

INCLUSIVE DESIGN

IN PRACTICE

**A case study and exploration of opportunities,
tensions, and lessons in implementing
inclusive design for more equitable and
community-led solutions.**





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
About the Authors	7
What is Inclusive Design?	8
• Notice	9
• Reflect	9
Inclusive Design in Application	11
Inclusive Design - Lessons Learned	
• Empathize	15
• Define	21
• Ideate	24
• Prototype and Test	27
Conclusion	31
Resources	33

INTRODUCTION

The following shares the experience of inclusive design in application. Through our case study, we aim to illuminate challenges, overcome tensions, and provide helpful tips for other purpose-driven professionals seeking more equitable and community-led solutions to address the challenges of our time.

Here's where we began:

Since 2002, [DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society](#) (DIVERSEcity) has been working within Surrey, and its surrounding community, to deliver culturally responsive Food Security Programs. With the challenge of ongoing demand and limited resources, DIVERSEcity focuses on community engagement and research to seek more impactful and financially sustainable solutions to address this challenge.

From March to September 2021, DIVERSEcity and [RADIUS SFU](#) worked together, building off previous efforts, to further assess the viability of an enterprising concept to foster food security in Surrey. We desired a community-centred process, pulling lessons from various inclusive design methodologies, to design solution(s) that will:

- meet community needs by being co-created with the community rather than for the community
- leverage and celebrate community and organizational strengths
- foster potential for financial self-sufficiency
- have a potential long-term impact on reducing food insecurity in the region.

Through our application of inclusive design, the RADIUS and DIVERSEcity project team faced barriers that challenged our ability to successfully apply these methodologies towards co-creation. Key barriers are the:

- tensions between inclusive design requirements and our **ingrained dominant cultural norms**. Inclusive design requires us to oppose many of our cultural norms such as a constant sense of urgency, the need for perfectionism, and the value placed on outputs of quantity over quality, to name a few. We must address these tensions as they arise in both our practice and behaviours at the individual, the institutional, and the sectoral level;

- practical difficulties of equitable community engagement. Inclusive design methodologies seek the participation of voices that have been both systematically marginalized and will be most impacted by the challenge being addressed. In practice, how do we balance participant outreach without overburdening the community so that we can create dynamics for true co-creation?

What do we mean by ingrained dominant cultural norms?

White Dominant Culture Norms have been defined by Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones as the “explicit to subtle ways that the norms, preferences, and fears of white European descended people overwhelmingly shape how we organize our work and institutions, see ourselves and others, interact with one another and, with time, make decisions.”

In later sections, we refer to a few of these norms, and you can learn more about them [here](#).

What follows will summarize the project team's learnings, and share them with other not-for-profits and organizations seeking to apply inclusive design practices to address these key barriers to designing solutions for the communities we aim to serve.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lead author: **RADIUS** is a social innovation hub based out of Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Beedie School of Business. We believe an economy that works for everyone is dynamic, just, sustainable, and resilient. To support our vision, we deliver programs to collaboratively develop, test, and accelerate innovative responses to tough social problems. Drawing on this leading-edge work, we also offer training, events, and educational opportunities to build collective capacity to respond to the challenges of our time. Our organization's vision is to transform the economy through collaboration and community engagement. A tenant of this work is to recognize our unique position and share our experiences and learnings (from working alongside diverse communities) while embedding and centring Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) principles into our work. RADIUS operates on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh), qíćəy̓ (Katzie), kʷíkʷə ʼəm (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, and Tsawwassen peoples on whose unceded traditional territories the three SFU campuses reside.

Co-author: **DIVERSEcity's** mandate is to support immigrants, refugees, and other diverse communities to build the life they want in Canada. For more than 40 years, DIVERSEcity has contributed to the development of inclusive and diverse communities in Surrey and beyond. The organization is rooted within the community, building partnerships that enable the provision of culturally responsive, wraparound services to support the livelihoods of refugees and immigrants through settlement, employment, community engagement, mental health, violence prevention, and language programs.

We thank DIVERSEcity for its openness and willingness to share this project as a tangible example of what inclusive design looks like in practice. Through their transparency to share learnings, they hope to support other organizations in their application of inclusive design.

Funder acknowledgement: RADIUS and DIVERSEcity would like to recognize that this market research and validation initiative was supported by the Vancouver Foundation as well as the Employment and Social Development Canada's (EDSC) Investment Readiness Fund which focuses on early-stage innovation.

