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Embracing emergence: reframing and reimagining the visionary communities project

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ABSTRACT


Addressing complex sustainability challenges has encouraged a growing interest in community-university partnerships and collaboration. Transdisciplinary knowledge co-production (TKC), a form of practice-oriented research, is committed to embedding pluralistic forms of knowledge into various aspects and stages of research. This paper explores how a TKC orientation, and a combination of academic and practitioner ideas, knowledge and experience, shaped the governance and research design of transdisciplinary knowledge co-production research project, Visionary Communities, embedded in a marginalised neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. The first stage of the project involved 8 months of aligning academic and community perspectives to address governance and role issues, determining rules of engagement, a theory of change and a combined set of objectives and engagement principles. Academic researchers' ideas of sustainability as an emergent property of discussions of desired futures (procedural sustainability), generative of net positive outcomes (regenerative sustainability) and embedded in social and institutional practices (normalising sustainability) contributed conceptual underpinnings of the project. Equally, the project's community partners' experience working in and with community contributed a framework for understanding communities as a relational ecosystem of collective assets, formalised as the Connected Community Approach. Weaving academic and practitioner approaches together led to four major reframing and reimagining moments of the Visionary Communities project: finding and sharing resources, project development, combining theoretical frameworks and making climate change/sustainability co-benefits.

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1. Introduction

In 2024 we find ourselves in a climate emergency with a pressing need for immediate action to address intra- and inter-generational equity needs. Yet our traditional ways of working inside the academy and with communities are not fit for purpose when we consider the complex and emerging nature of the challenge at hand. In response, universities and their researchers have begun to embrace the language of community-university partnerships and collaboration, but moving from words to action into real partnerships means we need to rewire how universities and communities work together. Our research project aligns with the growing interest in the sustainability literature (Chambers et al. 2022; Polk 2015; Wyborn et al. 2019) in exploring approaches for researchers to work with communities in ways different from typical “researcher-led” approaches, which treat the world and society either primarily as a source of data to inform the research or as an audience to be convinced or educated by the latest scholarly findings about sustainability issues.

Increasingly, these community-based approaches are framed in terms of transdisciplinary knowledge co-production (TKC), in which new forms of knowledge and action are co-produced by researchers and community partners (Polk 2015; Robinson 2024). TKC-type arguments are rooted in and build on a strong history of participatory forms of community-based research (e.g. participatory action research, Reed et al. 2018; community-based participatory research, Shalowitz et al. 2009; action research, Wittmayer and Schöpke 2014).

A key distinguishing feature of TKC approaches is an explicit epistemological commitment to pluralistic forms of knowledge co-production, in which various aspects of the research – identification of the problem, development of research questions, methodological choices, the research itself and the research outputs – are co-created by academic and community partners. As discussed in more detail below, this has significant implications for how the research is designed and carried out, how the academic and community partners interact and where power is held.

Of course, not all sustainability research needs to adopt TKC approaches. There is much need, for example, for researcher-led disciplinary exploration of technical, natural scientific, or social scientific issues. Yet we would argue that when sustainability-oriented research deals with the future of neighbourhoods and communities, then TKC approaches are crucial. Adapting Fiorino’s three rationales for participatory forms of research (Fiorino 1990), we argue that there are normative, substantive and instrumental reasons for TKC research:

- normative: people have a right to participate in research that may affect their lives;
- substantive: community partners have knowledge, experience and information that is highly relevant to the research;
- instrumental: policy-makers need to build a constituency to inform the policies that are needed to support sustainability and climate action.

To this list, we might add three more reasons:

- procedural: centring equity, sovereignty and social justice includes acknowledging that the people who are the most impacted by the lack of sustainability and by climate change impacts are often procedurally excluded from decision-making processes (Williams and Doyon 2019);
- epistemic: community partners can bring additional knowledge and new forms of knowledge drawn from their lived expertise (Dusyk 2013);
- constitutive: TKC has the potential to contribute directly to the kinds of changes in individual and collective identity across disciplines and scales that are required to achieve sustainable futures (Dusyk 2013).

This paper is intended to contribute to the literature on TKC and community-centred research partnerships as well as community-centred sustainability praxis. In particular, we are interested in

how intellectual and theoretical perspectives in the academy that support a TKC approach can be fruitfully combined with insights from community development praxis to support research on sustainability and climate change that centres community priorities and aspirations. To that end, the paper will explore how a TKC orientation, and a combination of academic and practitioner ideas, knowledges and experience, led to major reframings and re-imaginings of a research project funded in 2023 and currently underway as “Visionary Communities: Advancing Desired Neighbourhood Futures”. The research is based in the Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood of Toronto, Canada, and the author team for this paper consists of academic researchers and representatives of the core community partner organisations working on this project.

The rest of this paper will be divided into five parts:

- (1) Description and discussion of TKC itself, its implications for research and some of the challenges it poses and opportunities it makes available to researchers and partners;
- (2) A description of the conceptual underpinnings of the project seeded by academic researchers;
- (3) A description of the conceptual approach to working in and with community brought to the table by the project’s community partners;
- (4) A discussion of the reframing and reimagining of the Visionary Communities project brought about by our attempts to weave academic and practitioner approaches together;
- (5) Some concluding thoughts about the value of TKC approaches to sustainability research and action.

