



# The Business Case for Community Benefits Agreements in Publicly Funded Infrastructure Projects



# Partners



The Diversity Institute conducts and co-ordinates multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians; the changing nature of skills and competencies; and the policies, processes, and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by equity-deserving groups, leading practices to effect change, and producing concrete results.



TCBN is a community and labour coalition of over 120 member organizations that promotes economic inclusion for all Toronto residents. Working in tandem with community-based organizations, labour and other partners, it envisions Toronto as an inclusive, thriving city in which all residents have equitable opportunities to contribute to building healthy communities and a prospering economy.

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# Executive Summary

Infrastructure provides an important foundation to support economic growth and quality of life. Statistics Canada defines infrastructure as “the physical structures and systems that support the production of goods and services and their delivery to and consumption by governments, businesses and citizens”. This includes economic assets (e.g., roads, railways, transportation services, energy generation, water and wastewater systems) and social assets (e.g., educational, healthcare, and recreational facilities). Additionally, digital infrastructure has emerged as both a physical asset class (e.g., data centres, fibre networks, wireless towers) and a critical enabler for other infrastructure sectors (e.g., transportation, energy, agriculture) that increasingly depend on virtual components such as digital control systems, data platforms, and AI models. As a result, digital and physical infrastructure networks are becoming increasingly interconnected, creating new opportunities for growth and investment.

Demand for investment in critical infrastructure in Canada, including large-scale regional and national projects, has increased with population growth, aging assets, and chronic

under-investment. Canada’s infrastructure deficit is estimated to range between \$150 billion and \$1 trillion. Consequently, coordinated public investments are essential to support sustainable and inclusive growth.

Another challenge is labour shortage. For example, over 700,000 of Canada’s skilled tradespeople are set to retire by the end of the decade. At the same time, labour shortages



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and skills gaps are significant issues impacting related industries critical to infrastructure delivery, such as transportation and logistics, utilities, and engineering, among others. To address these challenges, it is essential to proactively recruit and provide employment and training opportunities for members of equity-deserving groups, including women, Indigenous Peoples, immigrants, racialized people, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and persons living with disabilities, who have traditionally been underrepresented in these industries. Tapping into a more diverse workforce can help mitigate labour shortages.

While infrastructure projects can have positive impacts on local communities, their development has also been linked to gentrification, displacement, and erosion of community identity. Addressing these potential negative impacts demands that infrastructure projects consider the

communities they serve and provide opportunities to affected residents. Community benefits agreements (CBAs) have emerged as a powerful tool in this context. A CBA is a legally binding contract, setting forth a range of community benefits regarding a development project, and resulting from substantial community involvement. Benefits typically include targeted hiring from equity-deserving groups, job training, apprenticeships, business opportunities for local suppliers and social enterprises, affordable housing, community amenities, and public realm improvements.

This report aims to develop a comprehensive business case for CBAs in the context of publicly funded infrastructure projects in Canada. The study will build on the Toronto Community Benefits Network's (TCBN) prior success with Metrolinx, which integrated CBAs into major transit projects.



The key components of the study include:

1

A comprehensive review of existing literature on CBAs that highlights best practices and challenges.

2

A review of CBAs from four major Canadian infrastructure projects (Vancouver Olympic Village, Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit(LRT), Rexdale–Casino Woodbine, and Gordie Howe International Bridge) that will provide insights into workforce development and training, local procurement opportunities, and community impact.

3

Interviews with key partners to capture diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of CBAs, along with any operational challenges.

4

Developing a business case for CBAs to provide a structured rationale for investment and demonstrate how they can generate long-term value for communities.

The business case developed for this study is divided into four components. Each component of the business case integrates CBA research with insights gathered from the interviews to ensure that the analysis reflects community and project realities.

> **The strategic case** explores how CBAs can align infrastructure investments with broader regional goals and policy objectives

(e.g., social inclusion, economic opportunity, community development, etc.) and the conditions required to make this possible.

- > **The economic case** examines how infrastructure projects can deliver benefits to local communities – targeted employment, training, and procurement opportunities that can address systemic barriers to workforce participation and stimulate local economic growth.
- > **The financial case** evaluates the fiscal benefits of CBAs related to wages, capital and operational costs, and potential savings or efficiencies over time.
- > **The deliverability and operations case** illustrates how transparent governance, data-driven planning, and inclusive engagement can support the effective implementation of CBAs.

Recommendations for the successful implementation of CBAs are based on insights drawn from the major components of the study (literature review, Canadian CBA case studies, interviews, business case). Additionally, recommendations were developed to align with the four aspects of the business case (the strategic case, the economic case, the financial case, and the deliverability and operations case) to ensure that they address a broad range of considerations.

## Strategic recommendations

- > A mix of formal and informal community engagement strategies should be employed to encourage representation from equity-deserving groups and to help identify community priorities.
- > Fostering long-term collaborative relationships between partners (e.g., developers, government, community groups) can help identify shared goals and solve issues as they arise.
- > Increasing education efforts can raise awareness about the benefits of CBAs beyond workforce outcomes.
- > Conducting ongoing research can help CBA advocates and practitioners learn and adapt best practices from other jurisdictions.
- > Practitioners should continue to develop and update toolkits, templates, and guides to support more effective CBA delivery and implementation.
- > Developers and contractors should incorporate anti-racism and anti-discrimination practices through inclusive hiring and worksite policies.

## Economic recommendations

- > Hiring should prioritize local residents and equity-deserving groups, with structured pathways for employment and training.
- > Wraparound supports are required for individuals experiencing complex employment barriers (e.g., homelessness, mental health and addiction issues) to support their re-entry into the labour market.

- > Mandate procurement targets that allocate significant project spending towards local, small, and diverse businesses.
- > Invest in apprenticeships, training, and workforce development to build a pipeline of skilled workers who can support both current and future infrastructure projects.
- > Social return on investment (SROI) analysis should be integrated throughout the planning and implementation phases of CBAs to better forecast and evaluate social and economic outcomes.

## Financial recommendations

- > Mandate fair and equitable wages for all workers, along with transparent wage negotiations and payroll monitoring.
- > Developers must be educated about the potential cost savings of CBAs, such as those resulting from local hiring (e.g., reduced travel and accommodation expenses).
- > Government funding can be leveraged to offset implementation costs borne by developers where appropriate.
- > CBA investments should align with broader policy goals and supplement investments from other levels of government (e.g., federal, provincial, municipal).
- > Incorporate community input to prioritize and rationalize CBA investments.

## Deliverability and operations recommendations

- > Clear and measurable targets for hiring, training, procurement, and investments should be established early in the CBA process.
- > Develop transparent reporting mechanisms that track progress against targets and publish results through progress reports and publicly accessible dashboards.
- > Data management protocols must protect confidential and personally identifiable information, particularly from equity-deserving groups.
- > Multi-party governance structures that bring together government, development, labour, and community representatives can help guide CBA planning and implementation.
- > Ensure that CBAs remain adaptable to changing economic conditions and community needs.