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE DESIGN?

The social sector engages in processes of design every day that range in scale from surveys, onboarding processes, recruitment strategies, and new programs or services. Design frameworks provide methodologies, phases of approach, and sets of tools for hosting these processes to create solutions. Design thinking is one solution-finding technique that originated from the product design world but has since been widely adopted across sectors. It highlights a process of five phases to designing solutions:

- **Empathize:** develop a deep understanding of the challenge
- **Define:** clearly articulate the problem to be solved
- **Ideate:** brainstorm potential solutions
- **Prototype:** try out an idea in the simplest way possible
- **Test:** use a continuous short-cycle innovation process to improve the design

For the social sector and not-for-profit field, in particular, the framework highlighted important recognitions that challenged traditional norms of the sector and provided alternative ways to approach design. These include:

- **Encouraging investment into the design process:** our funding norms seek to support the solution deployment rather than the investment in the process; therefore, research is considered and solutions are generated. The inclusive design model brought attention to the importance of the solution development process to the success of implementation
- **Testing in small iterations:** needing to have the solution presented to receive funding also creates a culture of jumping straight from ideation to launch, whereas design thinking introduced the concept of starting small and testing in small iterations to improve and build upon over time
- **Learning from “failure”:** in a culture that fears failure, the fear of losing resourcing leads to constant pressure to provide a positive response for donors, funders, etc. Design thinking reframed “failures” as an opportunity to learn and refine solutions

However, the design thinking process fails to recognize and address the power which the designer holds throughout: from the ability to choose who they seek to empathize with, to how they interpret these results, to the solutions chosen to prototype.

Within the context and position of providing social services, there can be various enablers to not acknowledging and rectifying the power dynamic at play or our potential individual biases brought to the process. Within the not-for-profit and social sector, we often do not see ourselves as designers in our field and scarcity mindsets instill a sense of urgency to deliver versus taking the time to invest in the design process.

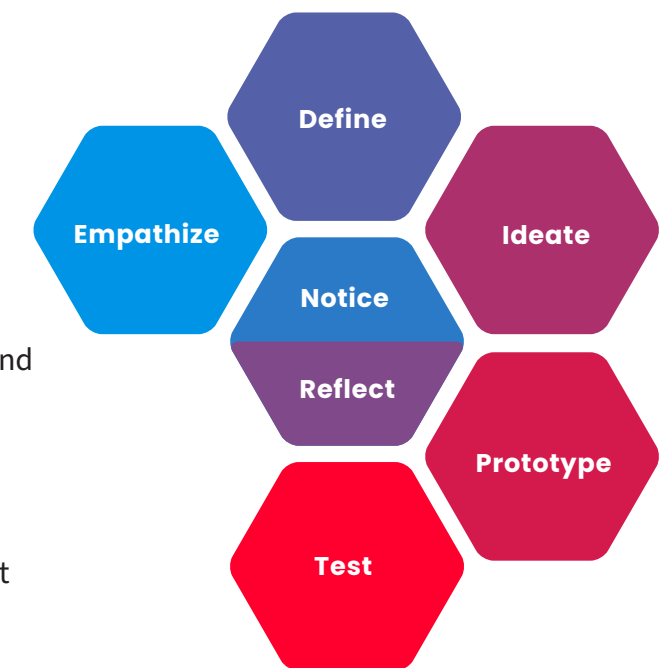
Without acknowledging the power and potential biases we bring to the design process, as both individuals and organizations, we can inadvertently perpetuate harmful practices and fail to create solutions that truly meet the needs of the communities we seek to support.

Expanding to equitable design practices

Inclusive design practices seek to identify systems-level barriers and catalyze community-led solutions to address gaps. Two examples are Equity-Centered Design (ECD) founded by Liberatory Design, and Equity-Centered Community Design (ECCD) founded by Creative Reaction Lab. ECD guides designers to understand that the role and position of a designer are to centre those that are most impacted by the challenge at every phase of the design process and (through ongoing reflection) pause to address and dismantle the power dynamics that create barriers to true co-creation.