2. Transdisciplinary knowledge co-Production (TKC)

2.1. *Forms of transdisciplinarity and knowledge co-production*

Transdisciplinary knowledge co-production (TKC) builds on, and goes beyond, interdisciplinary research. In so doing, TKC focuses on highly practical outcomes that are meaningful to the communities in which it takes place. It also favours the development of new concepts, theories, methods, or forms of understanding rather than approaches that strive to assemble or combine the results of disciplinary research (Robinson 2008; 2024). The challenges associated with this less disciplinary end of the research spectrum are magnified when the research involves not just communication, interaction and collaboration across academic disciplines, but also interaction with partners in non-academic communities, which is the domain of TKC. As with “interdisciplinarity”, terminology is contested in this field. So, it is important to distinguish among different uses of the terms “transdisciplinarity” and “knowledge co-production”.

Transdisciplinarity has sometimes been seen as a kind of meta-disciplinary approach, often associated with a unity-of-knowledge agenda (e.g. Wilson 1999). However, in this paper, we use the term transdisciplinarity to mean problem- and solution-oriented research incorporating participatory approaches to address societal problems, without any particular commitment to meta-theoretical integration (Klein 2015).

The different uses of the term “knowledge co-production” can be loosely grouped into descriptive and normative approaches to co-production (Bremer and Meisch 2017). Descriptive approaches, originating in the field of science and technology studies (STS), argue that science and society co-produce each other, and associated artefacts, settings, knowledge, social orders and power relationships (Hemström et al. 2021; Jasanoff 2004; Lövbrand 2011). In contrast, normative approaches to co-production focus on finding ways for academic and community partners to work productively together (Hemström et al. 2021; Lövbrand 2011). This paper adopts the normative approach to knowledge co-production.

Combining these two choices, the term transdisciplinary knowledge co-production (TKC), as used here, means ways for community and academic partners to co-create knowledge and action together to address societal challenges such as sustainability and climate change (Norström et al.

2020; Polk 2015), recognising that differences in resources such as time, culture/worldview, funding and power (e.g. to influence knowledge and action) significantly affect the ability of various actors to participate in equitable ways.

One recent conceptualisation of knowledge co-production for sustainability research defines it as “iterative and collaborative processes involving diverse types of expertise, knowledge and actors to produce context-specific knowledge and pathways towards a sustainable future” (Norström et al. 2020). Norström et al. (2020) suggest four key characteristics of TKC: context-based, pluralistic, goal-oriented and interactive. Taken together, these characteristics suggest forms of research and engagement with partners that are quite different from long-standing academic traditions that prioritise researcher-led forms of research and do not start with centring community from the earliest stages of the research process.

2.2. From researcher-led (more extractive) to reciprocal research

A key goal of TKC research, as discussed here, is to move away from more extractive researcher-led modes of research toward more reciprocal and relational ones (Table 1). The table is a heuristic tool for considering the types of information, relationships with partners and the intended outputs of these different modes of research (Table 1).

Most academic researchers are trained in how to operationalise the orientations on the left side of Table 1. This is much less true of the orientations on the right-hand side, which require a different stance and different research methods. In particular, the relational and reciprocal approaches to the right imply a (real or perceived) loss of control over the research agenda, which can be very challenging, especially perhaps for early career researchers whose career advancement depends to a large extent on their ability to navigate institutional expectations and incentives by creating an original research programme that demonstrates their individual skills and expertise. Juggling the disparate timelines, training and expectations associated with working actively with community partners and the academic, theoretical and institutional requirements of universities and funding sponsors adds complexities not typical of more traditional disciplinary research.

TKC work involves building strong forms of partnership at each stage of the research development and utilisation processes to ensure that the perspectives and realities of non-academic participants are captured and remain salient throughout the research process. Examples are:

- Co-creation of partnerships: the project purpose and goals must work and be meaningful for all partners;
- Co-design and co-evaluation of projects: joint development of project design and evaluation criteria;
- Co-production of knowledge: all partners are involved in the development of research questions, in the research process itself and in the interpretation of results;
- Co-management of research: all partners participate in the governance of the research project;
- Changing the traditional allocation of research funding to include the transfer of funding to non-academic partners;

Table 1. Spectrum from more extractive to more reciprocal/relational forms of research.

More Extractive	More Reciprocal
World as source of data	World as partner
Primary audience is academic	Multiple non-academic audiences
Primary products are academic	Multiple non-academic outputs
Researcher-driven RQs and methods	Co-design of research
Academic governance procedures	Distributed project governance
Focus on advancing academic knowledge	Focus on both academic knowledge and practical issues of concern to communities

Notes: We use the word “world” here to refer to both human and more-than-human reality.

Source: adapted from Robinson (2024).

- Co-implementation of results: there are multiple kinds of outputs and applications, both academic and community focused.

Since all of these processes give rise to outcomes potentially quite different from more conventional researcher-led research, TKC is often more an exploratory voyage than an opportunity to test specific theories or reach predetermined outcomes. However, such research can exist alongside, and interact fruitfully with, more conventional disciplinary research, which provides information that is highly relevant to the practical purposes of a TKC project.

From the academic point of view, when undertaking TKC research, it is important to be clear about the consequences and impact of this kind of work. Productive partnerships take significant time to develop, and a co-production approach has major challenges, including a loss of control over the overall research agenda and process, potential disconnection from promotion and tenure criteria, and potential dissonance between academic and partner timelines and cultures. It is also important to note that community partners do not necessarily share a culture but will each have their own distinct culture based on their purpose, sector, structure and governance models. Yet we believe that investment in such work also has huge benefits for both community and academic participants. These include much stronger relationships with partners, access to partner knowledge and expertise, opportunities to test theories and concepts from the literature and to be innovative, and the opportunity to unite knowledge and expertise to contribute to real-world change processes.

