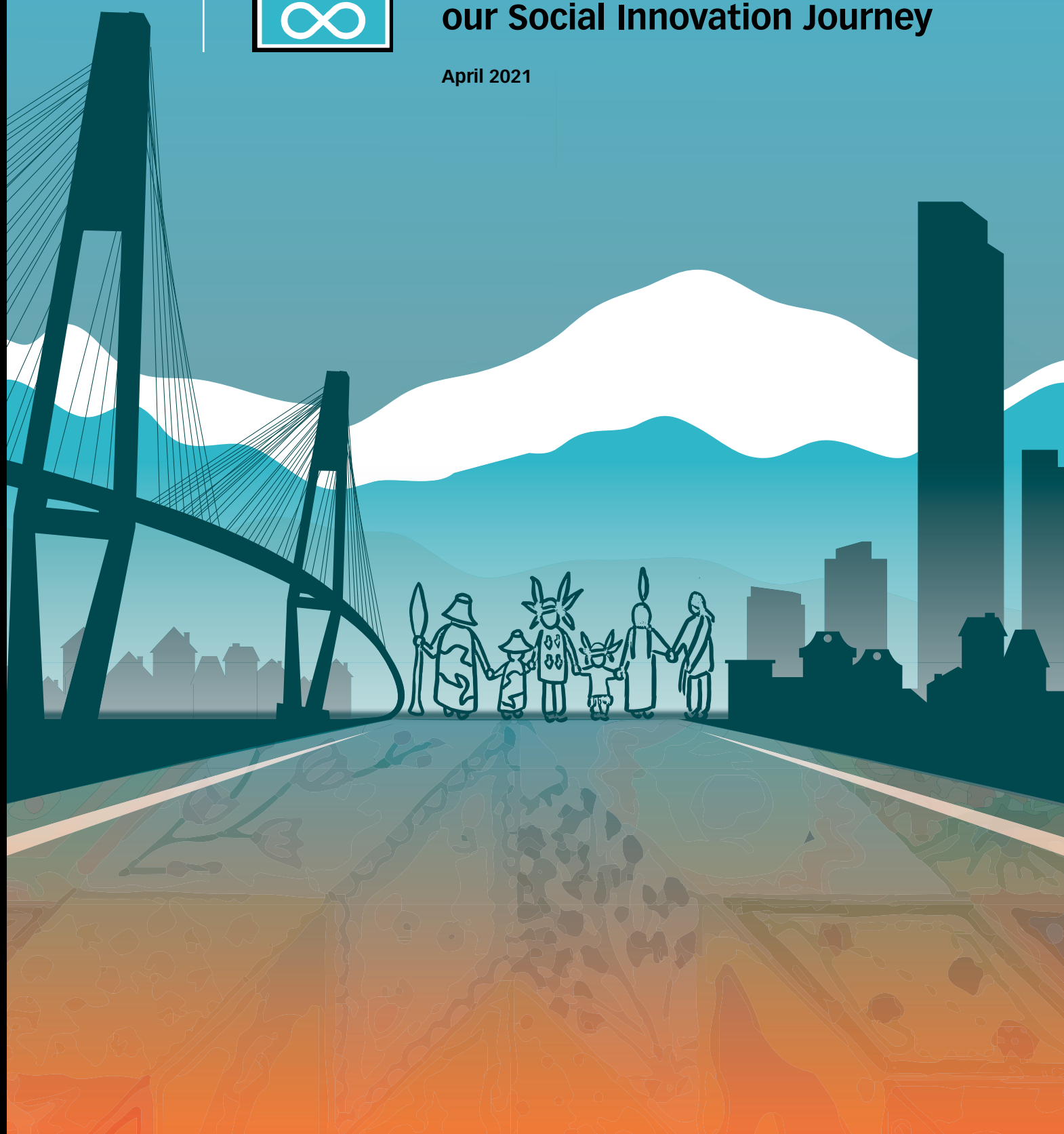


Skookum Lab:

**An Indigenous Reflection of
our Social Innovation Journey**

April 2021



SKOOKUM LAB

Skookum Lab is one of the first Indigenous social innovation labs in Canada. Convened by the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC), the Lab was created to tackle the complex issue of Indigenous child and youth poverty in Surrey. "Skookum" means strong, powerful, and brave.



Our work takes place on the traditional territories of the Coast Salish including the Semiahmoo First Nation, the Kwantlen First Nation, the Katzie First Nation, the Kwikwetlem First Nation, the Qayqayt First Nation and the Tsawwassen First Nations.

We recognize their connection to this land and acknowledge that we are newcomers to Surrey like everyone else. Skookum Lab, as well as the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee does not represent these land-based First Nations and we are careful not to speak on their behalf. Instead, we represent urban Indigenous people that have moved here from all over BC and in fact from all over Canada to make Surrey their home.

Our focus is making Surrey a great place for Indigenous people living in the city – regardless of where they come from, their legal status, or their particular cultural heritage. As we do this, we endeavor to live in a good way with the land-based First Nations that have called this land their home since time immemorial.

Skookum Lab:

An Indigenous Reflection of our Social Innovation Journey



"Social innovation is any initiative (process, product or programs) that profoundly changes the way a given system operates and changes it in such a way that it reduces the vulnerability of the people and the environment in that system."

(Social Innovation Generation Knowledge Hub)



"Prototypes are the 'small bets' that social innovators make in order to determine if they want to make 'bigger bets' to develop or scale an idea."

(Social Innovation Canada)

Introduction

Our social innovation journey began in 2017. At that time we didn't know much about social innovation labs and we were not part of the social innovation community in Canada. Nonetheless, we had a daunting challenge before us and we needed an approach that could shake up the status quo. Our search ended in 2018 when we formally launched Skookum Lab – a social innovation lab to address the high rates of Indigenous child poverty in the City of Surrey.

Three years later, we are winding down the lab activities and beginning to reflect on our journey. By any measure, the lab has been incredibly successful. For example, Skookum Lab has:

- Hosted hundreds of hours of conversations with over 1,000 Indigenous community members;
- Co-developed 16 prototypes for disrupting the systems that create and sustain Indigenous child poverty;
- Implemented 6 of the prototypes;
- Supported our partners to implement 2 more prototypes;
- Developed a comprehensive strategy for increasing affordable Indigenous housing options in the City;
- Initiated partnerships with Indigenous academics to support the aspirations of community members; and,
- Created an Indigenous way of doing social innovation that uplifts our community.



As one of the few Indigenous social innovation labs in the country we feel that our experience could be interesting to other Indigenous people, organizations, or communities who are considering using a social innovation approach. We have written this document with you in mind. This is a presentation of our journey.

