

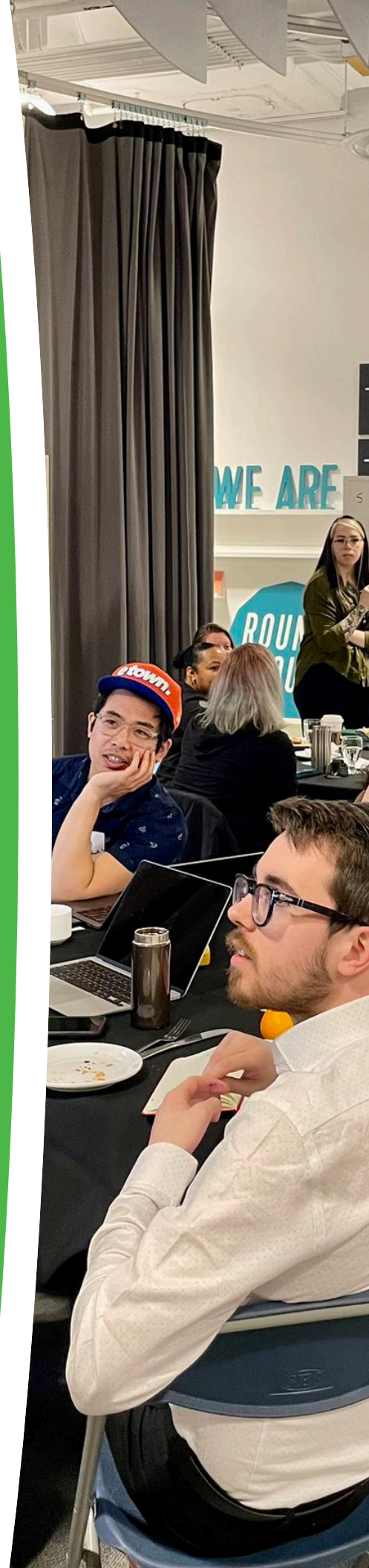


Launch Event Report

Fostering Understanding & Action on Urban Wellness

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INTRODUCTION

The Research Institute for Urban Wellness (RIUW) is now running! The Institute kicked off on May 13th, 2024 with an event, *Fostering Understanding & Action on Urban Wellness*, at our home in MacEwan University in downtown Edmonton. Our goal was to bring together people from diverse organizations and sectors across the city and foster discussions of urban wellness through a systemic lens.

This event included speakers such as MacEwan President and Vice Chancellor Dr. Annette Trimbee and Indigenous Knowledge Keeper Dr. Lillian Gadwa. Two workshops were delivered by Dr. Isabelle Sperano (design) and Dr. Jennifer Long (anthropology), and during lunch, students from various MacEwan programmes presented projects related to urban wellness.

As director, I am excited to see the RIUW showcase and encourage collaborative and impactful research on urban wellness. I hope it becomes a space where individuals and communities from different sectors and backgrounds can create connections, dialogue and build new understandings of this crucial topic. Together, we can participate in making our cities places in which urban residents feel a sense of belonging, fulfill their purpose, and feel and live well.

I would like to thank our participants, speakers, and student facilitators for contributing to such an exciting launch event. Visit @RIUW2024 on Instagram and X (Twitter) to follow our work!

Dr. Marielle Papin

Director, Research Institute for Urban Wellness

WORKSHOP 1

(Re)Imagine Edmonton

Methodology

Led by Dr. Isabelle Sperano, the goal was to map how participants perceived Edmonton's urban wellness ecosystem. Grouped into five tables, they worked together to identify relevant sectors, associated actors, and the issues and priorities surrounding Edmonton's urban wellness. The final product from each table was an ecosystem map that represented the relationships and dependencies between each part of the system. These maps are ideal tools for creating shared mental models and understanding of a system. They also help facilitate communication throughout solution development.

After sharing their ecosystem map, each participant was given three sticky notes and asked to vote on items that represented quick wins (blue), urgent needs (pink), and transformational opportunities (yellow). The outcome was a list of the top priorities and issues related to urban wellness in Edmonton.

Quick Wins

We have the means and resources to do something about this now.

Urgent Needs

We need this ASAP.

Transformational Opportunities

This would revolutionize our work, impact, and lives.

Those who can't access key resources, services, and sectors: how might we bring these to them?