2.3. TKC: lessons from previous work

Several of the academic authors of this paper were involved in a previous project, called Future-Talks, a three-year project from 2016–2019 which proposed using TKC approaches to engage 100,000 residents of Toronto in exploring pathways to a sustainable future for the city. While this project was unsuccessful in obtaining funding, the partnerships built over that period – with a number of local sustainability, private sector and City of Toronto actors, as well as social justice and civic engagement-focused non-profits – gave rise to many co-produced lessons for transdisciplinary knowledge co-production, lessons which guided the development of the Visionary Communities project (The Beatrice and Arthur Minden Symposium on the Environment 2016, 2019). In turn, these lessons led us to co-create a set of proposed TKC partnership principles that underpinned the Visionary Communities project proposal, summarised in Table 2.

With these principles in place and our approach to transdisciplinary knowledge co-production laid out, we turn now to the development of what became the Visionary Communities research project, in which we have tried to embed a TKC approach and the lessons and principles derived from previous work. Since a TKC approach to research combines the perspectives and priorities of both academic and community partners, we begin with two brief sections on the theoretical and conceptual approaches brought to the table by the academic partners and community partners in the project.

Table 2. Proposed TKC partnership principles.

No net increase; mutual benefit – project work must not simply add to the workload of partners but instead enhance the pre-existing agenda of all partners
Both “enhance the project” and “build the community” – the project itself must contribute to the goals of the community it is located within
Non-academic partners are to be involved in all governance decisions; need to articulate and agree on partnership principles, theory of change, approach to research, governance structure, roles, workplan
There needs to be funding for partner engagement (time) and capacity-building commitments

3. The ideas and framing the academics brought to the table: procedural approach to sustainability, regenerative sustainability, normalising sustainability

While TKC was, from the beginning, the methodological approach to the project that became Visionary Communities, the academic partners also adopted several conceptual and theoretical approaches to sustainability in developing the funding proposal for the project. The first was a procedural approach that recognises the essentially contested nature of the concept of sustainability,¹ and sustainability's inherently normative and world-making properties. This procedural approach thus sees sustainability not as a predetermined set of science-based outcomes but as an "emergent property of a conversation about desired futures that is informed by some understanding of the ecological, social and economic consequences of different courses of action" (Robinson 2004, 381). From this point of view, sustainability must be negotiated for each time and place, since it inescapably involves normative ethical judgements and critical questions about who participates, who benefits and who bears the consequences of different choices (Robinson and Dale 2012; Romero-Lankao et al. 2016).

A procedural approach to sustainability itself says nothing about the substantive content of sustainability. Instead, it sets up a kind of conversational playing field in which different conceptions of what sustainability means or implies can be put forward. Given the contested nature of the concept of sustainability (Connelly 2007; Ehrenfeld 2008; Maggs and Robinson 2016; Walker and Shove 2007), the choice of narrative about what sustainability means in terms of goals and outcomes is an important determinant of what kinds of action get chosen or prioritised. A procedural approach to sustainability, an embodiment of procedural justice (Williams and Doyon 2019, 144), begs the need for fair, equitable and inclusive engagement and decision-making processes about the nature of sustainability challenges, particularly with individuals and groups whose voices, perspectives and lived experiences have historically been, and continue to be, marginalised. Aligning sustainability agendas with those of underserved and equity-denied communities, and ensuring the former lifts up the latter, is therefore paramount. Not only was this imperative a driving force in pursuing a collaboration with partners in the underserved community of KGO, but it also shaped the flipped agenda approach described later.

As a starting point for discussions of desired futures, we propose the idea of regenerative sustainability (Cole, Robinson, and Westerhoff 2016; Coleman et al. 2018; Holden, Robinson, and Sheppard 2016; Robinson and Cole 2015). Regenerative sustainability departs from a common limits and constraints approach to sustainability, which focuses on harm reduction and that finds its most popular current expression in "net zero" policy goals. Instead, a regenerative sustainability narrative identifies human activity which simultaneously improves both human well-being and environmental conditions.

Such a net positive approach gives active and deliberate attention to human and environmental circumstances, and their deep interconnections. In a time of deep existential angst about climate change and other very significant sustainability challenges (see Hayes et al. 2022; Wray 2022), a regenerative sustainability approach offers a more hopeful and forward-looking agenda narrative than is sometimes found in the sustainability field. While net positive outcomes in both human and environmental terms are not always possible in specific circumstances, a regenerative sustainability approach emphasises the interconnected nature of human and environmental wellbeing, and suggests the importance of starting with such goals, looking first for net positive outcomes. This is consistent with approaches based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Valencia et al. 2019), 11 of which are themselves net positive.

A final aspect of the approach to sustainability brought to the Visionary Communities project by its academic partners is the idea of normalising sustainability (Robinson 2023), which consists of three components. First, in contrast to a view of sustainability that focuses on creating system change by narrowing the gap between expected and desirable outcomes by reducing or minimising undesirable activities (e.g. United Nations Environment Program 2023), a normalising approach

recognises that there is no single baseline future from which we need to diverge. It argues that transformational changes are omni-present in the major systems within which we exist (technological, economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.) (Policy Horizons Canada 2018, 2022, 2023; Williams and Robinson 2020), though many of these changes are moving in unsustainable directions. In other words, there is no single baseline projection of the most likely future; transformational changes in key aspects of our world are already occurring, so change does not need to be created so much as steered in more equitable and sustainable directions.