Part I - Background

Some context about Surrey 9

Part II - Skookum Stepping Stones

Key moments along our journey 11

Part III - Skookum Governance Ecosystem

The way we are organized to make decisions 25

Part IV - Indigenizing Social Innovation

Reflections on how we Indigenized Skookum Lab 27

Part V - Lessons Learned

A few take-aways that might be helpful to others 33

Part VI - Conclusion

Where does Skookum Lab go from here 37



What is a Social Innovation Lab?

From our perspective, a social innovation lab is a time limited effort to ignite social change. It requires: creating understanding about a complex issue; commitment to action and testing solutions; incorporating thoughtful design into new approaches; engaging diverse stakeholders and decision-makers - including people impacted by the issue; and intentionally setting-out to change the systems that create and sustain the issue.



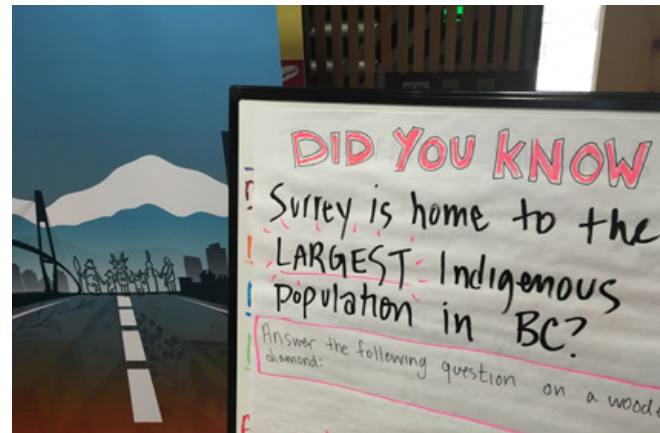
Part I - Background

The City of Surrey is one of 21 municipalities in Metro Vancouver in British Columbia. Located on the south side of the Fraser River, the City shares a border with the United States of America and is situated on the traditional and unceded territories of the Salish peoples including the Semiahmoo First Nation, the Katzie First Nation, the Kwantlen First Nation, the Kwikwetlem First Nation, the Qayqayt First Nation, and the Tsawwassen First Nation. Within Metro Vancouver, Surrey is the largest city in land area, and second most populous city with more than 500,000 residents. It is one of the fastest growing, most culturally diverse cities in Canada.

For a long time, the City of Vancouver was home to the largest population of Indigenous people in the province. About 1996, however, the Indigenous population in Surrey started to grow quickly; and by 2018 population estimates suggest the Indigenous population in Surrey exceeded that of Vancouver. Within 15 years, it is estimated that the Indigenous population in Surrey will double the Indigenous population in Vancouver.

In spite of these numbers, the Indigenous population in Surrey has been invisible to decision-makers and funders. As a result, there has been little investment in the Indigenous community in Surrey and there are only a few underfunded Indigenous organizations serving our people. This neglect has led to pervasive, systemic inequities that need to be addressed.

In 2015 a small group of Indigenous leaders in Surrey formed the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC) to address this and other issues while also honouring and uplifting the gifts of our people. SUILC's mission is to be the collective voice of the urban Indigenous population in Surrey. Skookum Lab was designed to be a vehicle that could move us from where we are today to the place we want to be.



13,460 Surrey residents are Indigenous. 55% of the Indigenous population in Surrey is First Nations. They come from all over BC and Canada representing many different nations, cultures and languages. Just over 40% of the Indigenous population in Surrey is Métis. Overall, the Indigenous population is young – almost half of the population is younger than 24 years old.



Part II - Skookum Stepping Stones

The following “stepping stones” represent key moments or milestones along our Skookum Lab journey. While they are presented chronologically, it is more accurate to say that some of these steps happened concurrently. Some steps represented short moments in time while others were things that we may have grappled with for a while before it came to a resolution in the lab. It is our hope that this timeline will help to clarify the path we took and why, and to provide you with some insight into the kinds of conversations you might want to have on your own social innovation journey.

1

SUILC uncovers a high rate of Indigenous child poverty in Surrey

When SUILC was formed in 2015, there was no authoritative information about the urban Indigenous community in Surrey. As a result, the first step that SUILC took was to develop a statistical profile using the 2011 Census. One of the striking findings was the high rate of Indigenous child poverty in Surrey. At 45%, Surrey’s Indigenous child poverty rate was significantly higher than the national poverty rate for off-reserve Indigenous children. That was our call to action.

2

The creation of the “All Our Relations Social Innovation Strategy”

Also in 2015, SUILC received funding to develop an Indigenous social innovation strategy. Basically we wanted a plan that would guide the work of our newly formed coalition. Ironically, we called it a “social innovation strategy” because it was a pre-requisite to accessing the funding – not because of any deep commitment to (or understanding of) social innovation.

By 2017, we achieved a consensus around 5 strategic objectives and 42 goals. The document that followed was called the “All Our Relations Social Innovation Strategy”. Knowing that all of the 42 goals could not be prioritized at once, SUILC agreed to make reducing Indigenous child poverty its top priority. This key decision catalyzed SUILC to ask the rather daunting question: *“How do we tackle Indigenous child poverty in Surrey?”*



3

Securing backbone funding for SUILC

Shortly after the completion of the “All Our Relations Social Innovation Strategy”, SUILC was able to secure a five-year funding agreement from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) to support the core activities of the coalition. While not specifically intended for Skookum Lab or social innovation, the ISC funding provided the multi-year foundation upon which we would eventually build a viable social innovation lab with contributions from other funding partners. Securing the ISC funding agreement gave confidence to potential funders and partners that SUILC would be a going concern for at least five years.

4

Establishing an Indigenous Child Poverty Task Force

Once SUILC had prioritized the issue of Indigenous child poverty, we established the Indigenous Child Poverty Task Force comprised of SUILC members and other systems entrepreneurs who were passionate about taking the lead on this important issue. Systems entrepreneurs are individuals who by virtue of their position can see inside various systems and have some level of influence within those systems to affect change. We chose key systems entrepreneurs from health, municipal government, education, housing, child protection, Indigenous service organizations, and regional social change funders. We hand-picked these individuals rather than ask each organization to send a representative. We did this because we didn’t want bureaucrats filling seats – we wanted people with a passion for making change. The Task Force was mandated to take the lead on determining the approach for reducing Indigenous child poverty in Surrey and assessing where our actions could have the most impact within the systems that create and sustain Indigenous child poverty.

