-19. Applying an LCR lens, with its integrative, multi-solving approach, can help local governments recover from the pandemic as well as prepare for future shocks, including climate risks. Climate projections and LCR decision-making approaches can give local governments more information about their vulnerabilities related to infrastructure, economy, ecosystems, and key sections of the population. This information can be applied in corporate strategy, community building, and asset/investment planning to reduce impacts and build low carbon resilience over time.

### **2. Link experiences and learnings from COVID-19 to climate action.**

Pandemic-related job losses and increased uncertainty for small and medium-sized enterprises have layered vulnerabilities that are compounded by climate change. Offering enhanced support to residents and businesses and investing in social resilience, while building capacity through enhanced supports ranging from community food security measures to mental health resources, are all needed now.





*“... there may be opportunities to improve messaging to the public and build a wider body of understanding and support for LCR.” ~ ICABCCI Champion*

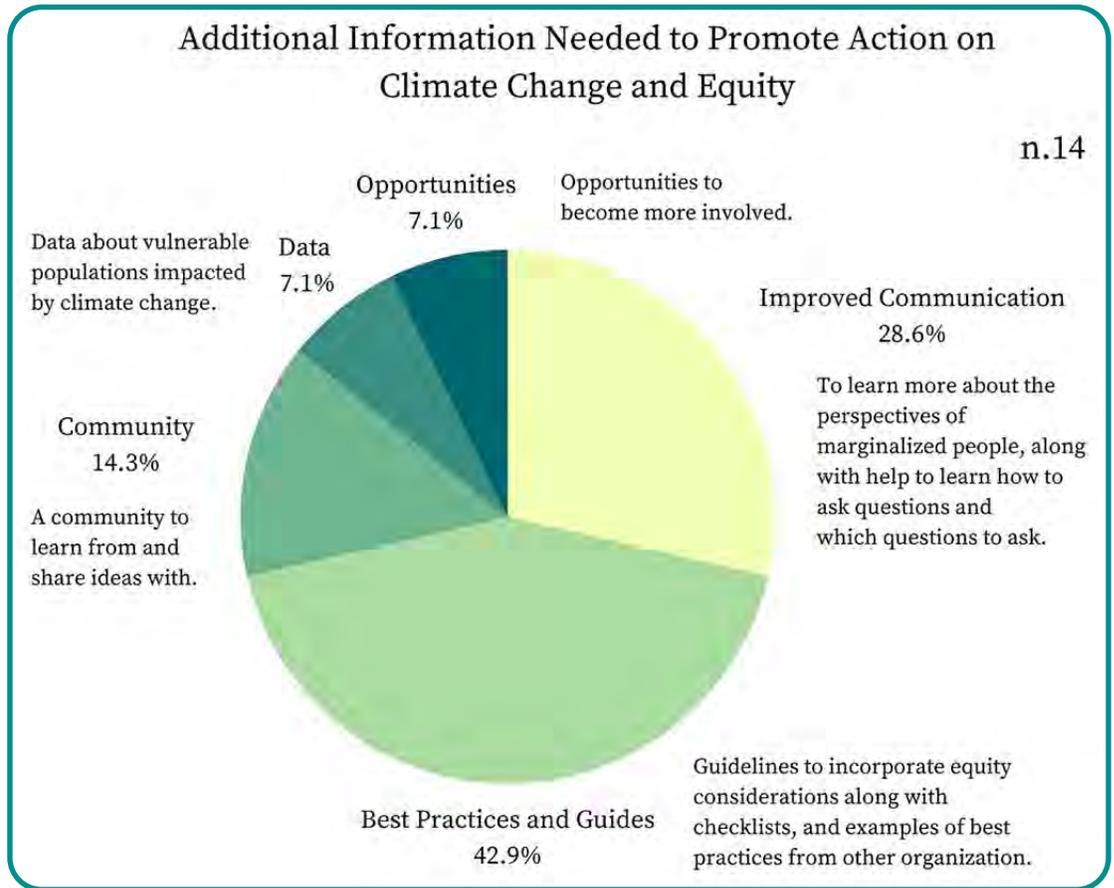
### 3. Elevate LCR approaches now.

During the pandemic recovery period, it will be crucial to build the capacity to apply such resources with the goal of building in resilience, rather than vulnerability, for communities into the future. ACT and the ICABCCI team are working with BC communities to develop tools that can be used by all actors in the climate action ecosystem to facilitate understanding and practical applications of low carbon resilience.

### 4. Adopt an optimistic vision.

It is important to move away from the language of sacrifice that has characterized much of the climate conversation, and develop a narrative focused on a society in which we create abundance that is shared by all, while developing more consciousness of and respect for equitable approaches.

ICABCCI is building tools and resources that help local governments and organizations apply low carbon resilience and equity in practice. We will use the needs-based survey in Figure 2 to guide and promote this endeavour.



**Figure 2:** Key areas in which ICABCCI Webinar Two respondents wanted more information to promote action on climate change and equity.

## CONCLUSION

The ICABCCI Learning Together webinar series provided opportunities for partner communities to voice what they had experienced during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for people across the country to consider options for integrating equitable approaches to climate action during the recovery phase.

In Webinar One, ICABCCI community partners identified significant challenges ranging from a lack of understanding of the connection between COVID-19 recovery approaches and LCR to concerns about food security; however, they expressed optimism about building back better and including LCR solutions in the process. For many, the swift responses of their communities proved that local governments can be nimble and adaptive. Webinar Two reinforced the understanding that COVID-19 has highlighted the need to address social inequity if we are to build truly resilient communities, and that a cultural and social shift is necessary for a transition to a world rooted in sustainability for current and future generations.

In this most decisive of decades, we can ill afford to return to “business as usual.” Instead, we must strategically plan for the opportunity to build in low carbon resilience as we move into the recovery phase of this unprecedented pandemic while climate change, and climate action, continue to advance.



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1. Islam, S., & Winkel, J. (2017). Climate change and social inequality. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. [Paper No. 152].  
Retrieved from: [https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152\\_2017.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf)
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ACT (the Adaptation to Climate Change Team) in the Faculty of Environment at SFU brings leading experts from around the world together with industry, community, and government decision-makers to explore the risks posed by top-of-mind climate change issues and to identify opportunities for sustainable adaptation.

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