**Digital Inclusion:** Community Access in Victoria

**A Report By:**

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**Letter From VIFA President**

Victoria Free-Net Association is a not-for-profit Internet service and systems provider. Under the heading of “digital inclusion,”[[1]](#footnote-1) we provide **support for all people to use the Internet to improve their lives.** We do this by operating publicly accessible computer networks and services, and by sharing the practices we learn through that operation.

Free-Net supports people and organizations in the search for the changing practices, tools and skills they will need to move from using the Internet in the delivery of community-based services to consciously and actively **networking their community so that it works better for everyone**.

As a not-for-profit ISP, Free-Net provides Internet access and hosting capacity at low cost. Our services include dialup & broadband Internet access, website & email hosting, server colocation, reliable server administration and programming, domain name registration, and mobile technical & legacy support. We are expanding services to partner with and serve not-for-profits, small businesses, and professionals to help them develop and manage their own computer systems and networks, as well as use Moodle training & learning centers, outcome database systems, e-commerce applications, online community directories & more!

Free-Net recently received a short-term Youth Intern Initiative grant from Industry Canada.   We used the grant to explore the future of community access and digital inclusion in our region, and Free-Net’s role in it.  This follows from the sun setting of Industry Canada’s Community Access Program (CAP) in 2012,[[2]](#footnote-2) and hopefully builds on the experience of digital inclusion that the community gained from that program.

CAP did not invent community-based Internet access in Canada. That occurred in 1992, in parallel with the first provision of public Internet access by community networking associations like Free-Net. What CAP did was bootstrap it.

In spite of CAP’s stated objectives, the problem of the digital divide was never about access to technology. It was always about addressing social disadvantage in the state of being online in a society going digital. The problem was equity. The need to address the digital divide (the market “demand”), like poverty, remains with us always. Every community now has a responsibility to address that demand, with or without federal support.

Over February to April 2014, we conducted a survey of current and future digital inclusion and public computer access programs in social service and not-for-profit agencies in the greater Victoria area, including especially the members of the South Island Community Access Network (SICAN). The survey was undertaken as part of Free-Net’s current push to expand its services to achieve sustainability through its core operating revenues. The purpose is to identify and engage with potential partners in or beneficiaries of Free-Net’s ISP services.

Perhaps our biggest finding is that, in the midst of a digital economy, agencies state, **“technology is a tool for their organizational needs, but not a goal.”** A problem of equity is still being framed as a problem of access to technology. That’s not true for Free-Net.The limited perspective revealed by that opinion underscoresSICAN’s failure to address horizontal collaboration and coordination as a priority. We missed an opportunity[[3]](#footnote-3) both to get a bigger bang for the money spent and also to prepare a network of community access services for the inevitable transition beyond CAP funding. Let’s not do that again.

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**Summary Of Findings**

This report was prepared by Cam Pasternak, a business student at the University of Victoria, for the Victoria Free-Net Association (VIFA). Industry Canada’s Youth Intern Initiative provided funding for the survey and its analysis. VIFA is the not-for-profit Internet Service Provider that created the South Island Community Access Network (SICAN) project as an umbrella for the distribution of Community Access Program (CAP) funding on southern Vancouver Island. The aim of the report is; (a) to examine the challenges faced by the public Internet/computer access providers in Victoria after the CAP funding finished, and (b) to explore possibilities for local collaboration on community-based action to address needs for digital inclusion services

CAP was started by Industry Canada in 1994. It was designed to bridge the gap between the Canadian public and computers and the Internet. Essentially it was to help support an infrastructure so that all members of Canadian society could access a new digital economy and society. In March 2012 the CAP program finally came to an end, having survived through annual renewals as a consequence of public pressure. This has left gaps in funding for community agencies that built up their computer and Internet access services and programs relying, in part, on the flow of resources from CAP.

The benefits to society from computer access are immense. It is simply not possible to be a fully functioning member of today’s society without access or the knowledge to use the Internet. Yet many people whose circumstances make them marginal to Canadian society have their disadvantage increased by their inability to use it effectively. The organizations and agencies surveyed acknowledge that providing public computer and Internet access is an essential service, relied upon by many members of the Victoria public. Despite that fact,, there has not been any recent formal community discussion about the challenges faced by providing these services.