In addition to the phases of traditional Design Thinking (Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test), ECD adds two more stages to be centred throughout each phase of the design process:

- **Notice:** acknowledging and building critical self-awareness, from both an individual and organizational lens, in order to enter the design process ready to co-create. By shifting power to, and centring the voices of, those most impacted by the design work community needs will be centred throughout each phase of the design process
- **Reflect:** taking a pause to notice emotions and reflect on learnings ensures equity and inclusion are embedded during each phase of the design process



Through the addition of these two phases, **ECD seeks to design solutions with, not for, and alongside communities to create meaningful and transformative change. These processes create conditions for collective liberation and result in reciprocal, (re)built community relationships.** Shifting our design processes to embed inclusive design practices begins with a shift in how organizations perceive their role in the community. This can be leveraged with responsive practices to have community member input integrated into every phase of the design process, co-creating the solutions. Of course, utilizing processes of inclusive design is easier said than done. But by continuing to reflect on our individual role and power as designers and decision-makers, taking the time to reflect on lessons from past design processes, and investing the time to strengthen our internal capacity, we can continue to improve our skills in centring equity in all our work.

What follows is the collective reflection by RADIUS and DIVERSEcity on the complexity and necessity of engaging in inclusive design practices through all aspects of a project.



INCLUSIVE DESIGN IN APPLICATION

With a mandate to support immigrants and refugees (and other diverse communities) in building the life they want in Canada, DIVERSEcity has served and worked in and with communities, across Surrey and the Lower Mainland, to support and deliver programs for settlement, employment, and food security. Surrey, British Columbia, is one of Canada's fastest-growing municipalities. With a large racialized and newcomer population, the community is facing significant food insecurity.

Current DIVERSEcity programs include community kitchens and gardens, food and health literacy, as well as advocacy programs. The sustainability of these programs is an ongoing struggle and now with increased demand and a need to adapt in-person services due to the global pandemic, the challenge grows.

Need:

an estimated 43,463 racialized residents lack access to culturally appropriate and affordable foods.

Empathize and Define

In early 2020, DIVERSEcity had begun pivoting away from traditional food services and, simultaneously, sought to explore its long-term role in responding to the food security and justice needs of its community. They explored the idea of a social enterprise as a means of supporting current community-led food security and justice initiatives. DIVERSEcity executed a variety of research before moving forward with developing initial concepts that included:

- conducting two analyses related to its role and capacity for food justice: a Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal (PESTEL); and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analyses
- gathering internal and external data on newcomers/racialized individuals and food insecurity/food justice in Surrey including an in-depth developmental evaluation conducted with food security clients
- conducting background research into food-based businesses in Surrey, circular food economies, and business/programmatic best practices relative to food loss/waste reduction

- launching a key stakeholder engagement process with food justice actors (locally, provincially, and interprovincially) with the objectives of: determining DIVERSEcity's potential role in a food-based social enterprise; understanding its mandate/capacity to supporting food justice for newcomers; and seeking guidance on best practice responses for social enterprises promoting food justice for newcomers

Ideate

This next step provided a common understanding and foundation for DIVERSEcity along with several food justice actors to define their challenge.

With this challenge in mind, DIVERSEcity hosted multiple 'Innovation Days' with key food justice actors and stakeholders to ideate solutions. What emerged were four social enterprise concepts to be moved forward for further iteration, including a brief feasibility assessment for each concept developed.

Prototype and Test

DIVERSEcity then successfully received funding through the EDSC's Investment Readiness Fund to test one of its four concepts further and move towards launching a prototype. For these next steps, DIVERSEcity engaged RADIUS to support further testing and assess the viability of this selected concept.

Concept:

An online food marketplace connecting Surrey "foodpreneurs" for cooperative bulk purchasing, and redirecting additional/recovered food to racialized residents experiencing food insecurity.

Challenge:

"How might we empower newcomers to become the co-ordinators (leads), to harness the resources and grow the number of food security actors so that they have greater access to culturally specific and healthy food and become ambassadors to educate/dispel myths?"

In the next stages, the project team worked to prioritize input and voices from those most impacted by the challenge and potential solution. This included refugees and immigrants, racialized food insecure Surrey residents, newcomer/racialized smaller foodpreneurs in Surrey, and other newcomers/racialized entrepreneurs. However, when the solution was put forward to these audiences, through an initial survey and direct outreach for interviews, the team found that it did not resonate, align with community needs, or inspire participation.