5

Embarking on Our Social Innovation Journey

In 2017, SULC was invited to a conference on community-university research partnerships. We were asked to “workshop” a “wicked problem” or “sticky issue”. We brought forward the reality of Indigenous child poverty in the city and asked for advice on how to tackle the issue given its complexity. The session we hosted was our first meaningful exposure to social innovation. It piqued our interest. We heard about social innovation labs like the Winnipeg Boldness Project and Edmonton Shift Lab. We met the person that eventually became our social innovation mentor. Given our positive experience, we engaged a summer student to bring the Child Poverty Task Force as much information as possible about social innovation and lab processes. The more the Task Force learned, the more it became excited by the systems thinking and creativity embedded in social innovation approaches. To be fair, however, not everyone was sure about social innovation as there weren’t many Indigenous people or projects reflected in the social innovation materials or community.

6

Support from Vancouver Foundation

Late in 2017, the Vancouver Foundation had a funding call for social innovation proposals. While still harbouring some doubts, the Task Force decided that this was a “bright spot” and an opportunity to advance our priority. We developed a proposal to begin a three-year Indigenous social innovation project on Indigenous child poverty in Surrey. Our proposal put it this way:

“We want to change the socio-economic system that marginalizes Indigenous people and prohibits Indigenous children from reaching their social and economic potential in our city. We want to create a city where Indigenous families and children are thriving. Part of the challenge is that few people have meaningful conversations across socio-economic systems. Usually they work within their own systems: education, health, economic development, child protection, etc. and those conversations rarely involve Indigenous people themselves. There is a lack of knowledge flowing from Indigenous people and families into the identification and design of systems, programs and services for Indigenous families and children. In short, we want to decolonize and disrupt existing systems that aren’t working for too many Indigenous children and families. What we are proposing, therefore, is to center Indigenous voices and knowledge in the dialogue about Indigenous child poverty with the intent of affecting change across multiple systems.”

Our proposal was accepted.



7

Trip to Winnipeg Boldness Project

Now, with backbone funding (from ISC) and lab project funding (from Vancouver Foundation), Task Force members were able to visit the Winnipeg Boldness Project and learn first-hand from their experience. This trip really firmed our resolve to go “all-in” with a social innovation approach. While Surrey and Winnipeg are not the same, it was inspiring to see what was possible! Most importantly we saw how Boldness was Indigenizing social innovation by doing what makes sense and feels right for Indigenous people in their own community. They told us to trust ourselves and not be bound by social innovation methods which may not make sense in our context. Boldness’ advice was to begin the work by grounding it in Indigeneity and in ways that are meaningful to the Surrey Indigenous community.

8

Development of Skookum Guiding Principles

After our Winnipeg trip, the Task Force decided to define our intentions in the work to come. They did this by developing “Guiding Principles” for the Lab. The principles developed for Skookum Lab are:

- Centering Indigenous wisdom;
- Community-based problem definition & solutions;
- Building community;
- Interventions that change systems;
- Strategic application of resources & effort;
- Taking risks for the purpose of learning; and,
- Seeking opportunities to learn & scale.

Some of these principles have been more central than others, but they all have been part of our journey. “Building community”, “Community based problem definition and solutions” and “Centering Indigenous wisdom” have been arguably the most highly discussed principles during our time together. Developing these principles at the start of our journey was incredibly helpful. Whenever we had difficult decisions to make about the Lab, we would return to our principles for guidance. They have also been used as the framework for two developmental evaluations we completed after the first and second phases of the lab.



9

Development of the Skookum Lab Phases

Another early step was to imagine four distinct phases of Skookum Lab to keep us on track. The four phases of our lab included:

Phase I - understand: Facilitate conversations and culture-based activities to discover community wisdom and knowledge about the root causes of Indigenous child poverty in Surrey.

Phase II - define: Fully understand the community wisdom and knowledge shared with us to better define the challenge we are working to solve.

Phase III - dream: Envision initiatives that will make Surrey a city without Indigenous child poverty and a great place for our children and youth. Select priority initiatives as potential prototypes to be tested and scope out how the interventions might work.

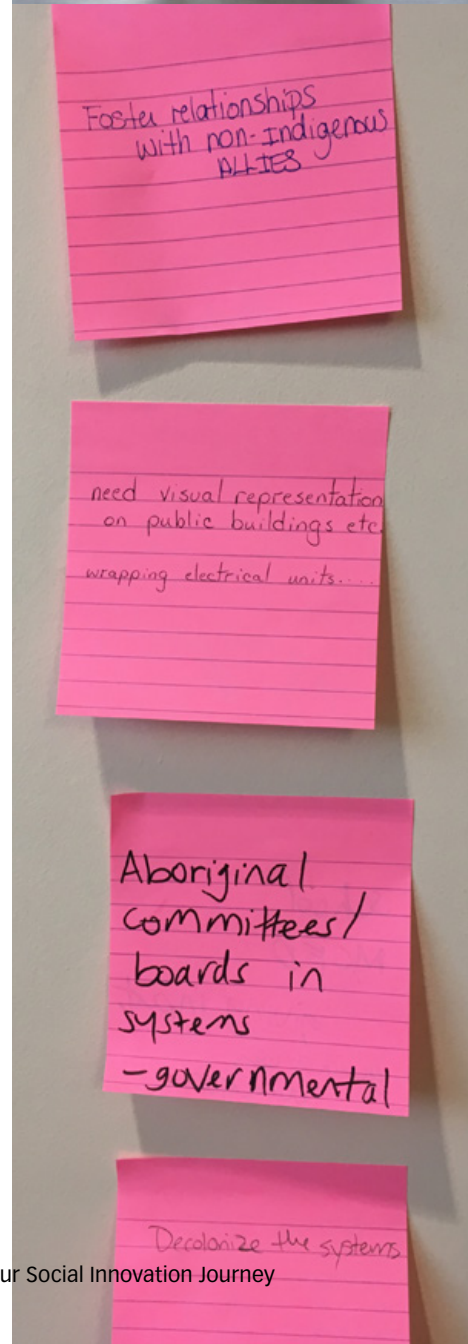
Phase IV - test: Select initiatives for design and implementation. Select a number of prototypes to be implemented in the community. Evaluate the prototypes for their potential to create change at different scales.

It took us three and a half years to complete the four phases. An early challenge was to resist the desire to move immediately to Phase III and develop solutions. Everyone who came to Skookum Lab was eager to advance their own ideas and solutions. We had to push back and reiterate how important it was for us to follow our predefined phases so that we could allow sufficient time for community-based problem definition and solutions to emerge. In the end, sticking to our principles and our phases of work allowed us to see Indigenous child poverty in new ways and to develop more effective interventions.