This, in turn, leads to a focus on identifying and acting on leverage points (Abson et al. 2017; O'Brien 2018) and stepping stones (Romero-Lankao, Blanco, and Rosner 2023) that offer the potential for contributing to, and scaling, action that improves, rather than impairs, net positive outcomes in human and environmental circumstances.

The second attribute of a normalising approach is a focus on collective pathways into the future, rather than upon individual behaviours, technologies, or policies. Following the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we view a development path as

the complex array of technological, economic, social, institutional, cultural and biophysical characteristics that determines the interactions between human and natural systems, including consumption and production patterns, over time at a particular scale. (Sathaye et al. 2007, 700)

This definition suggests that what needs to change are constellations of actors, socio-technical systems, governance approaches, practices and cultures that make up internally consistent pathways (Burch et al. 2014; see also Sovacool et al. 2020; Williams and Robinson 2020). Social learning and trying out new ideas and approaches are crucial drivers (Dyball, Brown, and Keen 2007; Wenger 2000; Williams, Holmén, and Holmberg 2024), as are pressures from various external systems. Since the process is complex and emergent, we need multi-stakeholder engagement to make sure a range of relevant knowledge, viewpoints and cultural worldviews are represented (Norström et al. 2020; Polk 2015; Reed et al. 2018). In turn, this implies the importance of normalising sustainability, not just in specific projects but within governments and institutions themselves, by embedding it in job descriptions, performance evaluation criteria, codes of practice, professional standards, etc. This also implies the importance of working with and in communities with attention to context and power dynamics which will allow for reciprocal dialogue and of trying out mutually beneficial ideas and approaches at a community scale (Funnell et al. 2020; Head 2007; Janes 2016).

The third attribute of a normalising sustainability approach is a move from “persuasive communication” approaches to working with communities to what might be called “emergent dialogue” approaches (Antle et al. 2014). Persuasive communication approaches start from the view that we (the experts) know the story and the goal is to replace our audience’s incorrect story with the correct one. The focus is on conscious, individual behaviour change and the premise is that people are resistant to change but can be convinced. Such approaches adopt an information deficit model of behaviour change, which assumes that changes in beliefs or attitudes lead to changes in behaviour and that information provision is the key to changing beliefs or attitudes.

As noted, an alternative to the persuasive communication approach might be called an “emergent dialogue” approach (Antle et al. 2014; Westerhoff and Robinson 2013), an approach in which the experts don’t know the whole story. Instead, we need to collectively co-create it through processes of knowledge co-production involving many stakeholders across sectors and scales. The focus shifts from individual to cultural change and changes in social practices and institutional rules. A key premise is that change is omni-present (rather than something that has to be engineered or forced into existence), and a key theoretical perspective is a social practice model of normalising sustainability. In this approach, the locus of agency for societal changes shifts from a primary emphasis upon individual conscious choice (e.g. educating individuals about the environmental consequences of their behaviours) towards largely unconscious cultural practices that are carried by people within a social context (e.g. looking at the social norms that govern collective practices) (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Strengers and Maller 2015).

A social practice approach suggests that as long as unsustainability is the default, and we need to change behaviour, we are failing. The goal is to make sustainability the default practice, not the change goal.

In summary, a normalising sustainability approach suggests that change needs to be steered (not created) at the level of underlying development pathways (not just policies and technologies) in order to normalise sustainability (to make it the default, not the change). By working across sectors and scales and especially with communities that have long been marginalised from these discussions, this idea of steering sustainability pathways becomes a collective effort grounded in equity principles.

These three approaches – a procedural approach to emergent and inclusive sustainability, a substantive commitment to regenerative sustainability (net positive human and environmental outcomes) and a normalising sustainability lens (leverage points, collective pathways and default sustainability) – and their underlying commitment to inclusive processes and emergent dialogue provided the academic and philosophical underpinnings of the development of the funding proposal for what eventually became the Visionary Communities project. The values and sensibilities that the researchers brought to the table were also critical and included a commitment to a relational approach to the project from pre-design to design, implementation and evaluation, as well as an intent to make sustainability a co-benefit of the priorities identified and projects taking place in the communities themselves, thereby adding practical current value while exploring future opportunities. As described below, these approaches and a commitment to building trusting relationships with community partners who have deep roots in an underserved community set the stage for a dramatic reframing of the original funding proposal.

4. The ideas and framing the practitioners brought to the table: the connected community approach

Research suggests that most social science research is neither participatory nor action-oriented, and that even when it professes to be, community participation is often limited to data collection; commitment by researchers to action is time-limited and sits uneasily alongside conference presentations, papers in scholarly journals and other research outputs that are more highly rewarded in academia (Stoecker 2009), consistent with a “knowledge-first” orientation rather than a process-oriented one (Miller 2013).

While there has been much discussion and debate about the need to better engage with, respond to and include diverse communities in (sustainability) research, as well as acknowledgement of the many systemic barriers to doing so (in terms of organisational cultures and incentive structures, particularly within academia), guidance on how to operationalise such work is varied and field-specific, and the bandwidth (and prior training) of academics for this work remains constrained (Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle 2018; Bell and Lewis Jr 2023). At issue is not only the need for new understandings and practices, and incentive structures (signalling the need for both attitudinal and educational as well as structural change within academia) (see, for example, Wittmayer and Schöpke 2014), but also the need for credible trusted intermediaries with deep roots in community as skilful brokers between the worlds of academic research and those of (especially, marginalised) communities (Levkoe and Cutler 2018; Poland and Gloger forthcoming).