Notice and Reflect

The project team was required to step back and reflect on the process that led to the current solution. From this reflection, the team had to admit that, despite positive intentions and a desire to utilize inclusive design practices, these methodologies and processes required significant unlearning and relearning in order to successfully implement a solution that would meet community needs. We needed to take a step back and strengthen DIVERSEcity Staff skills to combat our widely accepted, interconnected, and systemic dominant cultural norms. These included, but were not limited to, our shared norms, comfort, and preferences towards:

- **Quantity over quality:** metrics of successful engagement being measured by quantity, instead of a focus on quality, led to a high quantity of input that perhaps missed necessary context and details
- **Sense of urgency:** the value placed on speed, efficiency, and fast results led to jumping to narrowing solutions too quickly
- **Perfectionism:** a desire to have the right answer now and fearing failure led to the potential need to return to previous phases to find the correct solution

Rather than continue with the solutions proposed, DIVERSEcity determined it necessary to first work internally and reflect on the process to-date, collect learnings, and strengthen internal capacity and skills, in order to go back and ideate again towards a new solution. This was not considered a failure, but a rich opportunity for learning. What follows are the lessons learned.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN: LESSONS LEARNED

RADIUS' principle *"to be open and continue learning to improve our practice"*, is shared by DIVERSEcity: Therefore, we both offered our insights and learnings from our own application, in each phase, as well as the overall planning of the design process. Our hope and aspiration are, that through being transparent with our reflections, we may help other organizations and decision-makers in using the inclusive design process towards more equitable and impactful solutions.

The following are our experiences with the challenges and tensions that may arise at each phase of the inclusive design process, along with key reflections and tips to begin addressing them. We note that the process is rarely (if ever) linear, and tensions may be relevant interchangeably at other phases. However, this structure provides a starting point to begin to notice and reflect on each step of the design process.

Tip

Before beginning any design process we encourage:

- incorporating inclusive design methodologies and practices from the beginning
- conducting internal capacity building, requiring self-reflection of the team's role within the specified problem areas, and engaging strategies on how to acknowledge and address biases and dominant culture norms through the design process
- engaging inclusive design facilitators that have shared lived experiences, have relationships with or can bring an equity lens to working with community members.
- giving your process the necessary time and space for noticing, reflecting, adjustment, and meaningful engagement.

Empathize:

develop a deep understanding
of the challenge

Addressing power

Processes for engaging communities must be done in a respectful and inclusive manner, honouring the expertise and knowledge held, while providing the space to address the potential historical contexts in which power dynamics and relationships might need healing and repair.

What happened: Community member representatives, affected by food security in the Surrey region, were consulted towards ideating solutions using various methods including surveys and third-party research. While the outputs of these processes were utilized in the development of the initial concepts, there was little resonance when a solution was brought back to the community.

Tip

Before engaging in outreach, reflect on the historical contexts of relationships held by yourself and your organization. For true co-creation to exist, participation in the design process must first address these historical contexts and potential power imbalances.

Community engagement practices should consider:

- providing compensation to recognize the expertise of all parties and costs associated with participation (e.g. potential loss of income, child care, and transportation costs)
- the dynamic among community participants and other service providers. Is it a balance of power? Is there a prior and/or potential mistrust? How can virtual or in-person events be arranged and facilitated for all parties to meaningfully participate?
- be transparent with your goals of the process and how the information will be used with the aim to provide clarity and safety for all participants.

“Upon reflection, did we do sufficient and/or necessary forms of community engagement before moving onto the ideation phase and developing concepts in detail?” – DIVERSEcity Staff

Language

Various audiences may require different language to engage in the design thinking process. Funders and service partners may desire specific terminology, but jargon can potentially make communication challenging to broader communities. Therefore review and adapt the language for participant audiences.

What happened: Terms such as “food insecurity”; “virtual circular food economy”; “digital platform”; and “cooperative bulk purchasing” are potentially attractive to a funder but can be limiting when engaging with communities as they are not commonly used in relation to the formal economy. In this case, we may have reduced opportunities to hear knowledge the community held to teach us in regards to repurposing, reusing, and reducing waste in food production processes through informal practices.