# Context

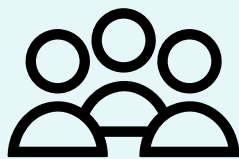


Canada is investing billions of dollars in infrastructure projects across the country, including housing, transportation networks, public transit, energy systems, healthcare facilities, broadband networks, community services, and natural spaces. However, despite significant investments, including the \$180 billion Investing in Canada Plan<sup>1</sup> and the \$5.7 billion Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund,<sup>2</sup> Canada's infrastructure deficit is estimated to range between \$150 billion and \$1 trillion.<sup>3</sup> Addressing the infrastructure deficit through continued investment presents a strategic opportunity to not only modernize Canada's infrastructure but to create lasting change by creating jobs, enhancing competitiveness, mitigating climate change, and improving quality of life for Canadians, including those from equity-deserving groups.

Although infrastructure projects can generate a wide range of economic, social, and environmental benefits, they have also been linked to gentrification,<sup>4</sup> displacement,<sup>5</sup> increased health and safety risks,<sup>6</sup> and erosion of community identity.<sup>7</sup> To mitigate these potential negative externalities and enhance the overall impact of public investments, infrastructure projects must

consider the communities they serve and provide opportunities to affected residents, particularly those belonging to historically marginalized communities. Community benefit agreements (CBAs) have emerged as a pivotal tool in this context. A CBA is a legally binding contract, setting forth a range of community benefits regarding a development project, and resulting from substantial community involvement.<sup>8</sup> As such, CBAs are considered an empowerment model that combines substantive negotiation, coalition building, and grassroots organizing.<sup>9</sup> Community benefits are considered physical, social, and economic benefits for the local community that are leveraged by dollars already being spent on an infrastructure project.<sup>10</sup> Benefits typically include targeted hiring from equity-deserving groups, job training, apprenticeships, business opportunities for local suppliers and social enterprises, affordable housing, community amenities, and public realm improvements.<sup>11</sup> As a result, CBAs are designed to ensure that the economic, social, and environmental value created by infrastructure projects are shared more equitably with local communities.

CBAs first gained prominence in the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first comprehensive CBA was the \$4.2 billion Los Angeles Sports and Entertainment District development, which is adjacent to the Staples Center (now known as the Crypto.com Arena). The Staples CBA was negotiated in May 2001 by a consortium of developers and the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice (FCCEJ), a local coalition of 29 community groups and five labour unions.<sup>12</sup> The CBA brought an array of community benefits, including a first source hiring program targeting low-income individuals, increased affordable housing requirements, and living wage requirements for 70 percent of project-related jobs.<sup>13</sup> Following the success of the Staples CBA, the model was employed for large-scale developments in other U.S. cities, such as



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New York (Yankee Stadium, Atlantic Yards), San Diego (Ballpark Village), Milwaukee (Park East Redevelopment), Pittsburgh (Penguins Arena), and Washington D.C. (Shaw District).<sup>14</sup>

More recently, CBAs have gained traction in Canada, with prominent examples including the Vancouver Olympic Village, Gordie Howe International Bridge, Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit (LRT), and Rexdale –Casino Woodbine CBAs (discussed in further detail in the Review of Canadian Community Benefits Agreements section). In the Canadian context, CBAs are similar to impact benefit agreements (IBAs), which are often negotiated between Indigenous communities and developers (typically in resource extraction industries). IBAs are often structured to ensure that Indigenous communities receive benefits from infrastructure projects taking place on their lands while also mitigating the environmental impacts of these projects. IBA benefits can include employment and training opportunities, procurement opportunities for local Indigenous suppliers, funding for community amenities, and provisions for protecting cultural and heritage sites.<sup>15</sup> While the success of individual IBAs varies, they have the potential to significantly boost Indigenous representation in specific industries.<sup>16</sup>

While CBAs are not explicitly referenced in international trade agreements, governments have implemented procurement tools to achieve similar social and economic

objectives. For example, in Canada, the Procurement Strategy for Indigenous Business (PSIB) has a mandatory requirement for federal departments and agencies to ensure a minimum of 5% of the total value of contracts are held by qualified Indigenous businesses.<sup>17</sup> As such, PSIB is structured as a legally recognized set-aside program grounded in Indigenous rights and Truth and Reconciliation that can be incorporated into major infrastructure projects, including those with CBAs. Internationally, jurisdictions such as the European Union and the United Kingdom have adopted similar social value-based procurement frameworks that promote a range of social, economic, and environmental benefits similar to those found in CBAs.<sup>18, 19</sup>

The CBA process involves numerous parties, each with their own interests, roles, and responsibilities. At its core, a CBA is an agreement negotiated between a developer and a coalition of community-based groups.

A **community coalition** can include labour unions, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, resident associations, environmental groups, and local business owners. The overarching goal of a coalition is to amplify the collective voice of community groups impacted by a development project, and to ensure that the project delivers tangible and enforceable benefits for the community.

The **developer** is primarily responsible for project construction and financing. In the context of CBAs, developers are typically



either private or public. Private developers are for-profit business entities whose primary objective is to enhance the value of a property and maximize financial returns for their investors.<sup>20</sup> Their involvement in a CBA helps them mitigate risks such as public opposition, legal challenges, and project delays that could harm profitability. Public developers are typically government agencies or publicly owned corporations whose projects are funded by taxpayers to serve the public good (e.g., a municipal transit agency building a new subway line). Their involvement in a CBA is often a result of a policy mandate to align public infrastructure investment with broader social, economic, and environmental goals.

In addition to their role as public developers, **governments** can act as policymakers, facilitators, funders, and regulators in CBAs. For example, as policymakers, municipal governments can create frameworks that encourage or mandate the inclusion of CBAs in development projects (e.g., City of Toronto Community Benefits Framework).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, governments can help facilitate the negotiation process between developers and community coalitions, provide financial incentives (e.g., subsidies, tax deferrals, etc.) to support projects with CBA requirements, and act as regulators responsible for ongoing monitoring and enforcement of CBA commitments.<sup>22</sup>

CBAs can be categorized into three broad types: private, public, and hybrid. **Private CBAs** are contracts signed between

developers and a coalition of community groups. **Public CBAs** are contracts signed between a government entity and a coalition of community groups, where the government is acting as the infrastructure builder, or between a government entity and a developer without the community being involved.

**Hybrid CBAs** are multi-party contracts signed between governments, developers, and one or more community groups.<sup>23</sup> Each type of CBA has potential advantages and disadvantages; and the effectiveness of each model depends on the specific project, political environment, and capacity of the communities involved. Table 1 summarizes the potential advantages and disadvantages of each type of CBA.