In an effort to move away from extractive research (see Table 1), the research in Visionary Communities brought together an academic focus on transdisciplinary knowledge co-production with the on-the-ground praxis of a Connected Community Approach (CCA).

CCA originated as a community development framework co-created by practitioners, residents and associated researchers to describe the approach that evolved over more than two decades in the Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood in Scarborough, Ontario. Faced with a myriad of issues related to chronic underinvestment and geographic marginalisation, dozens of local grassroots groups, organisations and institutional allies sought to design a collective approach

that leveraged the assets of many to create “by the community, for the community” solutions to the complex issues faced by local residents. The first iteration of the approach was used in 2000 to create the East Scarborough Storefront (The Storefront), whose role is to help facilitate local emergent and collective processes. The Storefront is the core community partner on the Visionary Communities project. Since its inception, CCA has evolved so that it can be used by communities and systems-level players like researchers, municipalities, or institutions to ensure that communities are at the centre of systems change efforts in ways that strive for equity and community agency.

CCA is a framework that sees geographic communities as the focal point for change. When working with a CCA lens, researchers are encouraged to see communities not as a collection of individuals that happen to co-exist in a specific place, but rather as relational ecosystems made up of people, organisations, businesses, institutions and government bodies within or connected to a shared place – each interacting with and benefiting from (or being harmed by) one another and the ecosystem, and having influence on its culture and norms. As argued in Brown (2017), an ecosystem is not a list of living things – tree, squirrel, bee, flower; it is the set of relationships between those things (the squirrel lives in the tree; the bee pollinates the flower). Understanding those community ecosystems is at the foundation of a CCA approach as applied to research.

CCA resulted from more than 20 years of work. It is neither sector- nor issue-specific. What unites practitioners of CCA is how they facilitate the development of conditions for transformational change with and in communities so that the overall results of the various projects and interventions at the local level will contribute to healthier, more equitable and resilient communities in which people have:

- An increased sense of belonging, inclusion and agency;
- Regular and meaningful opportunities to learn across culture and difference;
- Improved and seamless access to supports they need to thrive;
- More effective entry points to meaningful civic participation and the confidence to advocate for what they need;
- Increased trust in one another, organisations and institutions;
- Improved respect for and capacity to steward the land that, in turn, nurtures them (Poland et al. 2021).

Thus, CCA helps create the conditions that enable community players and systems-level players, be they social service organisations, municipal bodies, or academic researchers, to work together to simultaneously strengthen the local ecosystem and advance their specific project or mandate.

While many community-based interventions locate community problems in people and seek to build the capacity of, or change the behaviour of, residents who themselves have been marginalised, CCA takes a multiple scales approach to both support residents *and* build the capacity of organisations and institutions to shift their mindsets, policies and practices so they can more effectively strengthen the local ecosystem. These organisational and institutional shifts include:

- Removing barriers to opportunity;
- Unlearning racist and colonial ways of being and acting and replacing them with intentionally anti-racist, decolonising policies, plans and actions;
- Putting mechanisms in place for residents and professionals to design solutions together;
- Prioritising organisational and institutional capacity building and training of staff, research assistants, and interns to collaborate effectively and meaningfully across mandates and scales;
- Ensuring that strategies, programmes, research and funding intended to benefit community are grounded in fulsome and shared knowledge of the community context (Poland et al. 2021).

These conditions, both at the community and institutional level, are a critical and often neglected precursor to effective efforts that address sustainability issues and especially the intersection of climate chaos and growing inequities.

In a research project like Visionary Communities, the Connected Community Approach is a shift from focusing on simply understanding or addressing the needs or desires of individual community members to galvanising and building on collective aspirations, priorities, assets and mandates in collective action towards more desirable futures. Rather than convincing people (of the need) to behave differently, or getting them to “buy into” an idea or ideology, CCA provides a framework for building on what people care about, the knowledge they have and the initiatives they are already engaged in or willing to roll up their sleeves to get behind. Therefore, when using CCA, the research process itself is intended to add value to the community initiatives and projects in tangible ways (Figure 1).

As argued in Section 3 above, sustainability efforts need to be negotiated for each time and place, which is often not valued by academics, climate scientists and policymakers who seek to generate “generalisable” knowledge that is broadly applicable, rather than context-bound, so that it can be applied “at scale”.

CCA is both a theoretical and practical framework that the Visionary Communities project hypothesises can support context-specific sustainability practices that, when enacted in multiple communities in one geographic region (like the City of Toronto), collectively move the needle on systems-level change. CCA offers a both/and framework: intentionally and expressly taking an anti-racist approach by centring communities and their realities, aspirations and worldviews as the foundations for change, and engaging key community players and systems-level players in the co-creation of broader strategies based on those foundations.