“While we concentrated on making the survey plain language, with translation support made available, there was less attention given to the formality and accessibility of language used to invite participants to complete the survey. We overly utilized formal words and concepts that on reflection were often inaccessible – if we have to define a word, then we should probably just remove the word and search for a simple phrase.” – DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

Prior to engaging participants and stakeholders, reflect on the language being used to communicate your challenge and/or solution. Will the language invite participation and interest? Will the language honour and celebrate the community’s expertise and cultural understanding of the challenge? Can the words be translated into colloquial terms to increase language access? Continue to reflect on these questions throughout the design process to adapt, adjust, and work towards greater accessibility and inclusion.

Engaging staff across positions

In large organizations, it can feel efficient to have managers and/or teams that are individually responsible for designing solutions. They bring unique skills; however, staff can also have limited capacity left to participate in organizational design processes. We encourage efforts to engage all staff. In particular, front-line staff have a unique and often more direct relationship with clients than other team members.

What happened: While there had been deep engagement with the front-line staff for the project's initial data gathering, their input and engagement were not continued into the ideation phase; therefore, we lost key lenses of experience/expertise. The front-line staff could have supported both the outreach to clients and the community, as well as shared expertise in designing the solution.

"We missed an opportunity to continue to really engage front-line staff in the development of the concepts before they were then asked to engage community members in providing feedback to the selected concept. It can be really challenging to create adequate space for all levels of staff to participate in such processes, but it's crucial; not just for staff buy in, but for the insight, vision, and lived experience they bring." – DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

Build a team and organizational process that enables more organic forms of evaluation measurement. Do this by utilizing the knowledge and expertise of front-line service workers to provide valuable information to drive organizational improvements. Regular input and feedback received from clients and the community should be continuously collected, harvested, and used to inform organizational decision-making.

Leveraging existing clients

Engaging first with the organization's own client community can be a good starting point as opposed to attempting to initiate new conversations and relationships with a broader external community. However, we sometimes leave our current client's input untapped. Find opportunities to engage in reciprocal and equitable relationship building by allowing both parties to highlight their needs - potentially pointing the way to new opportunities for engagement and solutions.

What happened: DIVERSEcity engages in day-to-day interactions with clients that are consistently providing valuable input and context to community needs; however, some concern rose in engaging clients further on ideation for food insecurity solutions for fear of over exhausting this audience and/or leading clients to be concerned that their feedback could impact their access to current supports.

"The timing of the consultation around the concept, due to the funding period for the project, coincided with clients and communities still experiencing overwhelm and anxiety during the pandemic; much of which was food security related. This generated a lot of concern about re-engaging clients about something like a social enterprise and led to the assumption that communities were simply tapped out. In fact, the pandemic also completely changed community needs in food security. The concept had been developed during a pre-pandemic period and was unlikely to still hold much relevance." – DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

Provide safety for participants and be clear that any input will not affect other services they may already be receiving from your organization. Leverage other events you may already be hosting and/or find ways to make research/feedback opportunities equally valuable to the clients. For example, hosting a meal equally fosters connection opportunities for clients.

Tension/challenge map gaps in representation

Moving beyond staff and current clients is necessary to expand the reach and meet the needs of underserved communities; however, be strategic in clearly identifying missing voices that align with the challenge being addressed.

What happened: Although DIVERSEcity Staff, including the management team, is an estimated 95% racialized group of folks who have lived experience as refugees/immigrants (some having experienced food insecurity themselves), it is still important to engage beyond staff and current clients. No individual experience may be the same, but the context of the staffs'/clients' own experience of immigration may have also changed.

Tip

It is important to identify gaps within the staff and client identities and experiences when looking at the problem being addressed (e.g. are the clients recent newcomers, experiencing financial insecurity, or immigrating from particular regions or contexts?) Building partnerships with community organizations that have relationships and access to additional networks can be a great place to start expanding reach beyond current clients.

“COVID greatly restricted in-person opportunities. We made use of internal and external networks, but we pivoted too quickly to surveys and interviews without also exploring alternative means of engagement that could have increased accessibility, such as creative focus groups (e.g. using our learning from COVID of online groups with clients with limited digital literacy and access). The over-reliance on existing networks also meant we missed communities and community members that were not necessarily attached to organizations.”
– DIVERSEcity Staff

Define:

clearly articulate the problem to be solved

Defining the challenge

Narrowing down your problem statement can be the most difficult part of the design process and can set you up for success or failure throughout the process. Problem statements should be defined with the community, based on need, and then provide a shared understanding to engage the broader community and/or partners on solutions.

