

PIBC Student Internship Program

Evaluating Equity and Justice in Vancouver's Sea2City Design Challenge

Tira Okamoto, MRM-Planning, Simon Fraser University
Summer-Fall 2023 PIBC Student-led Internship

Like many coastal cities, the City of Vancouver has brought greater focus to coastal adaptation planning in the last decade. In 2021, the City of Vancouver launched the Sea2City Design Challenge, a sea level rise design challenge in False Creek, a narrow inlet bordering downtown Vancouver on the unceded, traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səliłwətaʔ Nations.

The challenge brought together City staff, international design teams, Indigenous cultural advisors, youth, community representatives, and technical advisors to develop design concepts for adapting to a rising False Creek. Now complete, Sea2City presents unique lessons learned for shaping future coastal adaptation across Vancouver and beyond.

Research Aim

As a case study, this research applies the JustAdapt framework to the Sea2City Design Challenge to better understand how the challenge incorporated equity and justice into its process and outcomes. This research sees equity (fair distribution of climate adaptation actions and supports) as distinctly different from justice (dismantling extractive systems to lessen climate impacts).

Developed by the researchers of this case study, the JustAdapt framework is a new evaluative framework for planning professionals and academics alike to bring greater accountability to their equitable adaptation work. The JustAdapt framework presents five forms of justice – **procedural** (process), **distributive** (outcomes), **recognitional** (acknowledgement), **intergenerational** (generational thinking), and **epistemic** (diverse worldviews valued) – as integral for realizing just urban coastal adaptation.

Methods

Methods included two rounds of semi-structured interviews with nine Sea2City participants, surveys, participant observation, and document analysis. NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to code examples of the five forms of justice across the data.

Results

Three findings stood out from applying the JustAdapt framework. First, procedural justice (192) was coded the most, and intergenerational (41) and epistemic (40) were coded the least. Second, there were more examples of equity being actioned rather than justice. Third, valuable insights were shared on lack of actions around each form of justice.

Sea2City's **successes** included (1) prioritizing Indigenous knowledge and decolonizing coastal adaptation approaches; (2) a culture of learning; and (3) flexibility concerning budget and time.

Key learnings included: (A) the pivotal role of the Indigenous cultural advisors in the process; (B) transformational experiences for some Sea2City participants in (un)learning

dominant design and adaptation practices; (C) youth calling for a stronger seat at the coastal adaptation planning table; and (D) a lack of focus on engaging specific equity-denied populations.

Three main **recommendations** for the City of Vancouver emerged: (1) Make equity a priority in future coastal adaptation in False Creek in addition to decolonization; (2) Conduct an equity audit in False Creek; and (3) Consider opportunities to increase the decision-making power of youth and community representatives.

Conclusion

Coastal adaptation planners have identified equity and justice as important guiding principles in their plans, yet tangible outcomes and clear evaluation are lacking. Through this case study, this research hopes to inspire future projects in their efforts towards evaluating equitable and just coastal adaptation.

Tira Okamoto is a Senior Policy Analyst with BC Climate Action Secretariat working on disaster and climate resilience planning.