**Table 1**

**Potential advantages and disadvantages of each type of CBA<sup>24</sup>**

Type of CBA	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Private</b>	Contracts signed between developers and a coalition of community groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Community groups have a direct hand in negotiating and approving benefits.</li> <li>&gt; Can be highly tailored to local needs.</li> <li>&gt; Fosters collaboration between the developer and the community coalition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Without government involvement, monitoring and enforcement may be difficult or costly for the community.</li> <li>&gt; The community may have significantly fewer resources and less bargaining power than the developer.</li> <li>&gt; There's a risk that the community coalition may not fully represent all community interests.</li> </ul>
<b>Public</b>	Contracts signed between a government entity and a coalition of community groups, where the government is acting as the infrastructure builder, or between a government entity and a developer without the community being involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Government involvement can provide a powerful enforcement mechanism (e.g., compliance can be a condition for receiving permits, zoning changes, funding, etc.).</li> <li>&gt; Government oversight can lead to a more structured and transparent monitoring and reporting process.</li> <li>&gt; Can involve substantial public participation that addresses a range of issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Government actions are often more restricted than those of private developers, potentially resulting in benefits that are not as responsive to community needs.</li> <li>&gt; Benefits can be shaped by the political agendas of elected officials rather than community input.</li> <li>&gt; Government enforcement can be negatively impacted by staff turnover, increased workloads, lack of internal expertise, shifting political priorities, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Hybrid</b>	Multi-party contracts signed between governments, developers, and one or more community groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Combines the community-led focus of a private CBA with the strong enforcement of a public CBA.</li> <li>&gt; All three parties have distinct roles and responsibilities, which can increase transparency and accountability.</li> <li>&gt; Government can serve as an independent monitor, ensuring both the developer and the community meet their obligations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; The negotiation process can be more complex and time-consuming.</li> <li>&gt; Disagreements between multiple parties with competing interests can undermine the agreement's effectiveness.</li> <li>&gt; Managing a multi-party agreement can require significant administrative resources from all parties.</li> </ul>

Research and evidence from the U.S. and Canada have found that CBAs confer numerous benefits for communities, developers, and local governments. For example, the CBA negotiation process provides a forum to hear and address community concerns, including issues such as wage rates or employment practices that are typically not addressed by local governments in the development process.<sup>25</sup> CBAs are also considered legally binding contracts that provide a framework to ensure that developers fulfill their commitments. The enforceable nature of CBAs often leads to clearer expectations and greater transparency through mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and reporting. This, in turn, holds developers accountable to their commitments and helps communities gain a better understanding of their associated benefits.<sup>26</sup> CBAs can also be a powerful tool for coalition-building that unites partners around a shared vision for development. This is in stark contrast to the “divide and conquer” strategies employed by many developers who accommodate the needs of certain community groups to gain project support while ignoring the concerns of others.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, CBAs can help garner community support, which can increase the likelihood of obtaining regulatory approvals and financial support from local governments.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the well-documented benefits of CBAs, research has identified several key elements of effective CBAs.<sup>29</sup>

1. **Community interests are well-represented.** An effective CBA is negotiated by a coalition that truly represents the interests of the community. Coalition members should have deep connections to the community and represent those most impacted by the development project, including members of equity-deserving groups who are often excluded from traditional planning and development processes.
2. **The process is transparent, inclusive, and accessible.** The entire CBA process, from drafting to negotiation and signing, is open and accessible to the community. This involves providing channels to share information about the CBA process (e.g., regular coalition meetings) and opportunities for community members to share feedback to ensure that a broad range of concerns are heard and addressed.
3. **Benefits are concrete and meaningful.** An effective CBA delivers meaningful benefits that directly address the most pressing needs of the community. The terms of the agreement are concrete and detailed, specifying the obligations and responsibilities of each party along with timelines for fulfillment.
4. **There are clear enforcement mechanisms.** An effective CBA has formal mechanisms to ensure accountability among all parties. This includes a system for monitoring and implementation, along with enforcement measures that have consequences for parties that do not fulfill their commitments.

Conversely, ineffective CBAs are characterized by the absence of these key elements – with minimal community involvement, a secretive and exclusive negotiation process, vague commitments lacking clear time frames or measurable outcomes, and inadequate formal mechanisms to hold parties accountable.<sup>30</sup> Other potential challenges associated with CBAs include unequal power dynamics (e.g., developers often have more resources and capacity than community groups),<sup>31</sup> legal expenses,<sup>32</sup> coalition politics,<sup>33</sup> and the potential for unfulfilled developer promises.<sup>34</sup> However, despite these potential challenges, evidence from Canada and elsewhere suggests that the benefits of CBAs far outweigh the risks.



*Other potential challenges associated with CBAs include **unequal power dynamics** (e.g., developers often have more resources and capacity than community groups), **legal expenses**, **coalition politics**, and the **potential for unfulfilled developer promises**.*



# Review of Canadian Community Benefits Agreements

## Introduction

This section will provide a review of four community benefits agreements (CBAs) in Canada: 1) Vancouver Olympic Village; 2) Eglinton Crosstown LRT; 3) Rexdale – Casino Woodbine; and 4) Gordie Howe International Bridge. These major infrastructure projects span different regions, industries, and community contexts and demonstrate that CBAs can succeed in a variety of circumstances. The CBAs discussed in this section delivered a range of benefits, including local hiring, workforce development and training programs, local procurement opportunities, affordable housing, community amenities, cultural initiatives, and more.

## Vancouver Olympic Village

The Vancouver Olympic Village CBA was signed on September 24, 2007, following a year of negotiations after the development agreement was finalized in August 2006. The CBA was signed for the development of a seven-hectare acre in Southeast False Creek by Millennium Southeast False Creek Properties Ltd., the City of Vancouver, and Building Opportunities for Business Inner City

Society (BOB). The agreement emphasized investing in local community members, providing training, creating jobs, and supporting local businesses.<sup>35</sup>

The CBA mandated that the parties to the agreement create 100 entry-level jobs for inner-city residents on the Olympic Village site. Out of the 100 entry-level jobs, the CBA required Millennium’s subcontractors, MetroCan and ITC, to recruit inner-city residents for 70 and 30 jobs, respectively. The CBA also required Millennium to provide \$750,000 towards BOB’s program funding to support the employment program, which aimed to find inner-city residents jobs and offer pre-employment training, construction skills training, employment support, and on-the-job training. The CBA also required benefits delivered to inner-city businesses. The procurement target included \$15 million worth of goods, products, equipment, and services from registered businesses (inner-city businesses or companies recruiting inner-city residents through social purchasing portals or inner-city community development initiatives) to be purchased. Moreover, Millennium committed to encouraging suppliers with contracts over \$350,000 and lease tenants occupying more than 8,000 square feet of

commercial space to register with BOB to provide additional benefits to the inner-city (e.g., employment of inner-city residents, procurement from inner-city businesses, etc.).<sup>36</sup>

In the two years following the initial signing of the agreement, employment targets set out in the CBA were exceeded as over 120 individuals had been placed in construction jobs, with 87 working on the Olympic Village Site and 33 on construction sites elsewhere in the city. CBA-related procurement was also well above the \$15 million target set out in the agreement, as around \$42 million in goods, services, and equipment had been procured from inner-city businesses. A total of 28 companies were involved in procurement, with eight companies accounting for \$39 million of this spending. Additionally, BOB worked with training partners to deliver 10 construction training courses and six pre-employment training courses.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to employment and procurement benefits, 252 affordable housing units were constructed in the first phase of the development, along with 119 housing units aimed at middle-income singles and families.<sup>38</sup> In total, there are currently around 1,100 residential units in the Olympic Village. The development also includes a 60,000 square foot commercial space and a 45,000 square foot community centre, which houses a daycare. Moreover, the Olympic Village is only the second community in North America to meet LEED Platinum ND (neighbourhood development) standards.<sup>39</sup>

## Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit

The Eglinton Crosstown LRT is one of Ontario's most significant public transit investments, with the initial contract valued at \$9.1 billion.<sup>40</sup> Completed in 2026, the Crosstown LRT comprises 25 stations across 19 km, with 10 km running underground, and aims reduce travel times by up to 60%. Additionally, it will connect to over 50 bus routes, three subway stations and several GO Transit lines.<sup>41</sup>

