

## 2019 USDN EDI Fellowship - Naomi Mumbi Maina – City of Vancouver BC

“What our cities can *become* (sustainable, smart, sharing and resilient) and who is allowed to *belong* in them (recognition of difference, diversity, and a right to the city) are fundamentally and inextricably interlinked. We must therefore act on both *belonging* and *becoming*, together, using *just sustainabilities* as the anchor, or face deepening spatial and social inequities and inequalities.” - [Dr. Julian Agyeman](#)



Naomi Maina is the Equity Fellow at the City of Vancouver, working closely with CityStudio Vancouver. Her fellowship focuses on integrating equity into sustainability policy at the City of Vancouver. Originally from Kenya, Naomi has an interdisciplinary background with degrees in English, Mass Communications, Social Responsibility, and currently pursuing a Doctoral program in Environment and Sustainability at the University of Saskatchewan. Her current research interest is on how various actors are involved in the enactment of sustainability, with a focus on how historically marginalized groups can contribute to advancing sustainability in higher education policy and practice. She has worked on anti-racism organizing and cross-cultural education with African American and immigrant women in Central Minnesota; and with student groups and grassroots organizations on issues of social justice, human rights, peace, the environment, and animals. She enjoys exploring local places, spending time with family and friends, and singing with her church group. She is grateful to USDN, the City of Vancouver, and City Studio for providing the EDI fellowship where she brings her expertise to bear in their work, while learning how local governments address the pressing challenges of the Anthropocene.

Am writing this blog post as the Ecocity World Summit 2019 comes to an end here in Vancouver. Thanks to the Sustainability Group at the City of Vancouver, I was able to attend an entire day of listening, learning, connecting and getting inspired by speakers from around the world. I was particularly inspired by Professor Julian Agyman’s keynote entitled Re-imagining Equality, Living within Limits. In his talk, Professor Agyeman, who coined the term *just sustainabilities*, reminded attendees that without equity, there is no sustainability, and that “social justice never simply ‘happens’ in planning processes and outcomes. It must be intentional, implicit and front and center in our work.” These insights are a validation of the work of centering equity in sustainability planning, that I spent this past summer doing with the City of Vancouver.

I found out about this fellowship in a quite unexpected way. After moving from Saskatoon to Vancouver in the spring of 2018, I enrolled as a visiting graduate student at the University of Simon Fraser. My goal was to stay connected to an education institution as I worked to complete writing my dissertation. It is through this connection that I saw and applied for the opportunity to be the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Fellow at the [City of Vancouver](#). Offered through the [Urban Sustainability Directors Network](#) (USDN) to

seven Municipalities in the U.S. and Canada, I saw this fellowship as a great opportunity to put into action my many years of learning about social and environmental justice. More importantly, I saw this as an incredible opportunity to learn how local governments work to develop, implement and evaluate policies and practices, particularly pertaining to sustainability.

In addition to being the only EDI fellow in Canada, my fellowship was quite unique. While I would spend three months working with the Sustainability Group at the City of Vancouver, my fellowship was facilitated through [CityStudio](#) Vancouver, an innovation hub that works collaboratively with students, faculty, city staff and community members to create sustainable solutions for the city. With my background and research interests in sustainability in higher education, getting more acquainted with [CityStudio](#) projects was an important part of my connection to Vancouver.

The City of Vancouver is located in the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Indigenous Nations. It is unceded in the sense that it was never surrendered to settlers, and in 2014 the city adopted the [City of Reconciliation](#) Framework, affirming its commitment to build relationships with the three First Nations and Urban Indigenous peoples. Vancouver is recognized as one of the most sustainable cities in the world and one of the most diverse cities in Canada. While these are positive aspects of the city, there are challenges that threaten the wellbeing of all Vancouverites. For instance, the current climate crisis, unaffordable housing costs, opioid crisis, and other rising inequalities all need to be addressed to ensure that the city is habitable for current and future generations.

One of the ways that the city is addressing current challenges is through the Greenest City Action Plan 2020 (GCAP), an ambitious strategy to be the greenest city by 2020. As we approach 2020, the city is looking back to evaluate the progress that has been made, and looking ahead to plan how current initiatives can continue and be strengthened. As part of these efforts, the EDI fellowship provided an opportunity for me to review how equity was integrated in the GCAP, identify any gaps and suggest ways to address them in the new plan. My role also included supporting the development of a climate equity working group, to understand and seek ways to implement the priorities of underserved and underrepresented communities.

A key outcome of this fellowship was team learning about the meaning of equity and the process of integrating equity in environmental sustainability planning. With support from Lisa Brideau, a Senior Sustainability Specialist, and mentorship from Desiree Williams-Rajee, the USDN Equity Strategist, I began reviewing existing policies and strategies that addressed equity at the City of Vancouver, followed by a scan of best practices from other Canadian and international cities. Strategies such as the City of Reconciliation and the Healthy City Strategy at the City of Vancouver, and the racial equity work at the cities of Seattle and Portland grounded most of our learning. I shared the historical and current equity challenges and opportunities at staff meetings and developed equity guidelines that currently inform the process of centering equity in sustainability planning.

The process of co-learning and building relationships were perhaps the most valuable outcomes of this fellowship. Through curiosity and openness to learn, Lisa and I were able to connect with staff across city departments and community members who work to

address equity in Vancouver. We went on numerous coffee dates, participated in equity working groups, attended presentations and meetings, and held ongoing check-ins and conversations throughout the fellowship. These connections not only developed our understanding of how to integrate equity in our work, but also contributed to individual reflections of how we can challenge our own biases and privilege as we work towards equity. In addition, weekly EDI Fellows group calls and personal coaching from Desiree were invaluable to my learning and providing support that I needed throughout this time.

I found that one of the challenges of centring equity in sustainability planning is the uncertainty of the process and outcomes. As I attended meetings with various staff, I got the sense that there was a genuine desire to learn, but also some hesitation and concern about what this would encompass. The key concern seemed to be that considerations of equity might take over current priorities and possibly shift the direction of already set goals and action plans. While these are important concerns, especially given the tight timelines at the city, they show a need for continued conversations and education about what it means to integrate and center equity in sustainability. These concerns also highlight larger complexities of government structures that lend themselves to certain ways of doing things. For instance, there seemed to be a strategy for various issues pertaining to the city. While these provide direction for how each department plans to address particular issues, there could be better alignment between departments.

Perhaps in efforts to create more alignment, the city has begun work to develop a city-wide plan. In addition to enhancing alignment, this plan is a great opportunity for the city to strengthen its commitment to creating an equitable city. The council has also mandated the creation of an Equity Framework that will provide a unified direction of how the city will integrate equity across all departments. Housed in the Social Policy department, ongoing conversations between the equity team and the Sustainability Group have helped shape how equity is integrated in sustainability planning.

One of the main takeaways from this fellowship is that as efforts to embed equity throughout the city continue, listening to communities, particularly those who are underserved and underrepresented will be crucial. The city needs to create space for diverse voices to be included in decision-making, with strong accountability processes built into city structures. Although deadlines are important to meet, it was clear to me that adequate time is needed to develop effective processes of building relationships and connecting with communities.

Thinking back to the ideas of *just sustainabilities*, it will be difficult to realize sustainability without addressing social inequities. The City of Vancouver has committed to building strong relationships with the local First Nations, Urban Indigenous peoples, and other historically marginalized communities. These efforts are initial steps towards creating a city that is equitable, sustainable and prosperous. I am confident that through this fellowship I have contributed towards this goal and paved the way for other fellows and staff to continue with this work.