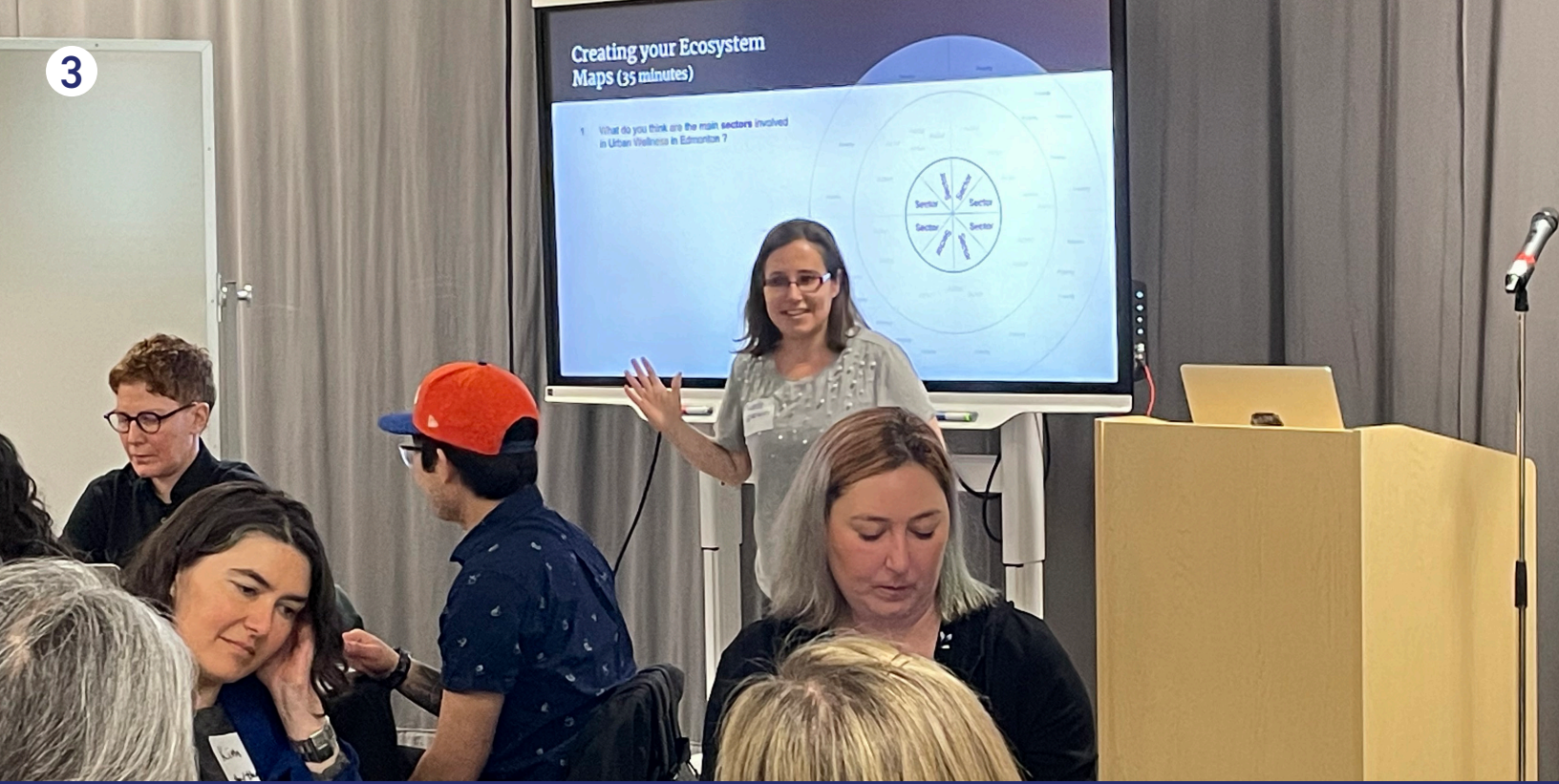
Findings

Unsurprisingly, many tables identified similar items in their ecosystem maps. Common sectors included governance, business, housing, health, education, transportation, economy, arts and culture, public spaces, and the environment. These were linked to actors such as policy-makers, business owners, developers, healthcare staff, teachers, city planners, and artists. Finally, recurrent priorities include access to basic needs, affordable housing, climate change, combating discrimination, and the development of funding structures.