The Crosstown LRT is the first large-scale infrastructure project in Ontario to include a community benefits agreement. In 2014, the Toronto Community Benefits Network (TCBN) signed a community benefits framework with Metrolinx, the first agreement of its kind in Ontario.<sup>42</sup> When initially formulated, the Eglinton Crosstown Community Benefits and Liaison Plan focused on four key areas: employment, workforce development and training, local and social procurement, and community engagement.<sup>43</sup>

The major players for the project include Metrolinx, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), Infrastructure Ontario (IO), and Crosslinx Transit Solutions (CTS), a consortium four global and local leaders in transportation infrastructure (ACS-Dragados, Aecon, EllisDon and AtkinsRéalis). Metrolinx determined the scope of the project, including schedule and budget; acquired lands needed for the project; and continues to oversee design and construction. The TTC is be

responsible for the day-to-day operation of the LRT. Infrastructure Ontario negotiated the project agreement that determines the role of each party and continues to oversee its implementation. Finally, CTS is responsible for designing, constructing, and financing the stations, tracks, and signals, along with the maintenance and storage facility.<sup>44, 45</sup>

In the early stages of the agreement, 43 full-time employees were hired in professional, technical, and administrative positions. These employees either lived in Eglinton area communities or were referred through a partner agency. In addition to local hiring, five career development workshops were delivered and the Career Start program, which committed to offering meaningful job opportunities to youth facing employment barriers, was initiated. Moreover, \$1 million was spent on locally procured goods and services, and a further \$15,000 was spent on social enterprises. Community outreach efforts also engaged over 1,000 job seekers and supported numerous initiatives involving food banks, public art, and local festivals.<sup>46</sup>

According to the most recent community benefits annual report published by CTS, \$8.8 million has been spent on local businesses, \$1.25 million has been spent on social enterprises, 561 people have been hired, and apprentices and journeypersons have worked nearly 1 million hours throughout the project's lifespan as a result of the community benefits agreement.<sup>47</sup>

Social return on investment (SROI) is a framework for measuring the social, economic, and environmental value generated by an intervention beyond traditional financial accounting (for more information, please see the Appendix).<sup>48</sup> SROI has been used to measure blended value outcomes in Canadian infrastructure projects that incorporate CBAs. In April 2022, the Toronto Community Benefits Network (TCBN) conducted a preliminary SROI analysis of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT project in Toronto. The analysis focused primarily on the local economic multiplier effect resulting from increased employment, apprenticeship training opportunities, and spending within local communities.



## **CASE STUDY:**

### **Eglinton Crosstown LRT Social return on investment analysis**

Results from the analysis illustrate the power of CBAs as a poverty reduction strategy. Over a five-year period, at least 436 individuals secured jobs paying considerably higher wages (between \$7.96 to \$49.23 per hour more) than they would have likely earned otherwise (estimated at \$15 per hour). By the end of 2021, it was estimated that the cumulative additional earnings of local residents totalled \$13.4 million. Those earning higher incomes also reinvested back into their local communities through increased discretionary spending on food, goods, services, and entertainment. On average, individuals spent an additional \$3,900 in discretionary community-based spending each year. By the end of 2021, this additional spending totalled \$3.9 million. Additionally, the local economic multiplier effect resulting from increased discretionary spending was estimated at \$6.3 million. This effect is separate from any local procurement opportunities resulting from the Eglinton Crosstown LRT project. Results from the analysis illustrate the power of CBAs as a poverty reduction strategy and a means to foster local economic development through increased wages and community spending.

### **Rexdale – Casino Woodbine**

The Rexdale – Casino Woodbine Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) was established in 2018 when the City of Toronto signed a CBA with One Toronto Gaming (OTG), which operates Great Canadian Casino Resort Toronto. The CBA requires OTG to achieve a range of social and economic benefits, including local hiring for casino construction and operations, local and social procurement, a child care centre, and community access to the event venue. Also included as part of the CBA was an international marketing plan requested by the City of Toronto that was completed in May 2023, and a 20-year employment and labour market plan that was finalized in March 2024.<sup>49</sup>

The CBA outlined hiring targets for casino construction and operations. For example, by 2022, at least 10% of total hours worked by trades or craftspeople were designated for apprentices or journeypersons recruited through local or social hiring (i.e., belonging to an equity-deserving group). Between 2018 and 2024, 2,819 individuals were employed in construction, with 29% (807) self-identifying as a social hire and 2% (65) self-identifying as a local hire. Furthermore, the CBA mandated that 40% of operations-related hires were intended to come from local or social hiring. Since 2018, this target has been met – among the 3,160 individuals employed in construction, 42% (1,319) self-identified as a social hire and 8% (257) self-identified as a local hire.<sup>50</sup>



## Gordie Howe International Bridge

The Gordie Howe International Bridge, set to open in early 2026, in spite of recent threats to delay the opening by the U.S. President,<sup>54, 55</sup> will be one of North America's largest bridges.<sup>56</sup> The bridge will consist of six traffic lanes, three Canadian-bound and three U.S.-bound, and a multi-use path for pedestrians and cyclists.<sup>57</sup> The bridge will support transportation improvements and economic development for the Windsor-Detroit region. The project is delivered through a public-private partnership with Bridging North America and Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority.<sup>58</sup> The project began in October 2018 with a contract valued at \$6.4 billion. To date, the project has created 2,500 jobs.<sup>59</sup>

The CBA also outlined targets for non-construction-related procurement. It stated that at least 10% of annual non-construction procurement should be through local or diverse suppliers. In 2024, OTG spent \$100.5 million across 18 local suppliers, representing 33% of their total annual non-construction procurement spending. In the same year, One Toronto Gaming spent \$1.8 million across three diverse suppliers.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, the CBA required responsible gambling measures, public reporting, accountability, and monitoring of the Casino.<sup>52</sup> OTG submits annual reports to the City of Toronto and quarterly reports through the Employment and Labour Market Advisory Working Group. Additionally, three committees are responsible for accountability, transparency, and overall delivery of CBA requirements: the Community Steering Committee (convened by City of Toronto); the Responsible Gambling Oversight Committee (convened by the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation); and the Employment and Labour Market Advisory Working Group (convened by OTG).<sup>53</sup>

An integral part of the Gordie Howe International Bridge is the mandated community benefits plan, which aims to improve the economic, social, and environmental conditions for communities in Windsor and Detroit. The Community Benefits plan is organized into two components: 1) the Workforce Development and Participation Strategy; and 2) the Neighbourhood Infrastructure Strategy. The Workforce Development and Participation Strategy focuses on creating job, training, and contracting opportunities for local workers and contractors, and leveraging existing local resources to maximize these opportunities. The Neighbourhood Infrastructure Strategy comprises initiatives and key regional priorities identified through consultation, including



*The Neighbourhood Infrastructure Strategy is a **\$20 million investment in community infrastructure** towards priorities identified in the consultation phase with communities, businesses, Canadian Indigenous peoples, and other rights holders.*

community partnerships, community safety and connections, economic benefits, and aesthetics and landscaping.<sup>60</sup>