CCA departs from other practices (e.g. information deficit ones; see Section 3 above) by creating tangible ways of integrating on-the-ground truth and knowledge with systems-level thinking, strategy and investment. It can help governments, institutions, businesses and, importantly, academics lean into their equity values by ensuring that their programmes, policies and research are meaningful to people who are too often on the margins. This approach posits that there are 10 keys that create the conditions that will “unlock the potential of a connected community” (Figure 2). The CCA 10 keys offer a way of organising and thinking about “how” researchers can engage with and in community in thoughtful, equitable and purpose-aligned ways. Pragmatically speaking, the 10 keys are an important touchstone for academic researchers who have been trained and rewarded to advance their own priorities. Learning to work differently is challenging and the CCA framework



Figure 1. What it means to centre community.



TEN KEYS

to Unlock the Potential of a Connected Community



Figure 2. Ten Keys that help research and researchers contribute positively to a community ecosystem (Connected Communities 2024).

serves as a vital reference point against which academic partners can return to ground their work in community partnerships and impact.

5. The visionary communities project

“Visionary Communities: Advancing desired neighbourhood futures in the Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood of East Scarborough” (Visionary Communities) is a collaborative research project brought about by weaving together the academic and practitioner approaches described above.

5.1. The neighbourhood

Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park (KGO) is a neighbourhood in Scarborough, the eastern portion of Toronto, where there is a concentration and overlap of poverty, racialisation and marginalisation, which means the people living here face multiple barriers to meeting their basic needs, to accessing resources and opportunities and to equitably having agency and voice in the systems that impact them. These are the issues that The Storefront was created to address. The Storefront is a community backbone organisation that facilitates processes that make the community ecosystem grow stronger over time by making sure that initiatives and people in or involving the local community have the support they need to thrive. The Storefront does this by cultivating a sense of belonging to the community ecosystem and a sense of agency to influence systems (both local and broad), providing

easier access to resources and opportunities to develop skills, and by convening players to share knowledge and work together.

The demographics of the KGO community, as analysed by The Storefront staff based on 2021 Census data,² show that it is both an incredibly diverse community, and one of the areas in Toronto that struggles the most economically (Figure 3).

Census data, however, only tells part of the story. KGO, like so many communities that have been marginalised, is full of creative and dedicated people seeking to make their community a better place to live and to work. While the above data certainly paints a picture of a community suffering from underinvestment, poverty and isolation from mainstream decision-making, the Visionary Communities project is based on the premise that sustainability research can and should seek out those who are rolling up their sleeves to make a difference and, while exploring the sustainability co-benefits of their projects, help advance their agendas and priorities.

Thus, Visionary Communities seeks to simultaneously support neighbourhood aspirations for just futures in KGO that truly reflect the priorities of residents, while advancing climate and sustainability goals. Lessons learned along the way will inform how the City of Toronto might advance just sustainable futures that are authentically grounded in community aspirations and actions.

5.1. Reframing and reimagining #1: finding and sharing resources

The Visionary Communities project came about after many moments of reframing and reimagining. Initially, the project was referred to as the Urban Climate Action Living Lab (UCALL) and was designed with the lessons of a previous unsuccessful research project – FutureTalks – in mind. As noted in an earlier section of this paper, Future Talks was also a TKC project and engaged community partners early on for the research design and proposal phase. Many hours over several years were contributed by community partners to meetings, writing and revisions in the development of a

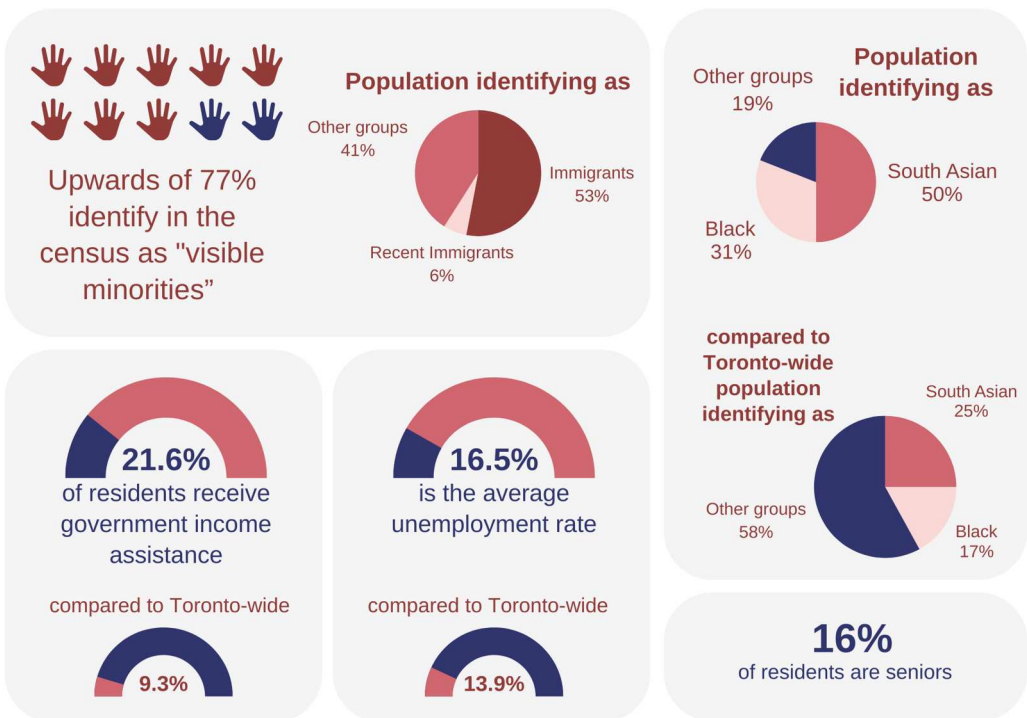


Figure 3. KGO demographics, based on 2021 census data.

funding proposal which ultimately failed, leaving community partners out of pocket for their time spent. Learning from this experience, the researchers created a funding proposal for the UCALL project, recognising that while designing research without collaboration is a violation of a core principle of TKC, the funding would allow for significant project redesign with community partners if the funds were secured. The proposal was awarded funding and the researchers could now approach potential community partners.