10

Forming the Indigenous Social Innovation Team

In the summer of 2018, the Task Force assembled a team to begin the “understand” phase of the Lab. At first, we only had two Indigenous Social Innovation Coordinators to carry out the work. One focused on facilitating Skookum Lab governance while the other focused on community engagement. We also accessed a research grant that enabled us to hire a graduate student to support the engagement activities. As the Lab progressed, we’ve expanded our team whenever resources would allow. We’ve had a facilitator to work exclusively with the Guide Groups, we’ve hired another facilitator to work exclusively on Métis engagement, and we’ve had a person for communication activities including to manage our social media. All of our team have been part-time contractors. More recently, the Ambassadors (participants in one of our prototypes) have been given opportunities to be part of the Skookum Lab team by learning about and doing research, evaluation, community presentations, and facilitation.





11

Art-Based Community Engagement & Knowledge Generation

In the first phase of Skookum Lab we started by asking “What would make Surrey the best place to raise an Indigenous Child?” To answer the question we did some typical research activities including interviewing people across different systems that interacted regularly with Indigenous children and families, completing a literature review of Indigenous poverty interventions and wise practices, and diving into the 2016 Census numbers. Our innovation, however, was using creative, Indigenous inspired, art-based engagements to understand the experiences of people most affected by Indigenous child poverty. For example, the Starblanket method developed by Jeska Slater allowed us to receive more than 1,000 responses from Indigenous community members. The collected findings of all our research activities in Phase I resulted in a comprehensive understanding of poverty in our community that was shared at the first Skookum Campfire.

12

Establishment of Skookum Guide Groups

Also in Phase I, we started convening the Skookum Guide Groups. Skookum Lab adapted the concept of “Guide Groups” from another social innovation lab, the Winnipeg Boldness Project. Guide Groups are innovative spaces for Indigenous people to build strong connections with each other and culturally engage in group activities, such as regalia making. Also, these are spaces for Indigenous people to use their voices, wisdom, and gifts to guide the social innovation process, alongside key community stakeholders.

Today, Skookum Guide Groups are comprised of a total membership of 62 Indigenous Elders, youth, community support workers, and caregivers in Surrey. We now also have a Métis specific Guide Group. Over the course of Skookum Lab, we’ve hosted over 100 Guide Group sessions. Guide Groups started out as a conduit to the community and ended up becoming one of our strongest forces for change.

13

Skookum Campfire #1: Developing our collective understanding of Indigenous child poverty

Our first Skookum Campfire was held in May 2019 at a school district learning centre. In the world of social innovation, a design lab is a process that convenes key change agents who come together to develop a collective understanding of a problem and create innovative solutions. Skookum Lab chose to call its design labs: “Campfires”.

Our campfires had between 40 and 60 participants including community members with lived experience, systems entrepreneurs and other key stakeholders. Campfire #1 was a space to discuss how the Indigenous community experiences poverty in Surrey. Participants from the Guide Groups delivered emotional and impactful presentations and we reviewed summaries of our research and engagement activities. A huge accomplishment at the campfire was “getting the system in the room”. Community members related their surprise at seeing decision-makers from across systems listening deeply to Indigenous stories and perspectives.

Our first Skookum Campfire was also a great opportunity to demonstrate how our social innovation approach was different than other social change projects. We were successful in creating a sense of urgency in addressing Indigenous child and youth poverty in Surrey and prepared participants for the second Skookum Campfire gathering in October 2019.





14

New Insight: the 4Cs

In Skookum Lab's first phase of research and community engagement our concept of Indigenous poverty was expanded. Rather than a strict focus on financial challenges facing families, community members spoke frequently about the need to foster connections between Elders and youth, language revitalization, cultural ceremony with families, and relationship building between urban Indigenous peoples, their own, and other, land-based nations. Many participants also noted that it was essential to create "a sense of belonging" through the development of Indigenized urban space and place. These things – in addition to accessing more financial resources – were the vision for a vibrant and rich community. Based on this community wisdom, Skookum Lab developed a concept for poverty reduction that we called the "4Cs". The 4Cs are:

- Community Belonging
- Connection to Family
- Cultural Awareness/ Visibility
- Cash/ Financial Security

The 4Cs are a way to represent our perspective on Indigenous child poverty. For us, "poverty" means a lack of or absence of the 4Cs. Alternatively, the presence of the 4Cs is an indicator of wealth and wellness. Practically speaking, we now use the 4Cs as way to develop and assess prototypes.

15

Campfire #2: Getting Creative

In October of 2019, the second Skookum Campfire was held at the Kwantlen First Nation Longhouse and Cultural Centre. The Campfire was grounded in Kwantlen First Nation ceremony and hospitality. It created a profound commitment to the creative task at hand. Over two days, Campfire participants generated 16 concepts for new prototypes. Each prototype was required to demonstrate how it advances the 4Cs and disrupts the systems that create and sustain Indigenous child poverty. The passion and creativity of the second Skookum Campfire was legendary.

16

VanCity Community Foundation Donor steps forward

In 2019, an anonymous donor facilitated by Vancity Community Foundation stepped forward to enable us to deepen our engagement activities. This amazing (and unexpected) gift was a real boost to our morale. It was incredible to be recognized and trusted. Plus, the gift expanded the resources we could make available for implementing prototypes. To this day, we have no idea who provided this gift, but we are extremely grateful for their support.

17

Task Force selects 8 prototypes to be implemented

The second Skookum Campfire generated 16 prototypes. Over the fall of 2019, the Task Force began assessing which prototypes were feasible to implement and would have the maximum impact. Obviously our financial resources were a significant constraint. In the end, we leveraged everything we had (including personal relationships) to implement eight prototypes:

I

Guide Groups: A Culturally Connected Community of Care – Guide Groups started as safe spaces for people with lived experiences to contribute their wisdom to the Lab. However, Guide Groups were so successful that they became an obvious choice for a prototype. The Guide Groups meet weekly and are facilitated spaces for discussing life in Surrey while engaging in cultural activities. As they meet, Guide Groups are building vibrant social networks or as we like to say, “a culturally connected community of care” in Surrey. Through Guide Groups we support community members’ aspirations to learn about culture, to create urban kinship, to learn about opportunities for their families and even earn additional income. They are a means for disrupting the systems that keep Indigenous people in Surrey isolated, invisible, and silent.

II

Ambassadors: Supporting Emerging Leaders – As the Guide Groups met there were a number of individuals (mostly young women and single mothers) that began to show more interest in helping to organize or facilitate Skookum activities. This was a welcome unintended outcome. We need more Indigenous people in leadership roles in Surrey as it is difficult to affect change when you don’t have a voice in decision-making. To encourage more people to learn about their leadership potential in a culturally safe and supportive environment, we developed the Ambassador Program as one of our prototypes. The Ambassadors participate in Indigenous leadership development training and get to use their skills to support our work at Skookum.