The Workforce Development and Participation Strategy comprises over 80 initiatives focusing on three key areas: 1) workforce development; 2) training; and 3) pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships. The strategy states that, in the design-build phase in Canada, the total value of work completed by workers or contractors located in or within 100 km of the City of Windsor must be at least \$250 million. In addition, the strategy set out to engage and employ Canadian Indigenous Peoples in the area, including Indigenous businesses.<sup>61</sup>

The Neighbourhood Infrastructure Strategy is a \$20 million investment in community infrastructure towards priorities identified in

the consultation phase with communities, businesses, Canadian Indigenous peoples, and other rights holders. Some of the planned initiatives outlined in the strategy include trails connected to the Gordie Howe International Bridge, Sandwich Park improvements, the Sandwich Business Development Program, and transportation improvements.<sup>62</sup>

According to the most recent annual community benefits report, from September 2018 to March 2025, over 14,300 individuals were oriented to the project in Canada and the U.S., with 41% being local to the City of Detroit or within 100 km of Windsor-Essex County. The project also engaged over 290 local businesses, 800 pre-apprentices/apprentices, 420 co-op students, and nearly 50 Indigenous workers. The report also noted that, between January 2021 and March 2025, \$7.9 million was spent on small-scale purchases under \$25,000 from local businesses. Additionally, \$21.96 million has been directed towards community investments since the project began, including tourism, local history and culture, food security and wellness, community safety, and aesthetics, landscaping, and green initiatives, among others.<sup>63</sup>

# Consultation Methods

To capture a range of perspectives on community benefits agreements (CBAs), 16 virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse partners between July and September 2025. Interviewees were divided into two broad groups: 1) CBA advocates, who actively champion the integration of community-focused outcomes into major development projects; and 2) CBA practitioners, who are directly involved in the design, negotiation, implementation, and monitoring of CBAs. Among the 16 participants interviewed for the study, 10 were CBA advocates and six were CBA practitioners.

Before partner outreach was conducted, a research ethics protocol was reviewed and approved by the Toronto Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board (REB 2025-126). This ensured that all aspects of the study – including participant recruitment, consent procedures, and qualitative data management – complied with ethical research standards set forth by the university while protecting participant rights and confidentiality.

Interview participants were selected in close collaboration with the Toronto Community Benefits Network (TCBN), which maintains an extensive network of partners across community organizations, labour groups, government agencies, and industry sectors. This collaboration helped streamline the identification of relevant participants and ensured access to a broad and representative range of voices. Outreach was conducted via a series of emails. The first email invited partners to participate in the study and provided some basic information, including the objective of the study, interview format, and interview duration. If a prospective interviewee indicated that they were interested in participating in the study, they were sent a written consent form via email with further details about the purpose of the study;



what they were being asked to do; potential benefits and risks; confidentiality; voluntary participation and withdrawal; and how interview data will be protected, stored, and used. Once prospective interviewees provided their written consent to participate in the study, they were contacted to schedule an interview.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom with a semi-structured format that allowed for flexibility and potential follow-up questions to probe for deeper insights. Two sets of 12 interview questions were developed for the study – one for CBA advocates and another for CBA practitioners (see Appendix). Both sets of interview questions were categorized into four main themes corresponding to the business case framework developed for this study: strategic, economic, financial, and deliverability and operations.

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and audio was transcribed to text afterwards to capture all relevant details. Qualitative analysis was then applied to the interview data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights. This included initial reading and familiarization with the interview transcripts, coding of themes, and incorporating themes into a coherent narrative that directly addressed the project's research questions. All interview data have been anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of study participants.

Although the qualitative interview approach provided valuable insights into individual experiences and perspectives on CBAs,

several limitations should be acknowledged. To begin, the sample size of 16 participants limits the extent to which findings can be generalized and does not reflect the full range of perspectives across different CBA contexts in Canada. Another limitation of the study is the uneven distribution of CBA advocates and CBA practitioners, as securing interviews with CBA practitioners proved more challenging than with CBA advocates – contributing to the smaller number of practitioners in the study. Finally, because participants were identified and recruited through TCBN's network, the selection process may reflect a degree of sampling bias by favouring individuals who already support the CBA framework.



*Although the qualitative interview approach provided **valuable insights into individual experiences and perspectives on CBAs, several limitations should be acknowledged.***

# Findings: Experiences with Community Benefits Agreements

## Introduction

This section will provide a review of four community benefits agreements (CBAs) in Canada: 1) Vancouver Olympic Village; 2) The business case developed for this study is divided into four parts: the strategic case, the economic case, the financial case, and the deliverability and operations case.

- > The **strategic case** explores how CBAs can align infrastructure investments with broader regional goals and policy objectives (e.g., social inclusion, economic opportunity, community development, etc.) and the conditions required to make this possible.
- > The **economic case** examines how infrastructure projects can deliver benefits to local communities – targeted employment, training, and procurement opportunities that can address systemic barriers to workforce participation and stimulate local economic growth.
- > The **financial case** evaluates the fiscal benefits of CBAs related to wages, capital and operational costs, and potential savings or efficiencies over time.

- > The **deliverability and operations case** illustrates how transparent governance, data-driven planning, and inclusive engagement can support the effective implementation of CBAs.

Each component of the business case integrates insights gathered from interviews conducted for this study to ensure that recommendations are aligned with community and project realities.

## Strategic Case

CBAs have gained recognition as a strategic policy tool that links infrastructure investment with equitable and inclusive development outcomes. CBAs are also instrumental in building consensus and public support for development projects, particularly in communities where mistrust may generate opposition.<sup>64</sup> Interviews with advocates and practitioners identified five key dimensions that are central to the strategic case for CBAs: 1) Community engagement, consultation, and input; 2) Collaborative partnerships; 3) Education and buy-in; 4) Combatting racism and discrimination; and 5) Research and development of best practices.

## Community engagement, consultation, and input

Research emphasizes that community engagement, consultation, and input can help form coalitions that balance community aspirations with project feasibility. This, in turn, can help identify priorities that are important for local residents, such as job creation, training programs, apprenticeships, affordable housing, and community amenities.<sup>65</sup>

One advocate emphasized the importance of community engagement to determine priorities and meaningful outcomes.

*If there's a group that's missing out, you have to go and find them and make sure that they're included. So, you have to do a lot of work to go in there to find people to help build up their confidence to make it easier for them to participate. You really have to listen to the people on the ground to understand their unique circumstances, their neighbourhood, the project, and then to find the impacts that are most meaningful to them.*

Another advocate stressed that a community-driven approach to consultation can help foster inclusion for groups that have historically been excluded from planning decisions.

*It has been a very collaborative effort and a lot of community consultation. And I think in general, there is a feeling from the community that they have not been involved in the planning process. And again, legislation keeps changing and it keeps watering down community democracy. But we are looking to ensure that communities are involved.*

A practitioner highlighted the importance of engaging directly with community members through both formal and informal approaches at various stages of the project.

*A robust consultation strategy does need to be put in place by whomever will be responsible for both drafting and implementing the plan. And that includes actually meeting with community members whether it's through an organized or a more informal grassroots approach.*



## Collaborative partnerships

In the context of CBAs, collaborative partnerships can help bring together developers, government, and community organizations to ensure projects serve local priorities. This can assist in identifying shared goals that reflect genuine community input, but risks excluding marginalized voices if the process lacks transparency or inclusivity.<sup>66</sup>

An advocate expressed that successful CBAs require developers and non-profits to cultivate long-term relationships and a mutual understanding of each other's work.