The agencies that participated in this survey are found all over Victoria, with clients of all ages and social standing. Many people who use computer access programs do so because they do not have their own computer at home. In Victoria, there are many different services available, including everything from Internet access terminals to computer training programs to online employment search help. However, the end of the CAP program has made it more difficult for organizations to provide the same level of service as when they were receiving funding.

Lack of funding is the main issue hindering future development for computer access programs, as it fuels other issues such as lack of equipment and appropriate staffing skills. However, if some community discussion and collaboration between agencies occurs, the issue will gain exposure, some problems may resolve themselves through collaborative action, and cooperation in exploring alternative funding possibilities may follow. Additionally, a number of other solutions, including refurbished computers and use of not-for-profit ISPs like VIFA would help alleviate the financial burden on social sector organizations.

**Introduction**

**Background To This Project**

Victoria has lots to offer in terms of public computer access and Computer Access Programs. Citizens of many of the city’s municipalities can access the Internet from public sites free of charge in many locations (See Appendix B). The depth and conditions regarding the access vary depending on which location a client is visiting. Computer access terminals can be found at many different agencies within the city. Access can be found everywhere from libraries, community centers, to the offices of different non-profit agencies.

Computer technology changes rapidly with major advances being made practically yearly. However, many of the agencies providing access programs are using computers years behind the current technology, some even over a decade old. Many of the access sites exist because of a Federal Government “Connecting Canadians” initiative begun in 1994, Industry Canada’s Community Access Program (CAP). The program was created to attempt to bridge the “Digital Divide.” The goal was to provide an infrastructure to support community agencies in providing computer and Internet services to help ensure that all members of Canadian society were able to be included in and access a new digital society and economy. Up until 2012, the program provided funding and support for agencies to do everything from purchase computer equipment to paying for specific Information Technology support staff.

Although it emphasised access to technology over capacity to use the technology effectively, CAP was a crucial step towards addressing digital inclusion. It helped provide support for a variety of computer access programs in communities across Canada. The access programs varied among agencies, depending on community needs. But it enabled those who did not typically have access to computers and the Internet to learn computer skills, bringing benefit not only to themselves, but also to Canadian society and economy. As coordinator of the CAP program on Southern Vancouver Island, Victoria Free-Net Association created a project called the South Island Community Access Network (SICAN). SICAN was an umbrella name for the distribution of the CAP funding. But VIFA also intended SICAN to be implemented as a network of the engaged social service agencies. It never succeeded in achieving that goal.

In 2012 CAP had run its course. Its ending had a variety of effects on the agencies that had benefited greatly from the program’s funding and saw that funding disappear. It is no secret that the Non-Profit and Community sector is heavily reliant on different funding and grant programs. When CAP ended it had a strong impact on the agencies that had previously benefitted from its support. It also challenged VIFA to address the question of SICAN’s future.

This report serves as a means to examine the current situation of Community Access Programs in Victoria. Through the assistance of the Co-op and Career Centre of the University of Victoria’s Gustavson School of Business, VIFA enlisted a University of Victoria student, Cam Pasternak, to interview the different organizations that had previously received the CAP funding. Cam met with the directors or coordinators of these organizations and discussed the programs offered by their agencies, as well as the challenges and opportunities they have faced in the years following the end of CAP funding.

**Why Is Access Important?**

It has been proven again and again that the benefits to society arising from the provision of community access greatly outweigh the costs that providing the infrastructure brings. (See for example: Marita Moll. Success doesn't compute for the federal Community Access Program. June 2007. <http://tc.ca/cap/cap_crisis_2007b.html>). We live in a digital economy. It is impossible for someone to be fully immersed in the economy and society if they are not online. In an age when an email is required to apply for fundamental things like a passport or a job, there needs to be a larger community focus on ensuring that the systems are in place to ensure all members of the population have both the skills and facilities needed to make computer and Internet use a reality. Unfortunately, currently there are two main issues when it comes to bridging the “digital divide” or “digital inclusion”. First, many members of the population who are marginal to society lack the skills to even begin to understand how beneficial a digital presence could be for them. Second, the funding is extremely sparse for these types of programs at the agency level.

