



DTES Information Hub Survey Project

Summary Report

December 2015



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An initiative of Ecotrust Canada
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Summary Report: **The Downtown Eastside Information Hub Survey**

*Mapping the continuum of income-generating opportunities
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside*

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This study was conducted on behalf of the Vancouver Urban Core Community Workers' Association and the University of British Columbia, with support from the Local Economic Development Lab, an initiative of Ecotrust Canada and RADIUS SFU.



Introduction

The Downtown Eastside (DTES) Information Hub Survey sought to engage non-profit organizations and social enterprises around their provision of income-generating opportunities. The Vancouver Urban Core Community Workers Association (Urban Core) initiated the DTES Information Hub Survey project to (1) understand and map the income-generation continuum and (2) inform future strategic planning and advocacy decisions around improving labour force engagement among community members. This research study was undertaken in partnership with the UBC Learning Exchange, and the Local Economic Development (LED) Lab, an initiative of Ecotrust Canada and RADIUS SFU.

Twenty-seven DTES non-profit organizations and social enterprises were interviewed on their provision of income-generating opportunities. Participants were asked to outline the types of opportunities they provide, their recruitment and hiring practices, the benefits of income-generating opportunities to DTES community members, challenges and barriers to income-generation in the community, and their local procurement practices.



The income-generation continuum

Income-generation has a variety of positive impacts on the lives of DTES community members. Participants noted that through their involvement in the provision of income-generating opportunities, they have observed marked advancements in DTES community members' personal and self-esteem development, financial independence, physical, mental, and emotional health, professional and educational

advancement, sense of community and societal belonging, self-expression and advocacy, and ability to leave unsafe living conditions. Income-generation, and its associated benefits, is seen as one meaningful way of addressing the long-standing poverty experienced in Vancouver’s DTES.

Research findings suggest that ensuring sufficient supports and incentives are in place will ensure successful transition into the labour force. Consisting of three phases (Figure 1), the continuum highlights the supports, training, and diverse types of income-generating opportunities required to empower labour force engagement and realize the benefits associated with income-generation. It is important to note that the phases of the continuum are by no means static and independent. Instead, the income-generation continuum is fluid and phases overlap, and each phase is dependent on the other (i.e. one cannot successfully engage in the labour force without having their basic needs and skills in place).

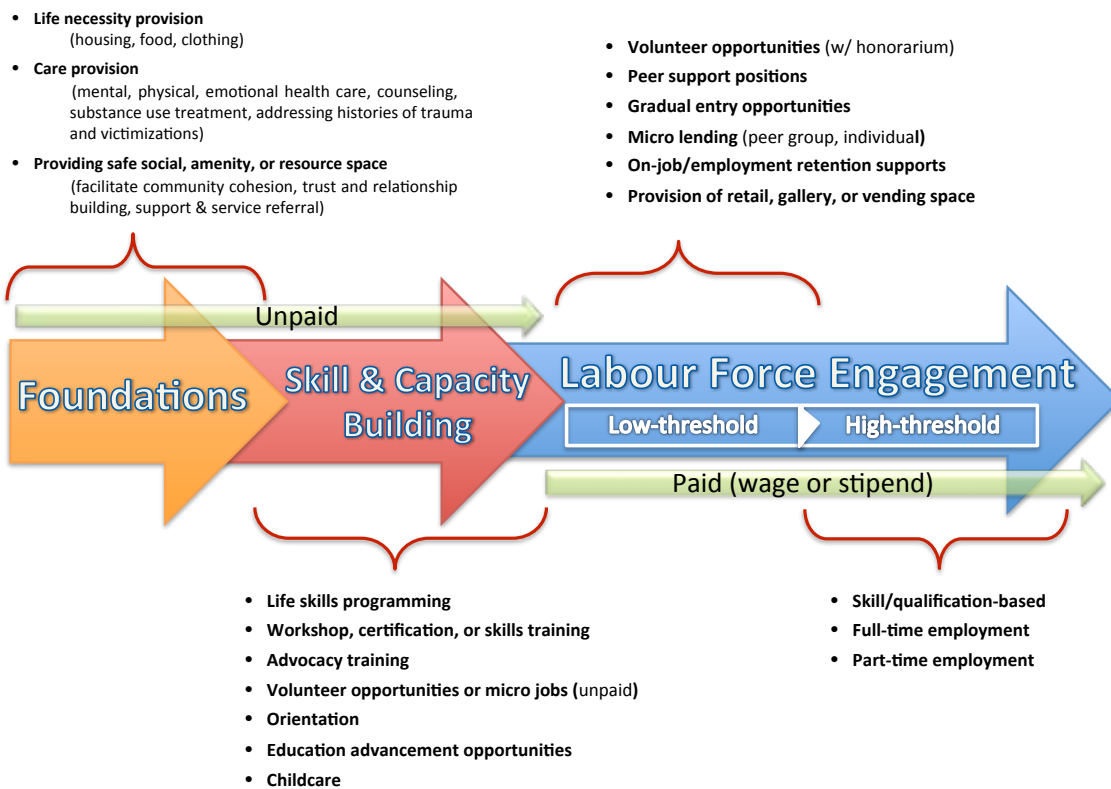


Figure 1. Income-generation continuum (based on DTES Information Hub Survey Findings)