*I think what we need is developers and non-profits in the room together on a long-term basis, building long-term relationships so that we can figure out what the benefit to both sides is. And then it won't be such an adversarial thing that we're constantly having to force people to do.*

Similarly, a practitioner emphasized the importance of meeting regularly to keep track of progress and address issues as they arise.

*Meeting regularly, ideally quarterly or twice a year with the contract holder, the developer, the contractor, etc., to continuously monitor progress and problem solve. And I would also say that, by bringing together partners from all ends of the spectrum and the community benefits ecosystem, so that they can hear each other's constraints, goals, hopes, and dreams, is a really crucial way for us to bring our partners into the same table and realm of reality.*

## Education and buy-in

Educating partners (e.g., developers, labour representatives, government officials, community members, etc.) can help all parties understand the potential impacts of CBAs. Similarly, educational initiatives (e.g., toolkits, workshops, public reports, etc.) can increase buy-in by communicating how CBAs can respond to local needs and drive more equitable development outcomes.<sup>67</sup>

An advocate emphasized their role in working directly with community members to educate them about the broader goals of CBAs beyond employment opportunities. This outreach also helped to understand their needs and the desired outcomes they hoped to achieve from a CBA project.

*There's a tendency in the community benefits movement to focus just on the workforce outcomes, and you will see that over and over again in reports and even in projects. And I'd like to say that community benefits can be more than just workforce development, it can be community wealth building, neighbourhood improvements, changes at the micro level. And until you go out and talk to the people in their community and find out what they want, you're not going to know what needs to change in that neighbourhood or what outcomes they would like from a particular project.*

Another advocate stated that CBAs are still a relatively unknown concept in Canada compared to the United States. As a result, this can pose challenges for building

awareness and gaining traction locally. This reality reflects the ongoing need to increase education about CBAs among Canadian communities and organizations.

*So, the biggest challenge has been, if you were to do this interview with someone south of the border, they all know about CBAs. Every not-for-profit down there is very aware, and they have a huge history with community benefit agreements through various state urban renewal projects. Up here, it's almost an unknown term. So, in some ways, you're fighting against that.*

## **Combatting racism and discrimination**

CBAs serve as powerful vehicles for combatting racism and discrimination. These agreements can shift power to members of historically marginalized communities by promoting equitable employment and development practices. This can help counteract decades of displacement resulting from exclusionary planning policies.<sup>68</sup>

An advocate expressed optimism about CBAs as a solution to systemic racism within historically exclusionary sectors.

*There is racism everywhere in society. There is racism in the construction industry, within the unions. And part of this is diversifying the unions themselves. And CBAs are a solution to that, it's really exciting. It is actually a solution that can make a positive difference once you're creative and you listen to people. I think that could have a really interesting long-term impact.*

A practitioner highlighted the value of anti-discrimination training for creating safe and inclusive worksites that support the recruitment and retention of a more diverse workforce.

*What we're trying to do is to help foster a more positive culture on the job site. One of our initiatives takes the participants through the history of Indigenous peoples in this country and the impact of the Indian Act. For many who participate, it's very eye-opening, and it can also be quite emotional. In order to have more people joining the construction trades, especially people who may be diverse, it needs to be safe and respectful. You cannot have one without the other.*



## Research and development of best practices

CBA practitioners must conduct ongoing research to refine their approaches and adapt to evolving community and project needs. Research can also help identify best practices and strategies from past CBAs that can potentially be implemented in newer contexts.<sup>69</sup>

One practitioner explained that jurisdictional scans of best practices used around the world and ongoing dialogue with other governmental staff can help strengthen the local approach to CBAs.

*My colleagues and I continually research best practices and structures being used and implemented in jurisdictions and other municipalities around the world, in particular in North America and in Europe. We also speak with other government staff as frequently as every four months to talk about what we are doing to respond to changing labour market conditions. And also, to learn about the targets and requirements that they are implementing, how are they implementing them, how are they improving or strengthening them, what are they struggling to attain, and how might we be able to implement their learnings in our context.*

Another practitioner described how their team maintains a community benefits toolkit that is continually updated and improved to support implementation.

*We also have a toolkit of community benefits implementation processes, templates,*



*We also have a **toolkit of community benefits implementation processes, templates, guides, best practices, etc.** And, for these tools, we take a very **iterative approach** to them, so we are **constantly evolving and improving them.***

*guides, best practices, etc. And, for these tools, we take a very iterative approach to them, so we are constantly evolving and improving them. And those tools are really adaptable on a month-to-month, project-to-project, year-to-year basis.*

## Economic Case

CBAs can boost local economies by providing employment and training pathways for equity-deserving groups, and procurement opportunities for small and diverse businesses. In doing so, CBAs can direct investment and wealth into communities where it can be recirculated. When considering the economic case for CBAs, advocates and practitioners interviewed for this study provided insights that can be grouped into four overarching themes: 1) Hiring locally; 2) Labour market integration; 3) Local procurement; and 4) Growing the skilled workforce.

## Hiring locally

Hiring locally in CBA projects can strengthen local economies and address systemic employment barriers faced by equity-deserving groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, women, racialized communities, and immigrants. CBAs with local hiring targets can help these groups gain access to employment, apprenticeship, and training opportunities that may not have been available otherwise.<sup>70</sup>

A practitioner described the importance of local hiring – given that, historically, local workers from the region were often not given first access to jobs in their own communities.

*A unique element is how we hire. It is referred to as priority hiring, and priority is set out for workers that are local to a project. So, those are workers that live within a certain radius of a project. You may not think that that's significant, but that is actually quite significant, because there are many projects. I know that, in our province, there have been projects in the past where local workers have not been the first ones to have access to the jobs in their communities. And so, we prioritize the hiring of local workers, we prioritize the hiring of Indigenous workers, and also women and others that are underrepresented.*

Another practitioner highlighted how hiring locally promotes a “Team Canada” solution that coordinates infrastructure investment and workforce development to support the country’s economic goals amid tariff threats.

*Hiring locally is the best thing that we can do for our current economy. We have always been a Team Canada solution. We try to hire within the province. I think about 75% to 80% of the workers that work with us are local to the project – and, if not, they usually live in the province. More than 92% of our workers live in the province and the remaining 8% are basically from other places in Canada.*

## Labour market integration

CBA frameworks can support labour market integration by offering structured pathways for equity-deserving groups to participate in employment and training opportunities in major infrastructure projects. This targeted approach helps expand the local talent pool by providing access to previously untapped labour markets.<sup>71</sup>

One advocate believed that CBAs can act as a vehicle for social and economic reintegration in marginalized communities.

*We work in an economically challenged community with high unemployment. So, the CBA can be a vehicle to create meaningful employment pathways for folks to re-engage with the labour market. I think it is a fundamental piece of policy that can have a profound economic impact for folks who are trying to enter the labour market and get a toehold.*

Another advocate shared their experience working with individuals who face barriers such as homelessness, mental health issues, and substance abuse that have resulted in

extended periods of unemployment. They noted that, while opportunities in mainstream employment are often limited, CBAs can provide pathways for marginalized populations to secure meaningful work and economic stability.