III

A Skookum Home: More Indigenous Housing Options – It was clear that the lack of affordable, safe, culturally appropriate housing was a major factor in Indigenous child poverty. While the initial discussions of a housing prototype focused on a housing co-op, it subsequently became obvious that systems change in the housing sector would require a broader scope of investigation. Our early design work on a housing prototype eventually became our Skookum Housing Solutions Lab which has created ground-breaking research and advocacy on the critical link between housing and Indigenous child poverty.

IV

Heart of Community: Indigenous Gathering Space – A place to meet and gather is important for every community. In Surrey, Indigenous people don't have a culturally designed space that can accommodate the size of the community and the kinds of cultural activities that create understanding, awareness and pride. As a result, the lack of Indigenous space was identified as a critical piece of community infrastructure that is needed if we are going to support an Indigenous resurgence in the city. For this prototype we worked with an Indigenous architect to host a number of community-based design sessions that resulted in a vision and program report that is being used to advance the community dream of an Indigenous gathering space.

V

Understanding to Action: Addressing Racism Through a Social Innovation Lens – It was clear at the first Skookum Campfire gathering how anti-Indigenous racism is a contributing factor to many of the issues we face in Surrey. As a result, we wanted to develop a prototype that would allow us to go deeper in our learning and understanding. This prototype culminated in a multi-day forum with Indigenous community members and allies learning together and committing to working in solidarity. We have used this prototype as a spring-board for action on anti-Indigenous racism in Surrey.

VI

Evaluating Successes to Scale Up: An Indigenous Social Innovation Evaluation Framework – As we considered how to evaluate our prototypes, it became apparent that traditional evaluation methods were inconsistent with the principles and approaches we had adopted in Skookum Lab. As a result we chose a prototype for decolonizing evaluation practice which allowed us to develop our own methodology for assessing the success of our prototypes. The prototype that emerged leaned heavily on the Ambassadors as witnesses to the impact of the prototypes and story-tellers for sharing the wisdom that emerged.

VII

Equity Lab: Learning Success for Indigenous Children – The Surrey School District has the largest number of Indigenous students of any school district in the province. We knew that the early success of students multiplies into greater opportunities later in life. Importantly, the Director of Instruction in Aboriginal Learning was actively involved in Skookum Lab since its beginning. Her passion and commitment to changing the education system to promote Indigenous students' success led to many ideas for supporting Indigenous learners. In response, the Surrey School District took the initiative to spearhead their own prototype called "Equity Lab". The purpose of the prototype was to identify barriers and challenges that Indigenous learners experience within the school district. Drawing on our innovative research methods and utilizing our Lab infrastructure, the Surrey School District has been able to deeply engage Indigenous learners and parents in ways that will support new, culturally informed innovations for Indigenous students.



VIII

IPPP: Removing Barriers To Accessing Services – We heard many stories of barriers that Indigenous people face when attempting to learn about or access government services. These services are intended to support individuals and families living in poverty yet too many Indigenous people reported feeling frustrated, mistreated, and mistrusted by the people and processes they are required to interact with. Some people even gave up trying to access services that could help them. In response, Skookum Lab participants from the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR) worked with us and our partners to develop the Indigenous Partnership Pilot Program or IPPP. The IPPP hired Indigenous workers, embedded them in Indigenous agencies, and gave them more flexibility to support Indigenous families in whatever way they could. The prototype has helped many of our community members to access essential services and supports. IPPP has now been nominated for a Premiers Award for Innovation in the BC Public Service.

We gave ourselves one year to implement and evaluate these prototypes.

18

Skookum Campfire #3 - Addressing Anti-Indigenous Racism in Surrey

In Phase I, the community identified systemic anti-Indigenous racism as an underlying and pervasive aspect of poverty. It was clear that we needed to spend more time together thinking about the intersection of racism and poverty so we made this the focus of Campfire #3 in February 2020. Participants have described this event as powerful, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, and a place of friendship and community connections. Our work was grounded in Semiahmoo First Nation cultural sharing and protocols. Many participants attributed the “cultural and community spirit” of Skookum Lab as the reason why we have been successful at leading the painful and heartbreaking conversations about Indigenous lived experiences of poverty and racism. These conversations, however, are necessary to move us to understanding and action.





19

Ambassadors Step-Up

About the same time as our third Campfire we saw the Ambassadors really start to grow into the community leaders they wanted to be. We witnessed Ambassadors using their voices for positive change, increasing the visibility and presence of Indigenous voices in Surrey, and creating grassroots capacity to organize Indigenous people in the community. Our intent is for Ambassadors to bring Indigenous experiences out of the shadows and into decision-making in Surrey. At Campfire #3 we saw Ambassadors stepping into leadership roles with confidence and with the ability to facilitate difficult conversations. Given that all of the Ambassadors are women and many are single parents, they have shaped the program to think about the specific supports that urban Indigenous women need to be leaders. Going forward, the Ambassadors are partnering with Simon Fraser University to develop an urban Indigenous women's theory of leadership.



20

Expanding the Scope of the Housing Prototype - New Funding Opportunity

As we were assessing the opportunity to implement prototypes, we identified CMHC funding that was aligned with our growing preoccupation with the connection between housing affordability and Indigenous child poverty. After much discussion, we applied to CMHC to embed a housing deep-dive within the overall infrastructure of Skookum Lab. We were successful and have been leveraging our existing community engagement capacity to convene around housing-specific challenges and opportunities.



21

Adaptation: The Lab Moves Online

In March of 2020 our world was turned upside down by Covid. We immediately diverted our resources to respond to this new and unexpected crisis. Skookum Lab used it's extensive community networks to monitor the needs of community members and to find and distribute resources when and where they were needed. As the rules of the pandemic became clearer, we returned to our work, with all of our activities including Campfires, Guide Groups, and community engagement moving to a virtual format. Surprisingly, this online format has not felt impersonal given that Skookum participants had established meaningful relationships before the pandemic. As a result, many people describe feeling even closer from meeting virtually, doing cultural activities, and enjoying each other's company.

22

Skookum Campfire #4: Urban Indigenous Housing Issues and Opportunities

In October of 2020, Campfire #4 was convened on-line. This Campfire focused on urban Indigenous housing in Surrey. At the Campfire, we shared our Skookum housing research including Guide Group discussion, a community art project, video ethnography, key informant interviews, and quantitative analysis of data on Indigenous households and housing conditions. For example, we learned that Surrey needs 1,880 units of deeply affordable rental housing for Indigenous households. This lack of deeply affordable rental housing affects single parents (mostly single mothers) the most. As a result, we were able to redefine our challenge statement and develop a Call to Action on Indigenous housing.

23

Indigenous Evaluation of Prototypes

In early 2020, we developed our own Indigenous methodology to evaluate the prototypes. Leaning heavily on our story telling traditions, we developed an approach that would keep community voices front and center in our evaluation of prototypes. In the summer of 2020, we selected four prototypes to evaluate. The Ambassadors were instrumental in carrying out interviews and talking circles with Guide Group members and Indigenous residents in Surrey. This was a high point and milestone for the Lab to be able to capture the value and change-making that happened over the years.

