

Engaging Low-Income Residents in Climate Action

*A collaboration between the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region and
cChange, Norway*

Andres Fuentes Martinez
Laura Hamilton
Aleksandra Petrovic

The [Social Development Center Waterloo Region \(SDCWR\)](#) has a strong track record of engaging citizens from underserved communities in the Waterloo Region. It works with partners such as Divest Waterloo, a local chapter of [Faith & the Common Good](#), interested in seeing this mobilisation project evolve in Canada. Locally, SDCWR's Civic Hub Waterloo Region initiative engaged participants from lower income households and racialized communities whose daily struggles intersect with sustainability challenges, and who may not be currently engaged with the climate issues. We have identified that an effort needs to be made to build bridges across the economic spectrum and bring everyone into sustainability and climate justice conversations. It is essential that citizens and communities play a role in the green transition towards social and economic post pandemic recovery.

A project like this, where diverse participants can experiment with a self-chosen challenge whatever their income or level of engagement, will help create new conversations about climate and the environment across dividing lines, and show that everyone can contribute regardless of their socio-economic standing.

As the results are shared, we believe that this project can open up new spaces and conversations around sustainability and climate justice solutions. Our local networks may gain insights to become more inclusive in their engagement and advocacy as they invite different experiences of people who may not be able to use strategies available to wealthier segments of society or encounter strong mobilising forces rooted in spirituality and cultural practices. There may also be opportunities to learn from the residents who have the smallest energy footprint, the homeless in Waterloo Region.

What is cChallenge?

The cChallenge is a program of [cCHANGE](#) started in Norway by Dr. Karen O'Brien and Linda Sygna. The 30-day challenge is designed to empower individuals to generate ethical and sustainable transformations, focusing on issues related to climate change.

cCHALLENGE begins like many other 30-day challenges: Each participant is invited to carry out a change project in their own life and live and learn with it for 30 days. It is important that they themselves choose one specific habit to create or change. They immerse themselves in this change through experimenting, reflecting, and sharing experiences with others. The transformative program is a light blend of research-based guidance, knowledge, perspectives, and reflection questions tailored for the project. The purpose is to give the participants a basis for thinking anew, reflecting on change, and learning with each other. It invites them to dig a little deeper.

Over the course of the 30 days, they reflected on practical challenges, social norms, systems and structures and their own assumptions and beliefs that prevent or promote change in everyday life. Participants were also expected to attend weekly sessions, as well as to write and share reflections based on the information prompts they received.

The prompts for the program were as follows:

- Day 1: Let's talk about change!
- Day 3: Are you on autopilot?
- Day 6: Observation is key!
- Day 9: Change is social!
- Day 12: You influence others!
- Day 15: It's all about systems!
- Day 18: We create change!
- Day 21: Can you stretch a bit more?
- Day 24: Test your beliefs and assumptions!
- Day 27: Ripple effects
- Day 30: You matter!

The Waterloo Region Pilot Program

The cChallenge program run in partnership between cChallenge, Divest Waterloo and the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region. The specific goal was to involve participants from groups that are not traditionally engaged in discussions or programming around climate change.

The overall long term goal of the project was to incite a cultural shift needed to move local climate conversations from exclusion of underrepresented voices to eventually reallocating resources for those voices to grow stronger and create a more level playing field for involvement; from considering them only as inputs to practices and approaches that support and enable self-determination.

We are testifying of the climate change impacts and living conditions of under-served and overpopulated neighbourhoods, deprived from greenspaces and quality housing, with no access to places for cultural ceremonies, or traditional ways of growing and preserving food. The values we hoped to espouse were self-determination, equity, justice and equal access to resources for mobilisation around environmental impacts on the underserved and marginalised populations. The principle of interdependence and oneness of people and the natural world was grounded in anti-racism, anti-poverty and respect of cultural practices, worldviews and different experiences of agency and change.

The program invited participants from the BIPOC, low income, and persons with disabilities communities. An honorarium of \$400 was awarded to the participants who successfully completed the program.

The program received 14 submissions from community members that were interested in participating. Most of the participants identified as belonging to more than one of the identified groups. Of the 12 people that started the program we had 5 identify as low-income, 4 as persons with a disability, 3 as persons of colour, 3 specifically as Black, 2 as Indigenous.