*I work with a lot of people that are re-entering the workforce after maybe 10 years of not working, that may have been experiencing homelessness, or have mental health or substance use issues, and there's many steps to get them to be able to reintegrate back to work. But once we feel like people are ready for the next steps, oftentimes there's not a lot of opportunities for folks in mainstream employment. And there's only so many social enterprises and programs where they can be employed. So, we really think CBAs are something that is important in securing employment opportunities for folks that are struggling to maintain employment.*

## Local procurement

By prioritizing local procurement, CBAs can help direct project spending towards small and diverse businesses within the community. This not only helps stimulate local economic growth in the present, but can act as a catalyst for future business investment and development. CBAs can also boost supplier diversity by creating dedicated pathways for firms owned and managed by members of equity-deserving groups to compete for contracts which otherwise may have been difficult or impossible to secure.<sup>72</sup>

A CBA advocate emphasized that procurement clauses embedded in agreements can provide a significant boost to businesses within the community and help mitigate some of the negative externalities associated with major infrastructure projects.

*So, anything that you are buying for the project – if you can source it locally, that is a big boost to businesses. Because when there's major construction, it does slow things down. Less parking, less foot traffic, etcetera. So, it helps if you can get as many services and materials from local businesses as possible. Procurement is really important, and that starts with getting a list of and knowing the local businesses.*



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A CBA practitioner underscored the importance of building and maintaining relationships with local vendors through dedicated procurement processes. They also noted that these connections are invaluable for long-term project resilience, allowing for better adaptation to market disruptions, including tariffs.

*When it comes to procurement, we track the number of bids that we get from local and diverse vendors, who declines, why they decline, and then we discuss the data to see if there were any barriers for them to bid. Did somebody want to bid but they were not certified? Things like that. Building these relationships with local vendors is really important for the long term. Look at what is happening with the tariff wars. Now, developers are asking if there are any local vendors that they can work with. And we already have that infrastructure built up. Because we have already been working with CBAs for so long.*

## Growing the skilled workforce

Growing the skilled workforce beyond the immediate scope of a CBA project can create lasting positive community and economic impacts. However, building a pipeline of skilled workers who can support future infrastructure projects requires strong partnerships to identify prospective workers from equity-deserving groups. Additionally, investments in training and apprenticeship programs are necessary to help prepare workers for future employment opportunities.<sup>73</sup>

A practitioner shared their perspective on the deeper impact of CBA projects that goes beyond the construction of physical infrastructure. They emphasized the “human legacy” of these projects that involves building a skilled workforce that can continue to work on future infrastructure projects in the region.

*I often say that, when you think about infrastructure projects, you think about the bricks and mortar that is left behind. But I feel that the work that we are doing in our mandate is 100% about the human legacy of these projects. So, it is not just that we have left behind these amazing pieces of infrastructure that people need that is important for our economy. We have actually left behind or helped to grow skilled workers who have good paying jobs and can continue to work on public infrastructure in our province.*

Another practitioner explained that a key part of their collective agreement was to set targets for increasing apprenticeship opportunities

to provide training and development for the skilled workers of tomorrow.

*For a number of years, we have been hearing that we do not necessarily have the skilled workforce to be able to build the important infrastructure that we want to build, whether it is bridges, or roads, or schools, or housing. And so, the nature of the collective agreement was struck in a way that there are targets associated with increasing apprenticeship opportunities and making sure that we are not only employing the skilled workers of today, but providing training opportunities for the skilled workers of tomorrow.*

## Financial Case

The financial case provides a compelling rationale for investment by demonstrating how CBAs can provide value for money through quantifiable fiscal returns and potential savings or efficiencies over time. Advocates and practitioners identified several key themes that are central to the financial case: 1) Equitable wages; 2) Implementation costs; 3) Cost savings of hiring locally; and 4) Rationalizing investment.

### Equitable wages

Within CBA projects, equitable wages can facilitate distribution of the economic benefits of major infrastructure among workers, particularly those from equity-deserving communities. Best practices for securing equitable wages include inclusive and transparent negotiation processes involving



developers, labour unions, and community groups, alongside continuous monitoring to ensure compliance.<sup>74</sup>

A practitioner underscored the importance of data-driven monitoring in upholding equitable wage practices within CBAs. They explained that their organization has direct access to payroll data, which allows them to verify and report that workers from equity-deserving groups are receiving equal pay for equal work.

*In terms of accountability, we have the payroll data and we know how people are getting paid. We know they are getting paid a fair wage, an equitable wage, and we know when they are advancing in their careers. And we can report that out. We can report that Indigenous folks that work on our projects get paid the same as non-Indigenous folks. We can report for a fact that women get paid the same on our projects as men, job for job. That is important, and I do not know that you can get that kind of transparency and accountability, unless you actually have access to the payroll data.*



*A practitioner shared that the **implementation costs associated with CBAs are relatively modest** compared to what contractors initially expected.*

Another practitioner explained that their work involves mandating specific union requirements, including wage levels and hiring targets. They also noted that hiring temporary foreign workers should be considered only after exhausting all efforts to hire qualified local workers from equity-deserving groups.

*The work that we are doing is about working with unions. It is mandating what wages should be. It is mandating that you need to hire more women, you do need to hire more Indigenous workers. And you need to hire locally and you can not rely on temporary foreign workers. You have to try to do all of these things before you rely on temporary foreign workers.*

## Implementation costs

Implementation costs associated with CBAs are an important consideration for developers, governments, and community organizations involved in infrastructure projects. Although CBAs can generate significant economic and social benefits, they introduce additional costs related to planning, compliance, monitoring, reporting, and engagement. However, the long-term economic returns associated with CBAs can often offset these costs over time.<sup>75</sup>

A practitioner shared that the implementation costs associated with CBAs are relatively modest compared to what contractors initially expected. This challenges common misconceptions about the costs of unionized labour.

*Contractors initially felt like they were giving up control, that they were not going to be able to hire the people that they wanted to hire. They felt that, working with the building trades, that workers were going to cost more money because they are unionized. They thought that public infrastructure projects were going to cost 30% more. Well, that's not true. The investment associated with having this type of a program and approach to public infrastructure projects is basically about 2% of total project budget cost. And, with linear projects like roads and bridges, it is closer to 1%.*

Another practitioner explained that their organization's mandate to implement CBAs is fully funded by the government. As a result, the developer did not bear any additional costs for these services.

*It is, in fact, the government who is paying for our services in order to be able to implement the policy. So, there is no additional cost that is passed on to the developer. The return on investment is substantially more than the cost associated with operating our organization.*

### **Cost savings of hiring locally**

Hiring locally through CBAs can generate significant cost savings for infrastructure projects. This includes expenses related to travel, accommodation, and relocation when bringing in workers from outside of the region.<sup>76</sup>

A practitioner recalled how a contractor was skeptical about the ability to hire enough local workers for a project and even considered purchasing an abandoned motel to house workers from outside of the region. However, after several years, the vast majority of workers on the project were sourced locally – which reduced costs for the contractor, as dedicated worker accommodations were not needed.