**The Challenge Of Meeting A New Basic Need**

Across the board, the unanimous problem identified by these agencies is that there has not been any recent formal community discussion about the needs and benefits of having community access programs. Their impacts can go much deeper than simply allowing people to access the Internet. They can help people build skills and gain essential knowledge to become more functional within society. Many clients who use these access programs are marginal to the communities where they live and face many challenges in their day-to-day lives as a consequence.

Capacity to function in a digital society and economy has become a critical dimension of community development. Social service agencies find that they cannot support their clients without addressing this change. Digital inclusion programming has only recently emerged as an essential function for social service agencies, and hasn’t yet been recognized as such by the parent institutions that support them.

Specific funding for computer access programs in Victoria post-CAP is limited and extremely rare. Many agencies within the city are offering their computer access services in internal competition with a variety of other services that also address basic needs. Agencies are usually absorbing the costs of maintaining computer use programs without receiving any additional external resources. This provides a challenge due to the already thinly spread finances within the sector. The question of expanding the services to address growing needs remains beyond reach This report outlines in detail the challenge they face in reaching the goal of providing all members of the community with the capacity to access and use the Internet.

**Survey Results**

The survey method involved face-to-face interviews with SICAN member agencies, based on a fixed set of interview questions (see Appendix A). This section provides a summary of what those discussions revealed.

**Client Demographics**

Computer Access Programs are available throughout Victoria. Services can be found everywhere from Libraries and Community Centres to the offices of different Community Agencies and Not-for-Profits. There are services available in all of the municipalities within the CRD Region (see Appendix B – list of SICAN sites).

The clients who use public access Computer Access Programs rely heavily on these services as a part of their lives. The average citizen of Victoria may overlook it, but it is a fact that there is a large portion of the population who are unable to afford the equipment and access to use modern essential technology like computers and the Internet in their own living space. These people rely on the services that are publicly available throughout the city. Another reason users rely on the use of public access computers is that the computers they have in their own homes may be dated and therefore it is easier to use the public ones. This is due to the fact that computer technology changes rapidly and it can be expensive for both individuals and organizations to keep up with the latest equipment.

While most of a library or community center’s computer clients come from the surrounding neighbourhood, there were some cases where regular users travelled further to use computers at a location they were more familiar with. For some users, travelling further is not an option due to financial or mobility reasons.

**Basic Internet Access Services**

The majority of organizations that once received the CAP funding have some onsite public Internet access workstations. At smaller organizations, it was common to have just one or two workstations, while some of the larger centres such as libraries have upwards of ten. Some organizations also offer a printer or scanner to use, usually for a small fee to cover costs.

In addition to the physical workstation computers, many agencies also offer free Wi-Fi for their clients to use (for example, please see< http://wirelessvictoria.ca>). Some of these networks require a password from the reception or a membership, but in the case of agencies surveyed for this report, users do not have to pay for Wi-Fi use. Wi-Fi is important because according to a study done by Google in August 2013, 56% of Canadians are using smartphones. (http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/smartphone-use-way-up-in-canada-google-finds-1.1384916) Wi-Fi allows these users to use the Internet without incurring data usage costs from their cell-phone providers.

**Digital Life Skills Training**

There are a variety of training programs provided throughout the city. At the most basic level, agencies that have public access workstations will help clients with any questions they may have about computer use. This is important because there are many public Internet users in Victoria who did not grow up using computers or have had limited experience with them and therefore may need assistance with very beginner level tasks. In some cases clients would ask how to do things such as: use the keyboard, or access their email.

In addition to providing sporadic assistance, some agencies also provide training courses for various aspects of computer and Internet use. In the agencies surveyed, these courses are offered to clients for free, but do require registration ahead of time. Offering training courses is a great way to get those who are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with computers to gain a better understanding of the basics.

There are a number of training programs oriented to finding employment online. They help those who are new to Canada or Victoria find work. Employees of these centers are willing to help clients with any questions they may have.

**The Effects Of The CAP Program Ending**

A number of agencies mentioned that the CAP funding was particularly helpful in allowing them to pay staff members to work on computer and Internet related projects, such as maintaining the public computers or instructing informational classes for the public. The ending of the CAP program affected the agencies who once received its funding by limiting those capacities.