Barriers to DTES community members

Individuals experience different barriers depending on where they lie on the income-generation continuum.

At the “Foundation” phase, significant barriers are DTES community members’ health limitations, poverty, and stigma. Health limitations, whether physical, mental, emotional, or other, create significant impediments to engaging in relevant programming, training or educational advancement opportunities, and income-generating opportunities. Poverty and stigma compound the difficulties faced by community members by affecting self-worth and self-esteem, and one’s ability to develop the confidence to engage in the labour force.

Participants discussed the need for a holistic model of care alongside the income-generation continuum. This entails the provision of necessary health care supports; the provision of stable, safe, and quality, and affordable housing; improved availability of affordable and nutritious food options; and access to safe community space that is conducive to developing stronger community ties and societal belonging.

At the “Skills & Capacity” and “Labour Force Engagement” phases, significant barriers include accessing or applying to agencies due to low confidence and self-esteem; difficulties in partaking in traditional application processes and meeting criminal record and substance use requirements; previously experienced rejection or denial; a lack of job-specific skills and engagement capacity, etc. Participants believe that income-generating opportunities must range from low- to high-threshold in order to meet the diverse needs of DTES community members and their capacity levels.

Numerous success stories demonstrating the transition of DTES community members into the labour force exist among the community organizations that participated in this study. In looking to these examples, Urban Core can prove that engaging DTES community members in the labour force returns significant benefits to the DTES community.



Barriers to community organizations

While arguments are made for the proliferation of a wider range of opportunities, many of the organizations involved in the provision of sensitive, low-threshold opportunities face significant challenges. Community organizations are constrained by budgetary demands that arise from supporting community members' transition into the labour force, remaining profitable, and/or vying for funding and limited resources among a competitive environment. This strains relationships between organizations and access to physical, financial, and human resources.

Participants recommended that Urban Core attempt to bridge the gap between community organizations and improve the sharing of resources, space, and knowledge. Instead of expending limited energy on competing with one another, organizations should develop stronger relationships and work collectively to demonstrate how providing income-generating opportunities to DTES community members not only benefits community, but also the respective organizations and society as a whole. Urban Core's role as a neutral community convener puts it into a unique position to facilitate collaborative and meaningful dialogue.



Systemic policy barriers

In addition to challenges faced by individuals and community organizations, participants acknowledged that municipal and provincial government policies also negatively impact the income-generation continuum. These policies were seen to have disempowering effects on community members and impede their engagement in the labour force.



At the municipal level, zoning by-laws, the treatment of social enterprises as traditional businesses, and the lack of policy innovation were seen as barriers to the proliferation of income-generating opportunities in the DTES. Participants suggested the City of Vancouver could be more innovative by introducing policies or by-laws that facilitate the growth of social enterprises and non-profit organizations involved in the provision of income-generating opportunities. Examples policy innovations include: the establishment of a tax, rent, and utility incentives or rebates that encourage the establishment of social enterprises that procure locally, the creation of a 'buy social' zone in Vancouver's DTES, and increased policy experimentation and flexibility to facilitate entrepreneurship among DTES community members and the proliferation of peer-driven enterprises.

In terms of provincial policies, participants felt that current income assistance rates and earning exemptions were outdated and impeded on DTES community members' engagement in the labour force. Current provincial definitions of income-generation and an overemphasis on full-time employment ignore the barriers faced by community members and the benefits of low-threshold and gradual entry income-generating opportunities. Contract tendering models for non-profit organizations, and an emphasis on billable services create gaps and redundancies in services and result in short-term benefits with long-term inefficiencies. The provincial government must engage key community stakeholders to redefine 'employment' and income-generation while consulting with key community stakeholders to design and establish community-centred and peer informed public policy.



Conclusion

As a neutral convener of community organizations, Urban Core is in a position to facilitate dialogue and call for action on the barriers to income generation in the DTES. By engaging multiple stakeholders from the DTES community, non-profit and for-profit organizations, and all levels of government, Urban Core can act as a platform for dialogue and collective action for the improvement of access to income-generating opportunities and increased engagement in the labour force.



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