24

New Partnerships

In the spring of 2021, the Lab saw new partners coming to the table to sustain and scale two of our prototypes. A senior manager from the Ministry of Child and Family Development who participated in Skookum Lab since its inception saw value in the Guide Groups as a “culturally connected community of care” and has agreed to fund a minimum of 36 Guide Group sessions in 2021/2022. We have also secured new resources through our partnership with Simon Fraser University to elaborate on the needs of urban indigenous women in leadership. We are keen to continue expanding our work through new partnerships.

25

Skookum Campfire #5: Urban Indigenous Housing Solutions

Our second housing related Campfire was held over the course of three weeks. Meeting online, we moved beyond our initial research and engagement to identify promising practices from other communities, develop policy and program supports to respond to community identified needs, and developed strategies to overcome systemic barriers that hold back new affordable housing development in Surrey. The final report is expected in the fall of 2021.



26

A Skookum Theory of Change

As Skookum Lab began to wind down, we started to reflect back on all of our work and learning. Eliminating Indigenous child poverty is multifaceted, yet we were drawn to focus on the:

- Lack of cultural and community connections;
- Lack of income security;
- Lack of affordable housing options; and,
- Pervasive anti-Indigenous racism that permeates all aspects of life in Surrey.

The gravitational pull of these four criteria lead us to believe that by addressing them we will eliminate Indigenous child poverty and make Surrey a great place to raise and Indigenous child. As a result of this reflection, we are working to develop a new theory of change.

27

Skookum Sunset Celebration

In June of 2021, we hosted our final Skookum Lab Campfire. We called it a Skookum Sunset Celebration. It was our opportunity to acknowledge and honour all of the contributions to Skookum Lab's success. We had music, comedy, and many reflections back on our journey together. At the Campfire, participants agreed to rebrand all of our collective efforts going forward as "Skookum Surrey". In this way, the spirit of Skookum Lab will continue. Reflecting back on our journey, we all agree that we are in a better place than where we were when we started Skookum Lab. We are well organized. We have louder voices. We have stronger connections with other Indigenous people and organizations. We have built relationships and partnerships with funders and key decision-makers who share our vision for Surrey. We are continuing to share and learn cultural practices with each other. We have created an awareness of our large, vibrant, and diverse Indigenous community in Surrey. We have a lot of work to do yet, but we feel confident that we've gained a strategic foothold in our battle against Indigenous child poverty – and we aren't giving it up.

Part III - Skookum Governance Ecosystem

Skookum Lab had a unique governance ecosystem. The ecosystem consisted of different yet inter-related entities that all contributed to the development and progress of the Lab. It was a form of distributed leadership that shared power and decision-making while remaining accountable to the community. Our governance ecosystem consisted of the following key entities:

Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee

The Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC) is the coalition of Indigenous leaders that convened Skookum Lab. SUILC's mission is to be a collective voice for urban Indigenous people in Surrey; advocate on behalf of all urban Indigenous people in Surrey; and work collaboratively with other governments, organizations, and individuals that are committed to understanding and achieving our vision. SUILC provided overall guidance to the Lab and accountability for funders.

Land-Based First Nations

Situated on the territories of the Coast Salish First Nations including the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwantlen, Kwikwetlem, Qayqayt, and Tsawwassen First Nations, Skookum Lab respects the inherent right to self-governance within these communities. Skookum Lab endeavoured to live in a good way with the land-based First Nations. The land-based First Nations helped us to ground the lab in place-based cultural protocols.

Guide Groups

Guide Groups are spaces for community members with lived experiences of poverty to use their voices, wisdom and gifts to guide the social innovation process. They reviewed all of our research to discuss perspective, meaning, and presentation. They have consistently been a wellspring of wisdom for how the Lab should unfold.

Ambassadors

Ambassadors are emerging community leaders that are learning to use their voices and organizing skills for positive change. The Ambassadors role has changed over the course of the Lab. As they became co-facilitators of our events and processes, they took more responsibility for ensuring our approaches are trauma-informed and appropriate for the community.

Social Innovation Mentor

The Lab's social innovation mentor – Cheryl Rose - challenged us to see the systems creating and sustaining Indigenous child and youth poverty and shared with us innovative methodologies for creating meaningful change. She has been a wonderful ally.

Task Force

The Task Force is a forum for systems entrepreneurs to utilize their position and insights to guide the Lab. They helped us to see opportunities to leverage change in existing systems. They also ensured that processes were consistent with the Lab's guiding principles.

Implementation Team

The Implementation Team included our on-the-ground people that ran our engagements, facilitated our meetings, and ensured decisions were implemented. The team included two Indigenous Social Innovation Coordinators; a Guide Group Facilitator; a Communication Coordinator; a Métis Engagement Specialist; and an Engagement Coordinator. The City of Surrey also provided critical administrative support to our team.

SKOOKUM LAB

Ecosystem



How you choose to organize your lab to make decisions and guide your work is a critical decision point. We made a choice to be inclusive and bring more voices – especially community voices – into our circle. It meant more time and effort was spent sharing information and gaining a consensus on key decisions. It also increased our transparency to the community.

Part IV - Indigenizing Social Innovation

Skookum Lab believes that “Indigenous social innovation” is about revitalizing old ways of doing things, in tandem with innovating new ways in urban Indigenous communities. For us, this means centering Indigenous wisdom as a foundation to solve present-day systemic problems. Importantly, the field of social innovation has conveyed what Indigenous worldviews have articulated since time immemorial: systems are interconnected networks built on diverse and complex relationships. The SUILC’s All Our Relations Social Innovation Strategy, developed in 2017, uplifted this wisdom. “All my Relations” is a phrase that recognizes that “we need each other”. In a world of siloed and fractured systems, Indigenous systems change is about building bridges and creating networks that reflect our societal need for interconnectedness and balanced relationships between people, sectors, and organizations. But what does centering Indigenous wisdom look like in Skookum Lab? We asked people from the Lab to tell us how they saw this principle in action. This is what they told us.





1

The Lab has an “Indigenous heart”

Many Skookum participants shared that the Lab has an “Indigenous heart”. Our core principle of “centering Indigenous wisdom” has rooted our Lab work in intersectional, decolonized, holistic, relational and reciprocal approaches. These Indigenousized approaches have created a Lab with “an Indigenous heart” and our community responded. They could see and feel that we are different from what often happens in our community. Too often non-Indigenous organizations and individuals want to work with our community and so they design a project, get a letter of support from an Indigenous partner, apply for funding, do the project with minimal introspection, and then wear a feather in their cap for their commitment to reconciliation. It is all done with the best of intentions yet control and decision-making remains with non-Indigenous people and non-Indigenous ideas, values and relationships are valued over Indigenous experiences and aspirations. Skookum Lab is different, the core of the Lab - its heart - was designed and implemented by and for Indigenous peoples in Surrey.