The Visionary Communities project is composed of a core team of academics, community partners and graduate students, as well as an activation team focused on momentum surfacing.

This “funding first, partnership development second” is the first moment of reframing and reimagining in the story of the Visionary Communities project. This moment addressed the inherent tension between the desirability of co-creating the project and proposal from the outset and not overburdening under-resourced community partners with the onerous demands of research funding proposals (many of which, in a competitive environment, are never funded). The approach we used, however, was only successful because of the flexibility of the funding agency. While the mechanisms for doing so are still somewhat difficult to navigate, the core learning here was that communities are better able to work with researchers when the researchers bring funds to the table with which researchers and community actors can co-design a project. This process of project re-design led directly to the second moment of reframing and reimagining. This involved employing a new funding model in which 50% of the resources went to the community partners: a model honouring their expertise and compensating their time in designing and implementing the research project.

5.2. Reframing and reimagining #2: partnership development

Once the funds were secured, the researchers formalised partnerships with key community partners the East Scarborough Storefront and Catalysts’ Circle, who became co-designers of the project. The partners were chosen based on several factors, including (a) existing relationships held by one of the researchers; (b) the facilitative intermediary roles each held within their mandates; and (c) the capacity and interest of the organisations in engaging in an emergent, exploratory sustainability research project. For the better part of a year, the team of researchers and community partners developed relationships with one another and reimagined the original, funded proposal. During that time, the researchers learned about the Connected Community Approach and the role of The Storefront as a Community Backbone organisation and of Catalysts’ Circle in building capacities for each of the researchers and community organisations to work together. Community practitioners at the same time sought to understand the researchers’ contexts, goals and cultures. They spent extensive time seeking to align mental models and conceptual frameworks, culminating in a robust project design focused on shared purpose and guiding principles and a dramatic reframing of the original project conception.

Early-stage learnings from this work suggest that integrating CCA into a research project supports more equitable partnerships between community actors (in this case, The Storefront and other community partners) and researchers, by spending time on developing shared principles and governance structures. The partnership is based on a set of co-created principles (Table 3) that advance

Table 3. Visionary Communities guiding principles.

Do no harm
Commit to and promote anti-racism, social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, reconciliation
Collaborate reciprocally so all involved experience mutual benefit
Adopt a community growth mindset where failure doesn’t exist – only opportunities for learning
Respect, celebrate and braid differences, worlds, worldviews, disciplines, lived experiences, desires
Move at the pace of trust and community, and ground all planning and action in authentic relationships
Embrace emergence by staying focused on our purpose and principles and adapting our actions as new situations, knowledge and learning get introduced

community-centred and Connected Community approaches. These principles are at the heart of the design, implementation and evaluation of the Visionary Communities project.

The extensive discussions of principles and governance led us to critically look at the language we were using. This resulted in significant changes in the language of the project. For example, the project was renamed from “Urban Climate Action Living Lab” – which (inadvertently) conjures notions of extractive research and metaphorically equates the community with a petri dish – to “Visionary Communities: Advancing Desired Neighbourhood Futures”. Similarly, the language of “living labs”, which is widely used in a growing literature on real-world labs, urban labs, living labs, etc., is consistent with an academic research mindset with regard to deriving and implementing sustainability solutions but is problematic in processes that want to centre community values, aspirations and priorities.

5.3. Reframing and reimagining #3: combining theoretical frameworks

Perhaps the most pivotal reimagining was the process of weaving practitioner methodology, specifically the Connected Community Approach, into the project and combining it with the academic approaches outlined above as a way of grounding transdisciplinary knowledge co-production in community realities. Combining the theoretical concepts of social practice theory, regenerative sustainability and normalising sustainability with the theory and praxis of CCA within a transdisciplinary knowledge co-production framework, we saw a common focus on centring community, building on strengths/positive visions and collective action.

The consequences of this recognition was a commitment to:

- Identify and build on existing work in KGO. All of our work must connect with, and build on, activities already going on in the neighbourhood.
- Identify strengths and aspirations rather than risks and vulnerabilities. The focus of Visionary Communities is on the positive activities going on in KGO to achieve more desirable community outcomes.
- Focus on groups and organisations active in the community, rather than eliciting individual views. We seek to identify the patterns of collective action in the neighbourhood.
- Support points of collective action. We want to construct a “heat map” of where the energy of the KGO community is occurring.

These approaches led to an approach to community development that centres positive collective action rather than individual need or desire.

5.4. Reframing and reimagining #4: climate change/sustainability as co-benefits

The final reframing reverses the relationship between climate change and sustainability, on the one hand, and community outcomes on the other. In doing so, it changes the way co-benefits are conceived. The focus of much climate change research leads with climate action and sustainability and then looks at if/how these generate community co-benefits. Putting community first, following the principles of CCA and procedural sustainability, means that climate action and sustainability become the co-benefits of pursuing neighbourhood priorities and supporting neighbourhood projects. With this reimagining, our objective became focused on engaging and supporting collectives already at work in the KGO neighbourhood. We wanted to find out what issues people and groups in the community were rolling up their sleeves to work on. To meet this objective, the first phase of Visionary Communities has involved deep listening and an approach we are calling “momentum surfacing” to help us understand existing collective aspirations, actions and community strengths in KGO. “Momentum surfacing” foregrounds what is happening in a community, who the local players are, what issues and projects they are organising around, what resources are available (and

missing) and how people and organisations organise, share information and generally interact with each other.