Most participants identified a pre-existing interest or involvement with climate action and were seeking to learn more and make a difference.

The program had 9 participants complete the 30 day challenge between June 4 to July 5th 2022.

The course of the full project implementation from April until August 2022

Timeline:

- Planning Phase and recruitment of the Coordinator April - May 2022
- Implementation Phase June - July 2022
- Report writing August 2022

Coaching:

- During the project, cCHANGE provided a very light level of coaching/support in the weekly check-in meetings.
- cCHANGE provided some guidance and support for the SDCWR team coordinating the project either over email or in phone calls, as needed.

Shared Responsibilities

SDCWR was responsible for:

- Project leadership and coordination including recruiting the participants, informing them of the expectations of the project and the important dates
- Providing participant email addresses to cCHANGE by 2 June in order to set up access to Zoom meeting link and to information and reflection documents online
- Giving cCHANGE feedback on Transformative Program© content and suggestions on tailoring the content and approach for the participant group
- Attending all workshops and meetings and contribute as co-leads
- Assisting with supporting the participants during the intense 30 day challenge process, ensuring follow up and support for successful completion of the challenge.

cCHANGE was responsible for:

- Delivering the content of the cCHALLENGE round and the Transformative Program©
- Preparing and hosting the kick-off workshop, weekly check-in meetings, wrap-up workshop
- Supporting the SDCWR team with project coordination

Challenges Chosen by Participants

The participants all started out with an initial challenge and many added additional challenges during the 30 days, which was unusual for other more middle-class cohorts who worked with the cChange team before who would stick with a single challenge. The participants were inspired by what the others were doing and encouraged by their success.

The final challenges that participants successfully completed, often combining more than one, were:

- Reduce plastic and wrappings when grocery shopping
- 1 hour spent outside on regular basis
- 1 hour of no electricity/technology, unplug as much as possible
- Less waste from takeout
- Obtaining reusable water bottles
- 20 min learning about climate change
- Taking cold showers (reducing hot water usage)
- Taking public transit or bike rides / limiting the use of cars
- Eating a plant-based diet

Most of the participants involved their family members and friends in the challenges they took on. The ripples started to spread...

What are they working towards?

The first call of the program included a visioning exercise where participants were asked to picture what they wanted the future to look like. There were two strong themes that emerged, one was a supportive community and the other was equity, food, water and shelter for all.

“I saw a future where everyone from different backgrounds and like you know, is working together for a common goal and like, it's everyone's helping each other learning from each other. It's a very engaged community.”

“I was doing this visualization, I saw everyone having access to water and food in abundance. And then when I came back to the meeting, it kind of arose a feeling, kind of a feeling like I want everyone to have access and abundance of food and water.”

Challenges during the cChallenge

Not every week was smooth for participants working on their goals. They faced a variety of barriers from being busy, to family members not going along with it, to unfavourable weather conditions.

“That [less waste from takeout] was the biggest one, so I'm starting one little thing at a time so no coffee cups. I will use this and I'm just reusing one of the plastic bottles I had from last week because I haven't gotten my perfect thing yet. Which is fine. I washed it and I use it. I just keep washing it and using it and it's fine. So those have been fine.

What I have failed on entirely is I wanted to reduce all disposable containers and I'm not there yet. Jack and I had to eat. We had to do some takeout this week.” –

“Well, for the first day it was like pulling teeth. I guess for her she was having a meltdown on the tablet, but you know we're doing it together. So it's fun because we're learning other ways to engage with one another as you can say without the tablets and the social medias and the other things. So it's fun, it's challenging, and I want to continue implementing it into my day to day routines.”

“The next thing that I'm going to have to work on is calculating price because you know, it's funny, like you were talking about how this is a discussion, which you're saying marginalised communities and low income are some of the people that you described as absent from the climate conversation. And I know for me as a low income earner that's definitely a barrier for me because I want to do more plastic free but for instance, one thing just right off the bat is like all the beans and nuts that were in the bulk section, were all organic. Like, if I'm used to buying conventional, which I am, then it's cheaper. So it's like, well, if you want to go zero waste, you got to buy organic, which means you got to pay more. And I'm just budgeting grocery wise is difficult because I have like many stores I go to and it's random when I do refills, so I'm going to really track it I think and find out and see if I can fit it in my budget still.”