Most noticeably, they are forced to fund their computer programs out of their own pockets. This is difficult for some as they are heavily reliant on funding from grants and the government and their agency funding is already spread quite thin. Agencies are now challenged to figure out how to become more cost effective in order to continue their programs. They are forced to continue using older and dated computer equipment, cut the number of operational computers, and perform maintenance and updates internally. Some organizations mentioned the use of external IT support from companies such as Dial-A-Geek, but mentioned that the high costs associated with doing so take away from money that could be spent towards providing services.

**Internet Service Providers**

100% of the organizations surveyed for this report are using Shaw as their Internet Service Provider (ISP). This ends up being quite costly as Shaw’s business accounts range from $60 to $260 a month. (http://business.shaw.ca/Internet/)

**What They Would Like To Do But Can’t**

Almost all of the organizations surveyed had ideas of digital inclusion services they would like to improve. Because of reasons such as funding or time/effort, their capacity to take action is limited. The biggest area for improvement here is the internal maintenance of both computers and servers. A number of organizations stated that a big challenge for them is ensuring that the computers have all the latest software updates and security measures. For a number of Victoria’s computer access sites, viruses and malware are a big problem. Computer users are generally not heavily monitored and sometimes lack the computer knowledge to avoid downloading viruses to the system. This can cause a large issue for agencies, as it is both cost and labour intensive to deal with viruses. These organizations mentioned that if more funding were available for computer programs, they would be more likely to be able to pay someone to maintain security and update their computers.

Other organizations stated that they would like to have more computers if more funding were available. Some agencies only have one or two public computers at the moment and these computers see regular use, sometimes resulting in wait times and time restrictions for users. Having more computers would help to eliminate these problems and provide a better experience for clients.

People are beginning to shift away from using desktop and laptop computers and beginning to increase the use of tablets and mobile devices to do their daily online tasks. Having tablet computers available for digital inclusion clients would be an excellent service. Tablets are a helpful introduction for people who do not have much computer experience, as they are usually quite simple to use.

**Plans For The Future**

Agencies feel a need to be able to provide clients with better, newer, and upgraded computer equipment. Since computer technology changes at such a rapid rate, clients are already one step behind if they are learning to use dated software and equipment.

Many organizations stated that they would like to provide expanded and different computer training programs. A common issue was that clients who use the public access computers often require assistance with basics, and providing one-on-one help from agency staff is time consuming and ineffective. Having an expanded selection of free programs available in the community would help raise the level of computer knowledge within it. However it is important for these programs to be provided in all areas of Victoria since many clients may find it difficult to travel to other areas of the city for a number of reasons including financial and physical mobility issues.

**Horizontal Coordination Between Organizations**

One way that could allow for new services and programs in computer access would be horizontal coordination or collaboration between agencies. Doing so could allow for the sharing of knowledge and resources and would reduce the financial and staffing burden associated with providing these services. This idea was difficult for people to visualize, as it has not been something that has happened much in Victoria in the past. However, the majority of people interviewed agreed that they would be willing to participate in such an idea if it allowed their clients to be better served.

Many organizations raised the issue of the cost of participating in collaborative approaches. They stated that while it would be interesting to see some type of horizontal coordination happen, it would be unlikely that their organization would have the extra funds to put towards it. They stated that technology is a tool for their organizational needs, but not a goal. When they thought back to the CAP program’s days, they mentioned that having a local “middleman,” as VIFA and SICAN acted, was very helpful in distributing the funding to the different access providers.

**Analysis**

**Challenges**

This survey surfaced the following common problems and challenges faced when providing computer access services to clients.

1. **Funding**

Though perhaps an obvious issue in the not-for-profit sector, almost every organization interviewed stated that one of the main issues hindering their ability to provide computer access services and skills training is the lack of funding available for these types of programs.

1. **Awareness**

There has not been any significant community discussion in Victoria on the subject of computer access programs. As this report makes evident, residents all over Victoria do rely on public access computers to complete important daily tasks and to learn new skills. The high degree of computer access in Canadian society and the capacity to use it are not automatically related. Discussions need to happen because they allow for input from different parties, which can help facilitate the creation of new services and programs in the area of digital inclusion. They can identify shared approaches to the improvement of existing services within the limits of existing resources. They can highlight the importance of digital inclusion programs, possibly pointing the way to alternative funding sources.