The focus on momentum surfacing moved us away from a needs-based approach to community-based work and research – which is most common in place-based sustainability living labs and experiments (i.e. a focus on what’s missing and what needs aren’t being met) – and, finally, to a positive, strength-based approach consistent with regenerative sustainability (and strength-based community development literature). The combination of theoretical frameworks used by the academics and practitioners – CCA, procedural and regenerative sustainability, as well as normalising sustainability and social practice theory – generated a framing centred on collective action. The result of this reframing is that the Visionary Communities project works on the premise that sustainability can be normalised via collective action, i.e. groups organising and working on the kinds of futures they desire.

6. Conclusions

The Visionary Communities project represents an attempt to deeply put into practice the principles of transdisciplinary knowledge co-production from the beginning of the project. This requires an unusual degree of partnership and shared governance between the academic and practitioner partners in the project. As discussed above, the challenges to fruitful partnership have been conceptual (e.g. how do we conceive of sustainability), theoretical (what are our theories of change), methodological (research methods vs. practitioner engagement methods), cultural (how do we work with partners, who is considered a partner) and practical (institutional constraints regarding funding guidelines, academic norms of research). In this way, Visionary Communities is a pilot of an approach to community participation, engagement and co-creation that is very different from those often used by academic researchers.

The shared principles of the Visionary Communities project have created the conditions which have supported both community partners to be fully involved in this project in ways that, to date, have been aligned with their missions, enhanced their work in the community, have not overburdened them with extra work that does not contribute to their organisational goals, and have honoured timelines that work for the community.

The approach we have taken in Visionary Communities has aligned better with what we’d like reciprocal community engagement and knowledge creation to look like by focusing on meaningful exchanges throughout the project. It has allowed us to deepen our understanding of the communities we work with, using both research and community development methodologies, in this case the Connected Community Approach, while simultaneously contributing within the community as a community backbone integrator. This approach values both lived experiences and academic knowledge, recognizing how each can enrich the other. (Rosana Ramper-saud, Community Wide Strategies Manager, East Scarborough Storefront)

Formal evaluation processes will be a core activity of the project and have recently begun. They will focus on a more in-depth understanding of the underpinnings of Visionary Communities. As of this writing, this approach of intentionally building relationships, starting with values and centring community through the use of CCA has helped make researchers welcome guests in the community rather than starting with the scepticism and distrust which can greet researchers who do not adopt co-production approaches. It is being paired with parallel initiatives to engage with key actors and departments within the City of Toronto, especially (but not exclusively) those charged with climate change mitigation, seeking to better align municipal decision-making practices with community aspirations and needs, and more fulsome, meaningful and sustained accountability of the City to the communities they are meant to be serving.

From an academic standpoint, the Visionary Communities process has fundamentally changed the goals, process, methods, research, partnerships and aspirations of the project. We believe that this way of working has given rise to new ways of conceptualising what constitutes a “research finding”. That is, the principles and practices arising from a process of co-production can themselves

be seen as findings, since they are connected deeply to pre-existing and ongoing activities in the community, and, we believe, to the prospects for positive community development and sustainability transitions. In this sense, we offer up the pragmatics of our partnership as a finding.

An early finding of our work to date is that there is a strong compatibility between practitioner principles derived from the Connected Community Approach and academic ideas based on procedural approaches to sustainability, regenerative sustainability goals, and ideas associated with the concept of normalising sustainability. In particular, the focus on a positive orientation toward community activity and development and on collective, rather than individual, agency was fundamental to the idea of momentum surfacing, developed in this project, and will strongly guide our work in the subsequent project activities.

Finally, Visionary Communities is a pilot of an approach to community engagement that is quite different from those typically used by cities, and other levels of government, when engaging residents on issues like climate change. That is, instead of leading with climate and trying to get residents to join the climate actions that the City, or the literature, has identified as crucial for achieving our climate targets, we start from what residents and organisations in KGO are focusing on, their priorities, values and aspirations about the future, using the Connected Community Approach to do this. Instead of seeing climate action as the main story and other priorities (such as food security, youth engagement, racial justice, housing access, income security and employment) as giving rise to potential co-benefits (that is, as ways of marketing climate action), we are putting those priorities front and centre, and only coming to climate and more general sustainability issues later (i.e. climate actions are the co-benefits of actions to improve the collective life of residents). Put simply, our hypothesis is that if we can't connect climate action and sustainability goals in positive and tangible ways to pre-existing priorities, issues of concern to residents and local projects and actions, we are unlikely to be successful in motivating climate action. Visionary Communities is an attempt to test this hypothesis in the context of the KGO neighbourhood of Toronto.

Notes

1. On essentially contested concepts, see Gallie (1956).
2. The Storefront staff analyzed 2021 Census tracts 5350364.02 (Woburn 1), 5350357.01 (Woburn 3), 5350364.01 (Morningside 1,2,3), 5350359 (West Hill 1,2,8), 5350358.02 (West Hill 7), 5350358.03 (West Hill 9) (Statistics Canada 2024).

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