2

Creating Space for the Diversity of Urban Indigenous Experiences

There are many Indigenous experiences, cultures and languages in Surrey. Skookum Lab centres Indigenous wisdom by conscientiously creating space for community members to express their own individual cultural practices as we collectively build the capacity to pass on our gifts to the younger generation. At the same time, we seek to acknowledge, honour, and privilege the Coast Salish protocols and traditions in our work. This culturally intersectional approach is how we value and respect the diversity within our community.

At a basic level, you can see this in the name “Skookum Lab”. Skookum means “strong” and “brave” in the Chinook language. Chinook is a West Coast Indigenous trading language that facilitated relations between many different people, languages, and cultures in the 1800’s. Community members chose the name Skookum because it represents the opportunity for us to come together and find a common language for advancing our shared interests. Plus it expresses the characteristics (strong, brave) we need to be successful. It is a wonderful symbol of how we are trying to work in Surrey.

3

Indigenous Art-based Engagement

Another expression of “centering Indigenous wisdom” in Skookum Lab was the use of Indigenous art-based engagement. Indigenous artists, musicians and knowledge keepers have been involved throughout the Lab. Our engagements have included:

- Photography;
- Large format murals;
- Traditional food preparation;
- Graffiti installations;
- Sacred teachings;
- Regalia making;
- Graphic illustrations;
- Song writing;
- Wellness & self-care practices;
- Poetry; and,
- Beadwork.

For example, in the first phase of the Lab, our team, asked “What would make Surrey the best place to raise an Indigenous Child?” Drawings, artwork, and other written responses were captured using a technique developed by Jeska Slater, one of our Indigenous Social Innovation Coordinators. Jeska’s Cree-inspired Starblanket exercise came from her Aunties teachings in Fisher River, Manitoba.

In total, 11 Starblankets were created with over 1,000 responses. This was an incredible Indigenous designed method and a huge milestone within Skookum Lab. It demonstrated the power of using Indigenous artists throughout the Lab to design artful, community friendly, and impactful Indigenous designed engagements. The result was creativity, emotion, honesty, colour, and inspiration!



“My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.”

Louis Riel

The Youth Guide Group made a rap song with the mentorship and facilitation of the multi-talented JB the First Lady.

We are resilient
We are brilliant
We have to take a stand
Need more connection to the land

I need a safe space
No chill space
I feel displaced
I need 24-hour support
Basic needs fell apart

Need to be connected
Not reflected
Not respected
Not protected
Need opportunities
Give voice
Visibility

Long term shelter
Want to be connected to Elders
Guiding
Teachings
Healings
Homelessness is astounding
Need more affordable housing!

Tired of racist attitudes
Always devalued
Give me salmon
Soul food
So good
Nutritional food
It's the way through
It's the way through

We are resilient
We are brilliant
We have to take a stand
Need more connection to the land

4

Grounding the Lab in Culture & Ceremony at “Campfires”

Another example of centering Indigenous wisdom was to ground the lab in culture and ceremony. As an example, Skookum Lab chose to call its design labs “Campfires”. Campfires have been central to Indigenous communities since time out of mind. We find comfort, sustenance, and spirit around a campfire. It is a sacred place that opens our hearts and minds to the people who sit with us in the circle around the fire. Our Skookum campfires were usually carried out over two to three days with an average of 40 to 60 participants. We convened our campfires in-person and virtually. Sometimes we were able to have real campfires and sometimes we had to be more imaginative. However we did the campfires, they elicited the same sense of warmth, honesty and openness we were trying to cultivate. Furthermore, one of our powerful commitments was to honour Coast Salish protocols and practices at the campfires. For example, we have been guided by Coast Salish leaders in carrying out witnessing, blanketing, praying, smudges, cedar brushing, storytelling of the land, and observed songs and dances that represent the treasures of local communities and families. Many Lab participants, describe our Campfires as having a “magical” feeling and report that they are the best meetings they have ever attended. Culture and ceremony set the stage for this to happen. Grounding the campfires in Indigeneity has created a “safe container” for participants to discuss how to tackle traumatic systemic issues they have experienced. As one campfire participant noted, “culture is medicine”. We agree.

5

Hiring Indigenous people and uplifting Indigenous leadership in Surrey.

Centering Indigenous wisdom means putting Indigenous people in decision-making and leadership positions. Skookum Lab has created more opportunities for Indigenous people to step into leadership roles. For too long, Indigenous people have been invisible in Surrey and our voices silent. Community members want to see more Indigenous people in leadership roles and Skookum Lab has been a space for a “grassroots building up” of Indigenous voices, participation, presence, and decision-making. Through the Lab we are modeling Indigenous presence, Indigenous leadership and Indigenous agency. At each Campfire we hired community members to support the event and some of our participants joined our Lab implementation team. As we did all of this, we began to interact with more and more people that wanted to be involved but had never had an opportunity. This was the seed for the creation of another one of our core prototypes: the Ambassadors. The Ambassadors are a group of emerging Indigenous leaders that we are now actively supporting to become the leaders they want to be. Hiring the Indigenous community and Indigenous consultants has been a means to center Indigenous wisdom. Lab participants have told us that hiring Indigenous has honoured and truly recognized the expertise that Indigenous people bring to the table.



6

An Indigenous concept of poverty

Finally, centering Indigenous wisdom means listening to the community. The statistic that started our Skookum Lab journey was from the 2011 Census: 45% of Indigenous children in Surrey living in poverty. In this statistic is an assumption about “poverty” and “wealth”. The assumption is that money, or the lack of money, is the single most important indicator of poverty. As Skookum Lab began to explore experiences of poverty, however, it became clear that the Indigenous community had a much broader perspective than just the economic or financial aspects of poverty. Indigenous Elders, parents, support workers, youth, and children all revealed that “Indigenous poverty” and “Indigenous child poverty” is not just about income but also about a lack of cultural wellness and social connection in Surrey. We learned that Indigenous child poverty needs to be understood, defined, and solved through an Indigenous lens. That led us to develop the “4Cs” as a way to address Indigenous child poverty in Surrey. The 4Cs are the criteria we now use to assess any new prototype developed through the lab. Centering Indigenous wisdom means understanding the “problem” from our own worldview and then designing “solutions” that make sense to us.

For us, Indigenizing social innovation means centering Indigenous wisdom in everything we do: from the smallest activity to the largest strategic decision. By incorporating culture, ceremony, and decolonizing methodologies, Skookum Lab has created a process for centering Indigenous wisdom and diverse cultural practices while utilizing social innovation approaches and tools.