1. **Equipment**

Computer equipment presents a challenge in two ways: it becomes dated and depreciates quickly, and it is costly to have multiple units. It is also expensive to ensure that computers are kept up to date with the latest updates and security fixes. Security updates for software and operating systems get released quite frequently, and take time and effort to monitor and implement. In addition, software licenses often require monthly or yearly payments to licence software in a commercial or public use setting.

1. **Staffing**

Both the agencies providing Internet access and training services and the external agencies supporting them have largely underestimated the need for in-house capacity in systems management to sustain those services. Operating and maintaining computer access services requires staff members with extensive computer knowledge and the time to dedicate to the maintenance and installation of these services. In smaller organizations, staff members are often wearing multiple hats as it is and might not have the spare time required to operate and maintain extra computer services.

**Solutions**

1. **Collaboration**

Collaboration is an effective way to share resources and expertise among organizations. Since computer technology is expensive, collaboration is one way to spark new ideas and find ways to better serve clients. It increases the exposure to the issues.

In the area of public computer access, there could be huge benefits for community agencies to partner with people outside of their typical sector, such as computer programmers or computer science students. The technology scene is booming in Victoria and it could be beneficial for the social service sector to seek partners within it.

1. **Discussion Forums**

In addition to collaboration, agencies with in the social services sector would benefit from having discussions on public access computer programs. Currently, this is a topic that does not see enough discussion in mainstream media or among organizations. Most agencies agreed that having computer access is an essential service, and that their clients rely on it, but little is being done in terms of discussion to determine the future of these programs and the future development of similar programs.

1. **Refurbished Computers**

Organizations commonly state they would like to have more computers. Although some noted that the cost of computers has come down in recent years, it is still difficult for organizations to justify the cost of purchasing new computers for their staff, let alone public use.

Many for-profit companies have a large turnover in the computers they provide for their staff. When those companies decide to upgrade, there are several services that either re-cycle or refurbish those computers (for example, Computers for Schools). This is an underutilized potential source for not-for-profit and community agencies to obtain computers without the problem of the high price of new ones. But the links between these services and social services agencies are largely non-existent. There are already some computer stores in Victoria who specialize in selling refurbished computers for low costs. For example, Gizmo’s Computers advertises systems with Windows 7 from $129 (http://www.gizmos.ca/). However, even at this price, not all agencies in Victoria would be able to afford to purchase more computers. If there was enough pressure and collaboration, it would not be unlikely that a organization could be set up to partner with for-profit companies and establish a distribution channel for their “old” no longer needed computers.

1. **Not-For-Profit ISPs**

According to the organizations surveyed, Shaw currently provides Internet for almost all of the CAP sites. As previously stated, this monopolistic situation is expensive and is not beneficial for the operation of digital inclusion programs. The development and operation of not-for-profit ISP services such as those provided by VIFA could be beneficial to agencies in the social services sector, allowing them to provide services at a lower cost.

**Appendix A: Questionnaire/Method**

The following questions were asked to the directors/staff of the agencies surveyed for this report:

1. Who are your primary clients?
2. Do you provide Internet access workstations or wireless access for your clients and/or the public?
3. Do you provide basic digital life skills training?
4. Did or how did the sun setting of the CAP program affect your provision of these services?
5. If access is wireless, are you on, or willing to let us add your location to the Free-Net wireless hotspots map? ([www.wirelessvictoria.ca](http://www.wirelessvictoria.ca))
6. Do you provide low cost or no cost refurbished computers to clients and if so what is your source?
7. Who provides your ISP services and are we competitive with them?
8. In your internal uses of Information and communication technologies (ICTs for the provision of services (your in-house IT capacity), is there anything you’d like to do but can’t?
9. Where do you intend to take the Internet based services you provide in the future?
10. SICAN’s horizontal coordination of digital inclusion programs in the victoria region was marginal. Do you see any need to explore a greater degree of horizontal coordination and its benefit and, if so, in what direction or based on what priorities and essential capacities?

**Appendix B: SICAN sites at the end of CAP**

The following is a list of the SICAN sites at the time the CAP program concluded. This list of organizations located around Southern Vancouver Island was compiled from: http://sican.tc.ca/locations.php. For more detailed information, such as hours and addresses, please visit the website.