Participants also indicated a need for intersectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration on solutions that take into account lived experiences (knowledge generated through direct, first-hand involvement experiences, rather than through studying, learning, or making assumptions).



An ecosystem map of the sectors, actors, and priorities that make up Edmonton's urban wellness. This group chose to add a fourth 'individual' component.



Dr. Isabelle Sperano explains the components of an ecosystem map at the beginning of her workshop.

An example of this lived experience in action comes from one table that added a fourth element, the 'individual', to the centre of their ecosystem map. Their discussion centralized joy, dignity, respect, and justice as pillars of personal wellness, surrounded by secondary items such as basic needs, health, community, justice, environment, transportation, schools, and gathering spaces. This framework thus illustrates an interdependent relationship between personal and urban wellness.

At the end of the workshop, participants voted on the most important elements:

- **Sectors:** health, education, housing, transportation, economy, social justice, government, environment, food, public spaces.
- **Actors:** business owners, developers, community leagues, activists/advocacy groups, policy makers, police, land owners.
- **Priorities:** sustainable funding, accountability, joy and connection, redistribution of wealth, knowledge and meaning.

Key Takeaways

- Unsurprisingly, the **identified sectors, actors, and priorities are highly interconnected and interdependent.**
- Addressing key issues such as social determinants of health, sustainable structure development, and measurement of long-term impact would benefit from **collaborative and cross-disciplinary efforts that take into account individual lived experiences.**
- This **work should leverage and integrate Indigenous knowledge.**
- Participants agreed on five top priorities: **sustainable funding; accountability; joy and connection; redistribution of wealth; and knowledge and meaning.**

WORKSHOP 2

Urban Wellness in Policy & Governance

Methodology

While the first workshop took a top-down, systems view at urban wellness, the second, presented by Dr. Jennifer Long, introduced a bottom-up approach. With a focus on individual experiences of urban wellness, the goal was to create a tasklist or wishlist for the RIUW to pursue.

Participants first wrote and illustrated stories of wellness or unwellness relating to the five priorities identified in Workshop 1 (sustainable funding, accountability, joy and connection, redistribution of wealth, and knowledge and meaning). Stories could be positive, neutral, or negative, but should represent an 'Edmonton experience' as much as possible. After sharing within their tables, participants chose one story to be used in the next activity.

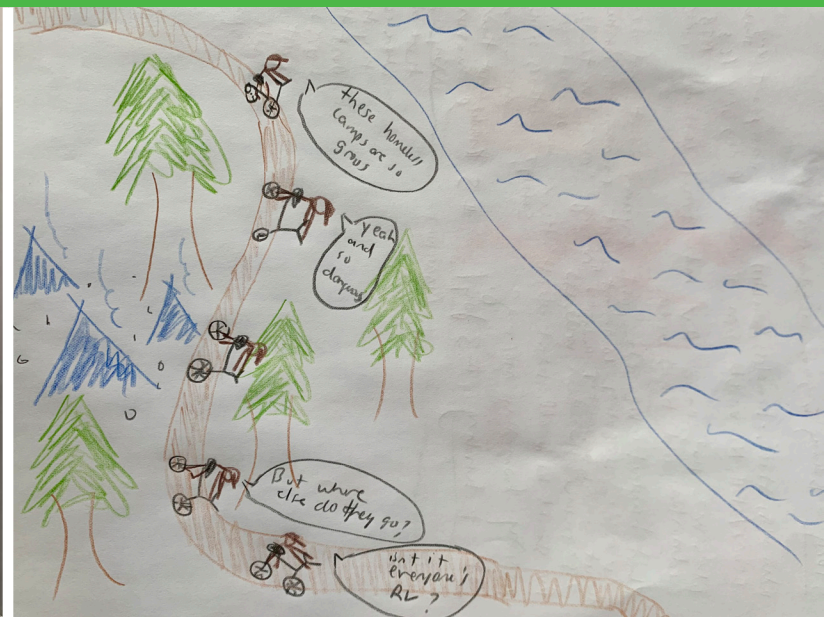
In the World Cafe exercise, the author of the winning story rotated between tables and shared their story with the other participants. The present group then discussed one of the following questions:

- What, if anything, could be done to create, maintain, or improve urban wellness/wellbeing in this scenario?
- How might you measure (assess) whether meaningful change has occurred?
- What information or knowledge is missing when thinking about this scenario?