Community Building

One of the things that emerged was the sense of community within the group. Group members were able to help each other with their own experiences doing the challenges, but more broadly, they built a support network. The check-ins at the beginning of each call provided an opportunity for participants to not just talk about their challenge but also life in general.

“I'm feeling kind of frustrated now with anybody here like I'm hoping that this meeting will help me help boost my mood”

“If you're feeling like lower energy or you're getting headaches, I would seriously urge you to make sure that you're not just eating veggies, fruits and vegetables. You have to switch because like meat is a huge calorie source. And you need to get the bulk of your calories from starches. So whole grains, beans, lentils, quinoa, rice, pasta, noodles, all of that kind of stuff. You have to base the majority of your calories on that and then you add in the vegetables for your micronutrients but you certainly don't need; it's not sustainable just to consume vegetables to help you. You won't feel full and you won't get the calories you need.”

Participants also expressed a desire to keep the community built by the program alive by continuing to meet or run this challenge beyond the 30 days.

Program Challenges

Access to Technology

As this program was run entirely online we did face some participation challenges thanks to access to technology. Two participants had challenges accessing a device with a stable internet connection on a regular basis, but were able to interact with the coordinator in between sessions and share their screen shots of notes and upload photographs.

Programing for under-represented groups

This project was intended to bring into the climate conversation communities that are normally left out of it. While the participants were able to provide their lived experience and enhance the discussions, the program material was not necessarily tailored to get at more of these unique experiences.

It was the first time that cChallenge was used to purposefully engage with marginalised communities like BIPOC, persons with disabilities, and low income. There were some reflections and a week of discussion on systematic challenges but these as well as other reflections and discussions could be better tailored to relate and facilitate discussion around the lived experiences of underserved communities.

Insights

Life of Homelessness can teach us minimalist lifestyle

One of the participants lives in a homeless community called A Better Tent City. The greatest insight shared with the group was recognition that the way of life lived there, that cannot be grasped by the majority of residents in Waterloo Region, is: minimalist in its essence; does not require average levels of energy and infrastructure; people spend most of the time outside, walk, use transit or bike to their destinations; do not depend on technology as much; reuse and repurpose things; have access to nutritious food despite their low income; share amenities like laundry or kitchen facilities, etc.

Low Income is not an Obstacle for Change

Determined and passionate participants, living on low income, were no less driven to start new habits or improve upon their existing habits. Some were actually inspired by the monetary limitations they experience to strengthen their resolve, be even more creative in finding ways to work with the resources they have such as being better at planning their purchases and time; involve their children in small successes and excite them by obtaining colourful/singing reusable cups; enjoy quiet family time outdoors;

try plant based foods. Some had exhaustive knowledge of sustainable food growing, and were supportive of others to ease transition to a plant based diet.

Cultural Connections and Traditions Kept Alive in Immigrant Communities

One of the participants successfully transplanted the social and agricultural practices from the native country, while maintaining the connections with contacts abroad not only to support eco-friendly and food growing traditions in the current community, but to involve the people in the home country in the 30 day challenge! Cultural practices that evolve, at their source and in new environments, are one of the best ways forward globally.

Awareness of Uniqueness Different Cultures Bring

Many were encouraged and felt comfortable sharing their beliefs even when those would go against some of the expressed views that are part of the dominant environmentalist beliefs. Fully recognizing the importance of greater reliance on plant based foods, the group welcomed traditional consumption practices rooted in history and culture of hunting for Indigenous peoples or cattle raising in crops-poor parts of the Balkans.