What happened: “How might we address food insecurity for newcomers in Surrey?” is too broad a problem statement. This problem requires further specificity to narrow down the key challenge that is creating food insecurity and further clarify the audience impacted by the challenge so their needs can be addressed.

Tip

Problem statements should find a balance: seek openness to not restrict solutions and avoid being too broad that it provides focus. Be clear on the problem statement and continue to refine by asking – what assumptions have I made in defining the problem?

“Even coming to a common understanding and definition of a term like “food security” was challenging given the complexities of current food systems.” – DIVERSEcity Staff

Solution focus vs. problem understanding

It can be an ongoing challenge to step out of our dominant cultural norm that leans toward a focus on solution generation. It can be humbling and uncertain to remain with a problem statement and hold back from jumping to solutions – especially given pressures in our sector to respond rapidly. However, not holding back can result in a missed opportunity to engage in the necessary design processes altogether. Too quickly transitioning from problem defining to the ideation phase risks limiting the generation of new ideas.

What happened: “How might we encourage newcomers to participate in the virtual food economy?” This problem statement has already defined a virtual food economy as the solution and it is now unclear what a virtual food economy is solving. The statement also assumes that there currently isn’t any newcomer participation already in a virtual food economy.

“Jumping to solutions was one of the hardest instincts to navigate for just about everyone who engaged in this process. Much of this stems from our sector and the pressure to always have a response or solution. It was incredibly hard to remain in a place of curiosity and questioning to really understand the issue at hand, without positioning ourselves as the folks to ‘fix’ the issue.” – DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

With our dislike for uncertainty we are inclined to jump to solutions but be careful and avoid placing solutions into the problem statement. Instead, be explicit, separate spaces and conversations to understand root causes and do not require solutions from participants.

Ideate:

brainstorm potential solutions

Need vs. sustainability

Through the design process there can be a conflicting tension when seeking enterprising ideas as sometimes there are opposing interests in serving the need and developing a financially viable solution. The result can sometimes make it unclear what you are trying to solve for and/or limit opportunities deemed feasible. If you can become clearer on the challenge first, and the potential solutions necessary for the user, you can then ideate how to make the solution enterprising.

What happened: There was a clear need for our solution to be enterprising and ideally to support the sustainability of other existing food security programs; however, this may have limited the initial solutions explored.

Tip

Distinguish clear phases of the ideation processes. Begin with brainstorming solutions to address community needs, and follow up in separate ideation for opportunities to make solutions enterprising.

“The funding challenges within our sector, and in food security in particular, meant that there were often high expectations placed on the solution and the need to pivot to exploring self-sustaining options. It was also hard to separate the nature of a potential social enterprise from funded programs, which in turn may have limited ideas scoped.” – DIVERSEcity Staff



Focus on creating “new” ideas

Although innovation can also be the adaptation of current processes to new challenges, we often focus on having the most novel idea as this is largely what is rewarded and celebrated within our dominant cultural norms and through the competitiveness of funding environments. This focus, however, can encourage us to lose sight of learning from existing best practices and/or overlooking informal practices that already exist.

What happened: The generation of ideas to address the challenge sought to leverage existing DIVERSEcity resources and mapped community needs, but only one concept was selected to be further tested, validated, and prototyped. Focusing on the one concept meant a missed opportunity to review and shore up work that may already be happening within the community.

“The idea of the circular food economy and cooperative bulk buying for racialized residents was seen as exciting and a way to address many systemic issues with one solution. We got very attached to this being ‘the’ solution.” – DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

Within the ideation process, you don’t have to start with a blank slate. What is already happening, and can it be maximized? Who is already doing this work, and can we collaborate or amplify it? What is happening in other communities that could be adapted?

Prototype/Test:

try out an idea in the simplest way possible and continue a short-cycle innovation process to improve the design

Quantity over quality

A common norm or understanding of success is “the more, the better.” But setting success measures by quantity can cause us to ignore the quality of these interactions. In design processes, this can show up by setting high standards for the number of people reached through the research rather than focusing on who are the right people to provide input?

What happened: Targets and commitments, related to our research funding, led to setting significantly high targets for the number of individuals reached (by focus groups and survey outreach) rather than having alternative metrics to assess if meaningful input was contributed from these tools.