To end the exercise, each author returned to their own tables to share and reflect on what the other groups discussed about the chosen story.



Dr. Jennifer Long reviews the priorities identified in Workshop 1.



A participant's illustrated story about a tent city in Edmonton.

Findings

Stories are powerful tools for communication and connection. This workshop's focus on the individual makes this medium especially helpful for taking a ground-level view of the human experiences that make up urban wellness. Participants are primed to think empathetically about how a story relates to them, and discussions are centered in the immediate context of the narrative.

Several themes emerged across the story sharing sessions. First was the importance of community and connection in fostering urban wellness. Participants emphasized the role of community activities and support systems in creating a sense of belonging and mutual aid among urban residents. Stories illustrated how community-driven initiatives such as local gardens can enhance social bonds and provide individuals with a sense of joy and connection. These activities not only beautify urban spaces but also create inclusive environments where residents feel valued and connected.

Another significant theme was the need for accountability and transparency in urban governance. Many stories pointed to instances where a lack of corporate or institutional accountability led to community frustrations and a sense of neglect. For instance, unexplained, multi-year delays in the construction of an apartment complex highlighted the necessity for more responsive and transparent communication between urban planners, developers, and residents. Ensuring community voices are heard and the availability of clear channels for addressing grievances were deemed crucial for maintaining trust and ensuring equitable urban development.

This workshop revealed how empathy and understanding are too often swept aside when addressing urban challenges. Participants noted that urban wellness is deeply affected by how institutions, orga-

There's a lack of empathy and communication in terms of civic engagement.

nizations, and individuals respond to vulnerable populations such as those who are houseless or those with mental health challenges. Stories pointed to the need for fostering empathy through education, awareness, and kindness in order to improve interactions and reduce stigmatization. This includes rethinking institutional approaches to support services and emphasizing compassionate, human centered responses over bureaucratic procedures. To sum up, enhancing urban wellness requires an intersectional approach that prioritizes community engagement, accountability, and empathy.

Key Takeaways

- Recurring themes from this workshop include the importance of **community and connection** between individuals, as well as a lack of **accountability and transparency** from corporations and institutions.
- To a large extent, urban wellness is affected by how institutions, organizations, and individuals **respond to vulnerable populations**.
- Stories illustrated a **need for fostering empathy through education and awareness** to reduce assumption-making and stigma.
- The RIUW would benefit from an **intersectional approach** that prioritizes community engagement, accountability, and empathy.

CONCLUSION

We would like to thank all of those who helped out or participated in this launch event. We are particularly grateful to the students who participated in the drafting of this report: Nathan Blacklock, Emily Boivin, Vik Chu, Matt Clark, Liam Jolly, April Lauzon, and Jaden Secrist. Many thanks also to Roundhouse and MacEwan University for hosting this event. The RIUW is committed to leveraging its community of researchers and other stakeholders to.

In the first workshop, we created ecosystem maps that revealed a systems view of the sectors, actors, issues, and priorities that make up urban wellness in Edmonton. We discussed the need for joined policies, addressing social determinants of health, and prioritizing sustainable funding structures, long term impact measurement, and collaboration between governments, sectors, organizations, and communities. We emphasized the importance of community-focused approaches and the integration of Indigenous knowledge and practices in as many areas as possible to help ensure equitable access to resources and services.

The second workshop used the power of stories to highlight individual experiences in an attempt to take a bottom-up view of policy and governance. In each retelling, we noted how integral community and connection are to urban wellness. We illustrated how community-driven initiatives foster a sense of belonging and mutual aid, and how these activities provide purpose and joy. We identified the need for corporate and institutional accountability and transparency. Above all, empathy, awareness, and kindness is crucial to ensure all members of our communities are heard.

We also reiterated that we live, work, and play in a colonial paradigm. Our research, discussions, and actions should reflect an intersectional view of urban wellness issues and recognize the many forms privilege and discrimination may take. Our work should be guided by community engagement, accountability, and empathy. We must consider the forces, barriers, and opportunities that shape individuals and institutions. With the knowledge gained in each of the workshops, discussions, and connections, we now begin work on the next steps for this Institution. The collected insights will inspire our community-based research agenda and encourage us to keep building and strengthening meaningful relationships with our community to support it better.