Part V - Lessons Learned

When we reflected back on our experience we agreed that we were gifted certain teachings. We want to share these with you.

1

Social innovation worked for us

In our experience, social innovation funding and approaches created enough space and flexibility for creative, community-based inquiry. The ability to have a process funded without clear deliverables or solutions identified at the beginning was liberating and allowed us to listen to the community. This led to “unconventional” approaches to addressing poverty to be developed – like the focus on Guide Groups as a “cultural communities of care” and developing our own Indigenous concept of poverty. It may not be for everyone but overall our experience has been very positive.

2

Robust, flexible, multi-year funding is important for success

Skookum Lab was funded by an initial investment of \$75,000 each year for three years. While the funding itself was not sufficient for the lab that we wanted to run, it did have a positive effect by guaranteeing a three-year planning horizon. Time is often the biggest Achilles heel in social change projects. This multi-year commitment was critical for us to be able to develop relationships and trust in the community. It allowed key insights to emerge naturally. In addition to that initial contribution, however, we continually had to find supplemental funding. Luckily, our work attracted additional investment from an anonymous donor via the Vancity Community Foundation and funding from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. These funds were critical because they enabled us to juggle multiple funding sources and stretch our dollars. Typical of Indigenous projects, however, we also had to leverage our own personal relationships to be able to do everything we wanted to do. For example, we were funded to implement three prototypes and we delivered six. The lesson we walked away with is that if you don’t have secure, multi-year, robust, flexible funding for your lab you may not want to consider a social innovation process.

3

It’s emergent - We couldn’t always see where we were going but we got there!

Another lesson we learned was to give in to the process and surrender to the unknown. Around Skookum Lab you often hear the expression “It’s emergent!” This saying has come to be our inside joke about our inability to fully predict where the Lab would go next. It took us a while to become familiar with the discomfort of not knowing and to be patient enough to let a community-based solution work itself out. We couldn’t always see

where we were going but we had faith in our Lab ecosystem, our guiding principles and in each other. Sitting with uncertainty demonstrated our commitment to community-based problem definition and solutions. This is not typical. Often, funders expect to see the outcomes of a given project described and costed in the project proposal. These outcomes then become contractual obligations. While this is understandable from an accountability perspective, it doesn't facilitate innovation. Especially in phases and parts of the Lab when we were trying to understand systemic issues. There is often not one problem before us, nor one solution. Seeing and appreciating the intersection of racism, colonialism, sexism, and poverty experienced by our community is one of the strengths of social innovation.

4

Raising the bar on community engagement

Another lesson for Skookum Lab was the incredible strength that comes from deep community engagement. Historically, Indigenous experience with community engagement has been less than positive. It often feels extractive, repetitive, and futile. Often the proponent (usually a non-Indigenous organization or government) wants access to Indigenous people and perspectives. They take our feedback and then determine the meaning of the feedback and the value of the feedback. They never come back to report on how our feedback informed their decision-making. More often than not we feel they are just "checking the box" to show they've reached out to "marginal communities".

Skookum Lab set out to be different. We wanted to build the community. We wanted to be in a relationship with the community. We wanted the community to co-create the understanding we sought. This shift in approach significantly raised the bar on community engagement. We did this by using OCAP as a guide. OCAP stands for Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession. The right of Indigenous communities to own, control, access, and possess information about their peoples is fundamentally tied to self-determination and to the preservation and development of their culture. This is true for urban Indigenous communities also. Indigenous knowledge generation is a powerful tool for advocacy and changemaking. Skookum Lab has created a new norm for working in the community.

5

Creating community friendly language and processes in social innovation

When we set out to do Skookum Lab, we often got bogged down in social innovation jargon and processes that were difficult to understand or didn't seem to resonate with Indigenous sensibilities. In our experience, the language of social innovation was exclusionary. Luckily, we got some sage advice from other Indigenous social innovators to trust ourselves and use social innovation in ways that would work in our own community. This was liberating as we were able to learn from social innovation practice but not be beholden to it. Rather, we could trust our instincts with what was right or appropriate for our community. As a result, we made conscious choices to avoid language and activities that were alienating or exclusionary.

6

The importance of cultural safety when the “system” is in the room

Indigenous participants have expressed that they felt a significant level of trust and safety during Skookum Lab activities and campfires. At the same time, they also acknowledged that safety is never fully guaranteed. The interaction between people working in systems and people with lived experience of poverty was a novel experience for most Lab participants. Everyone joined the Lab with different levels of awareness of past and present-day legacies of racism, colonialism, and other systemic forms of oppression. It became an ongoing commitment therefore to continue to build a safe container for discussion and sharing. We also asked that everyone be open to unlearn beliefs and behaviours that perpetuate oppression, colonialism, and racism. Furthermore, we also had to pay particular attention to the emotional and spiritual needs of Indigenous participants. There are many ongoing impacts in our communities from a history of colonial violence and racism. It was important for us to allocate resources to community and cultural wellness. This helped to build a culture of care that supported people with emotional responses that might arise from triggering discussions in the lab.



7

Métis distinction-based approaches needed

There are important cultural distinctions between the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada. In Surrey, almost half the Indigenous population is Métis. Unfortunately, we were guilty of designing “Indigenous” activities that at times felt exclusionary to Métis community members. It was a hard lesson for us to hear, but one that often goes unchecked. As a result of this valuable feedback, we prioritized resources to hire a Métis Engagement Facilitator and began to design activities and engagements that recognized the distinctions in our own community. This attention to diversity enhanced our ability to carry out engagement, research, and resulted in more nuanced decision-making.





Part VI - Conclusion

By any measure, Skookum Lab has been incredibly successful at disrupting the systems that create and sustain Indigenous child poverty in Surrey. There is so much more work to do, yet our social innovation journey has brought us to a place where the urban Indigenous community is stronger, more connected and resilient, and better equipped to make Surrey a great place to raise an Indigenous child. We got here using social innovation in a very Indigenous way. In sharing this story with other Indigenous people, organizations, and communities, we hope to inspire and give examples of what we did and the impact we generated. You will have to find your own way on your journey but our hope is that our experience will help you along the way.

Even though our Skookum Lab journey has come to an end, we have committed to starting a new journey as Skookum Surrey. With Skookum Surrey, we are committed to advancing all of the learning, organizing, relationships, and advocacy we started in Skookum Lab. The Lab has come to an end but Skookum lives on!

All Our Relations,
Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee
<https://surreyindigenousleadership.ca>



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Indigenous Services
Canada

Services aux
Autochtones Canada

vancouver
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Vancity
Community Foundation



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SKOOKUM LAB



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