Overcoming Conflict in Promoting the Challenge

Veganism is more than the food we eat. It is a value based way of life that is incongruent with the current consumerism and capitalist economy. This is just one of the contesting issues reported as the participants tried to explain to their friends and acquaintances why they have taken on the challenge. Meat and dairy consumption is prevalent in the agricultural industry and is heavily invested in by governments and corporations, which translates into investment in promotion, marketing and favouritism. North American consumerism culture is deeply ingrained in our collective social psyche with its own set of premises that exclude alternative views that are more nature aware, egalitarian and communal. The resistance is still strong in casual conversations about the inequitable impact of climate change. Everybody agreed, it is not about pushing back and getting into conflict, or persuasion at the cost of our own wellbeing. It is about the change we commit to, enjoy and model in our own lives; about the silent and gentle impact we make on people around us. That is where it all starts.

The Fruits of Our Efforts Will Be Visible for the Coming Generations

At the wrap up session, the participants did confirm that their contributions matter in a different light because we connected through the project. The change is slower than needed, but small ripples add over time as we spread them through our relationships, family, friends and other like-minded people first. Leadership is never in only one

person or campaign; all the efforts in the society accumulate through the work of many people sharing the same concerns. The outcomes may not be visible in our lifetime, but our lives are more fulfilling knowing we took our personal responsibility.

cCHALLENGE and Beyond

The transformational approach that is offered through cChange and cChallenge is inspirational and highly motivating for both people who are already taking action, as well as gentle to introduce people joining to learn more. However, it remains effective only at the individual level and immediate impact on family and close friends. It does refer to the other systems in which individual action is embedded, such as culture and economic and political systems, but the duration of the program and its design do not allow for deeper exploration of the other dimensions of impact and action. However, it has the potential to set the stage for deeper engagement on systems level changes.

The program, as it is set currently, also in many of its aspects addresses a very particular segment of the demographics, that is highly educated, White, middle class, Eurocentric and progressive mindsets. This challenge was identified at the outset of planning with the partner from Norway, and this assumption was validated throughout the program implementation. The questions and the prompts, mostly verbal and virtual exchange (also due to the context of COVID pandemic and distance from the program facilitator), premise of an individualistic vs. communal challenge, are all reflective of the prevalence of the dominant culture of communication and advocacy at the highly privileged and global level. Many suggestions were expressed in explicit and subtle ways over the course of the project that can be acted upon in future iterations of the local initiatives respective of socio-economic status, cultural heritage and intersectionality of underrepresented communities.

Next Steps

We had 9 out of 12 participants complete the full challenge by participating in the weekly calls, providing reflections and completing the climate goal they had set out at the beginning of the program.

The feedback from the participants that completed the program was that the community and connections built deserve to be nurtured, to invite more people into the circle as the fall offers opportunities to reunite and continue.

“Just the idea of, of putting everything in the form of a challenge. I had not thought about it, then I'm just so amazed at the response that I've got in the past 30 days. Indeed, it has totally moved a whole bunch of things thinking in my head. All of a sudden, I'm like, Oh, I'm going to turn that into a challenge. I'm going to turn that into a challenge. So that's

definitely something I'm going to take away from people I like being told you can't do some, and they have to prove to you that they can. And so I appreciate that very much.”

The discussions that took place in this group, even with the limited guidance, are certainly discussions that need to be had more often and elevated beyond just this group.

From their part, cChallenge also found this experience constructive:

“This project highlighted how important it is to include these voices more and the valuable and creative perspectives and solutions they bring.

Each week, the participants inspired us. We heard how climate change and sustainability issues impact their lives, but also how committed they are to equity and wellbeing in their region, and their ideas and passion for contributing to solutions. This project challenged us at cCHANGE to ensure that our communication was accessible and did not exclude participants through complex terminology. We aimed to offer all of them an opportunity to explore their relationship with the problems, with change (habit, cultural, systemic), and to activate their sense of agency and creativity around these issues...

Coming out of this project, I feel strongly that it is critical that these voices are heard more in discussions around addressing climate change and sustainability and adaptation.” – Leoni Goodwin, cChallenge Advisor and program facilitator.

Based on the feedback we received, this program should look for a way to continue, perhaps facilitated or helped by the first group of participants in order to engage more diverse individuals and communities that are often forgotten in the discussions around climate change. Through the leadership of Faith & the Common Good, Divest Waterloo, Social Development Centre and other local climate justice initiatives and environmental organisations, we can transform this excellent method into a motivation force to effect change at different levels - cultural, social, economic and political - in Waterloo Region.