**Central Saanich**

Central Saanich Branch, Greater Victoria Public Library (GVPL)

**Chemainus**

Chemainus Branch, Vancouver Island Regional Library (VIRL)

Chemainus Chamber of Commerce

Chemainus Community Schools Association

**Colwood**

Juan De Fuca Branch, GVPL

**Duncan**

Cowichan Branch, VIRL

Cowichan Valley Independent Living Resource Centre

**Esquimalt**

Esquimalt Branch, GVPL

**Gabriola Island**

Gabriola Island Branch, VIRL

**Galiano Island**

Galiano Community Library

Galiano Island Activity Centre

**Honeymoon Bay**

Honeymoon Bay Community Hall

**Ladysmith**

Chemainus Native College/Stu”ate Lelum School

Ladysmith Branch, VIRL

Ladysmith Resource Centre Association

**Lake Cowichan**

Cowichan Lake Branch, VIRL

Cowichan Lake District Chamber of Commerce

**Langford**

Goudy Branch, GVPL

WestShore Centre for Learning & Training

**Metchosin**

Metchosin Community House

**Mill Bay**

South Cowichan Branch, VIRL

**Nanaimo**

Nanaimo Harbourfront Branch, VIRL

Wellington Branch, VIRL

**Oak Bay**

Oak Bay Branch, GVPL

**Pender Island**

Pender Island Public Library

**Port Renfrew**

Port Renfrew Branch, VIRL

Port Renfrew Health and Social Services Society

**Saanich**

Big Blue and Cousins

Bruce Hutchison Branch, GVPL

Emily Carr Branch, GVPL

Nellie McClung Branch, GVPL

Royal Oak Community Access

Saanich Centennial Library, GVPL

Ukrainian Cultural Centre

Victoria Native Friendship Centre

**Saltspring Island**
Core Inn Youth Project Society

Mary Hawkins Memorial Library

**Saturna Island**

Eddie Reid Memorial Library

Saturna #1 Internet Café

Saturna Recreation Centre

**Sidney**

Individual Learning Centre – Sidney

Sidney/North Saanich Branch, VIRL

**Sooke**

Sooke Branch, VIRL

Sooke Senior Drop-in Centre

**Thetis Island**

Thetis Island Community Centre

**Victoria**

Bayanihan Centre
Blanshard Community Centre

Bridges for Women Society

Burnside Gorge Community Association

Central Library, GVPL

Disability Resource Centre

Downtown Community Activity Centre

Fairfield Community Place

Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group

Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria

James Bay Community Project

James Bay Community School Society

James Bay New Horizons Society

La Societe Francophone de Victoria

Literacy Victoria

Oaklands Community Centre

Our Place

Salvation Army – Harbourlight

Salvation Army Family Services

Silver Threads – Downtown

**View Royal**

Shoreline Community School

Songhees First Nation

View Royal Community Library Association

**Youbou**

Youbou Access to Computers

1. Garth Graham. **Towards a National Strategy for Digital Inclusion.** A discussion document adopted by Telecommunities Canada (TC) to support participation in public forums on the role of broadband in social change. January 19, 2010. <http://tc.ca/digital_inc4.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The reasons for ending CAP are outlined in: Audit and Evaluation Branch, Industry Canada. Final Evaluation of the Community Access Program. September 2009. That report states, “*In the main, Industry Canada's current priorities tend to emphasize household access through the development of broadband infrastructure, rather than public access at the community level…. Internet access and use has increased significantly since the creation of CAP in the mid-1990's, with ninety-four percent (94%) of Canadians now living in a community where broadband is available for purchase. The Government of Canada is now placing greater reliance on private sector mechanisms and household access over public initiatives and public access.”*

<<https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/ae-ve.nsf/eng/03127.html>> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There was a session on regional responsibilities for networking access services at a SICAN CAP workshop, February 20, 2004, titled, “Where Are We Going? – Our Cap Future.” It concluded: *“At the “network” level, how to reach agreement on processes for shared approaches to planning is not yet clear. “SICAN” as a concept is still a “they” that is separate from the “us” of those who provide public internet access services. Responding to those stated network level needs in an open and participatory manner might grow a sense of shared planning responsibility step by step.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)