“Given these had been expressed in an approved funding application, it was also difficult to let go of these targets and pivot to focusing on the richness of input that was already coming through and quickly telling us that the proposed solution was unlikely to be viable.” – DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

Where possible, question and reframe what you are centring as measurements of success from an initiative and explore how you can capture the quality of interactions vs. just the quantity. Share these quality metrics with funders and partners, they too may be seeking better ways to measure the impact of their initiatives.

Perfectionism and fear of failure

We are often rewarded for having the right answer and solution, but not for asking the right questions. In the not-for-profit and charitable sectors resources are limited and a scarce-based mentality limits our openness to experimentation and learning. Therefore, seeking the right questions can be seen as a failure instead of a step toward continuing to improve the solution. These pressures are reinforced through the granting process, where you need to have solutions in order to receive funding. The focus is on reporting successes rather than what might not have worked. These ongoing cycles of funding can lead to a lack of testing and jumping into solutions without piloting and testing them first.

What happened: The Investment Readiness Fund, which supported DIVERSEcity’s research into piloting a solution, was a unique funding opportunity to further research a potential solution. But in many ways, there remained the traditional fear that the proposed solution had to work. We had to overcome the desire to proceed with the proposed solution and be ok to step back and understand what we had learned in order to adapt and proceed.

“This was one of the hardest instincts to recognize and unlearn: the fear of failure - despite this being a key part of the prototyping and testing process. We felt that accountability meant finishing this process with a viable working solution and had to really reflect on how to listen to the community feedback that was coming in and admit that something wasn’t working. We were not going to finish this process with a perfect prototype in a neat little package.” – DIVERSEcity Staff


Tip

Where possible, leverage unique research funding opportunities to remove any notion of what solutions need to come from the research in order to be open to all solutions. Start by creating small initiatives within your organization where staff are supported and allowed to test ideas without fear of the outcome.

Urgency and lack of time

Time is of the essence. With finite staff capacity and being continuously on a granting timeline to show results, we can have limited space and time to build the trust and relationships required to engage in fruitful inclusive engagement. Jumping straight to solutions, and skipping the testing and prototyping phases, can seem more efficient but this often does not create long-term, sustainable solutions.

What happened: We set various restrictive timelines, imposed through our funding commitments and the need to see “results” internally. These strict timelines impeded deeper engagement and did not allow a chance to pause and reflect which would have supported progress towards a sustainable solution.



“Capacity constraints is one of the biggest challenges in our sector and often drives quick responsive decisions rather than slow, intentional development of a solution: with funding models often contributing to this. It’s been humbling to try and cultivate patience and think in terms of sustainability rather than immediacy.”
– DIVERSEcity Staff

Tip

Where possible, make space to think long-term. In the long run, what processes will help the communities you seek to serve? The more you embed inclusive design practices, the more beneficial the relationships will develop and can support the timelines necessary for future initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges of overcoming our dominant cultural norms, investing in our skills and capacity for inclusive design practices can significantly transform our organizations and communities. Start the process from within by providing an awareness of the impact of our individual roles, lenses, and biases that we each bring to our work. We can then utilize this awareness to transform our relationship with our colleagues, partners, and communities with the aim of true co-creation. We hope you join the opportunity to reflect on and learn from past design experiences and utilize these shared learnings to move towards more inclusive design processes in the future.

“Inclusive design requires consistently and consciously selecting to pull away from our dominant cultural norms and choosing an alternative path. When these norms are embedded through our organizational practices and reinforced through our granting and funding models, this is no easy feat. But as purpose-driven professionals, we each have an opportunity to begin to move our sector toward a new path, one of transformation and co-creation.”– RADIUS

“Success (likely) may not occur immediately but learning together we can continue to improve our ability to move from reiterating existing challenges to solutions that meet communities for lasting impact.” – DIVERSEcity



RESOURCES

Here are some helpful resources to learn more about specific inclusive design methodologies:

- [Dismantling the Master's Tools by Mathura Mahendren](#)
- [Equity Centered Community Design, Creative Reaction Lab](#)
- [Equity Centered Design, Liberatory Design](#)
- [Equity X Design by Caroline Hill, Michelle Molitor, and Christine Ortize](#)
- [Systems Change in Deep Equity by Sheryl Petty and Mark Leach](#)