*When we started working with the contractor, they were very concerned about the ability to hire locally. They did not think that we were going to be able to attract local workers. They felt that, at best, we would be able to hire 40% of the workforce on the project locally. And they actually were looking at buying an abandoned motel to set up a bit of a camp. So, we are currently two or three years into the project and about 90% of the people working on the project are local. So, that is a big savings*

*for a contractor to not have to go out and purchase an abandoned hotel or set up a separate camp. There are a lot of costs associated, as you can imagine, with running a camp – and, to me, that is a good news story.*

Another practitioner described how bringing in workers from outside of the region often requires paying a living-out allowance, which covers additional costs such as room and board. They explained that, by hiring local workers, developers can avoid these extra expenses and reduce the overall project budget.



*When you have workers coming in from different communities, they are entitled to a living-out allowance. And so, if you hire more workers locally, that's simply less that you have to pay to house that workforce. They're still getting excellent, fair wages. But you don't have to pay for the room and board for those workers as well, so all developers want to have a local workforce and we help maximize that.*

### **Rationalizing investment**

Rationalizing investment in CBAs involves aligning community needs with project objectives, and strategically directing resources to maximize social and economic returns. Community engagement processes that include a range of partners can help prioritize and rationalize investments, and ensure that they are responsive and broadly supported.<sup>77</sup>

One advocate explained that CBA investments can support a broad range of policy goals and

can be designed to supplement investments from other levels of government (e.g., federal, provincial, municipal).

*Community benefits are supposed to support the implementation of evidence-based solutions to address the challenges that the community faces. So, we are looking for certain investments in employment. We are looking for certain investments in capacity-building, in community-building. We are looking for investments in priorities like safety. I feel like community benefits supplement other investments coming from other levels of government. The federal government has had an important role to play in community benefits, and hopefully the provincial government will do the same.*

Another advocate described how their organization provides a forum for developer partners and elected officials to hear directly from residents about the importance and prioritization of CBA investments. Input gathered from residents is also used to inform all levels of government about the kinds of benefits they wish to pursue.

*We have a stakeholders table that happens quarterly, where we listen to input from residents so that developer partners and elected officials can understand the importance of investments in the community. We gather information from the community to rationalize certain investments and also advise governments – whether it is municipal, provincial, or federal – on what they would like to see.*



## Deliverability and operations case

The deliverability and operations case for CBAs focuses on how development projects can be designed, administered, and monitored so that expectations are managed and project commitments are fulfilled. Advocates and practitioners identified four key components central to the deliverability and operations case: 1) Monitoring and reporting; 2) Data capture and sensitivity; 3) Transparency and accountability; and 4) Developing clear and measurable targets.

### Monitoring and reporting

Monitoring and reporting are essential to the successful implementation of CBAs, as they measure and track the commitments made by developers and contractors, and communicate results to partners. Without robust monitoring and reporting frameworks, CBAs often lack accountability, transparency, and enforceability.<sup>78</sup>

One advocate noted that all CBAs, regardless of who is implementing them, require strong monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure that all parties involved are fulfilling their obligations.

*Any community benefit agreement – whether inside government, outside government, private sector, public sector – needs heavy reporting, heavy monitoring to ensure that people are living up to the promises that they have made.*

Another advocate stressed the importance of consistent and transparent public reporting to ensure that CBA commitments are being fulfilled, adding that data should be openly shared with the community rather than kept within government or developer institutions.

Reporting is also really important, to ensure the benefits are actually being delivered and realized. I think making sure you report on your progress regularly, but also publicly, so that all the data is easily accessible from the public's point of view is very important.

### Data capture and sensitivity

CBA monitoring and reporting rely heavily on data capture to collect relevant, accurate, and timely information. This process requires sensitivity around the management of confidential or personally identifiable information, and an understanding of the social implications of data misuse, particularly as it pertains to the potential stigmatization and exclusion of equity-deserving groups.<sup>79</sup>

One practitioner identified data capture as a key focus of their organization's efforts to measure progress towards established CBA objectives.

*I think it was more around trying to capture the data so that we knew we were moving towards the target. And again, we talked about it every single meeting, so I think it was on the radar. It was just a matter of asking what else we could do. And that's what we would brainstorm every meeting, just to think about how we can better reach out to more of the communities that we're trying to target.*

Another practitioner stated that much of the data collected for CBAs are sensitive and often gathered from communities that have historically had their personal data misused. As a result, they stressed that data security is of paramount importance.

*There are very strong privacy considerations, especially since the data that we are collecting from the communities that we are working with is incredibly sensitive. And these are communities that otherwise may have historically had their information misused by their employers or the government. And so, it's really important to us that we are handling people's private and sensitive information with strong security.*

## Transparency and accountability

In the context of CBAs, transparent processes (e.g., community consultation, data dashboards, public reporting, etc.) can facilitate open access to information and clear communication across project phases. This not only helps partners better understand CBA commitments, but also serves to hold parties accountable to their commitments.<sup>80</sup>

An advocate stressed the importance of binding agreements to safeguard commitments, even as project circumstances inevitably change.

*I believe the most effective CBAs are the ones that are trilateral, meaning that there is a means or a mechanism by which the community can hold the institutions and the developer partners accountable to*



*In the context of CBAs, **transparent processes** (e.g., community consultation, data dashboards, public reporting, etc.) **can facilitate open access to information and clear communication across project phases.***

*their commitments. And the reason why is because situations can change in the future, so it is really important to have an agreement that is binding.*

A practitioner explained that community leaders play an active role in ensuring developers and partners remain responsive to evolving community priorities.

*We have community leaders that sit at our oversight table. So, they are always holding our feet to the fire and making sure that things have shifted. They keep us up to date on what new community needs are. Having community leaders on board, I think that helps a lot.*

## Developing clear and measurable targets

Developing clear and measurable targets promotes actionable and enforceable CBA commitments, which can increase the likelihood that community goals are achieved. Having specific targets with defined timelines and responsibilities also provides a framework for monitoring and evaluating progress.<sup>81</sup>

One practitioner described a strong commitment to data analysis and performance tracking within their organization to inform decision-making.

*So, you can see on our website how much we have spent, when we spent it, why we spent it. And then, internally as an organization, we have a few data scientists who are looking at the data all the time. We have a scorecard, we have operational metrics. Beyond how we are hiring, we are looking at how we perform as it relates to when we supply, how long it takes us to supply, how effective we are at supply management. So, we do a deep dive in terms of our performance metrics and our KPIs.*

Another practitioner explained that their organization emphasizes the use of clear and measurable hiring and procurement targets to strengthen transparency and accountability.

*Our organization has a best practice of clear and measurable hard targets. Using hard targets is really important to us, because it is one way that we ensure a level of accountability. And I think that hard targets are a great way for us to assess*

*the benefits of CBAs. Hard targets that we use are primarily associated with hiring and procurement. When I say hiring, I mean hiring people who are from equity-deserving communities. And when I say procurement, I am speaking about procurement from diverse suppliers or local businesses.*



## Insights

The interviews confirmed the four elements of our business case. Strategically, CBAs serve as a framework to align infrastructure investments with broader policy objectives. Advocates and practitioners expressed that this requires ongoing community engagement, consultation, and input, along with education and collaboration. Moreover, CBAs were identified as a vehicle to combat racism and discrimination through more inclusive hiring practices and workplace policies that support increased labour participation for equity-deserving groups. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of ongoing research and development of best practices as a strategic lever to improve CBA processes.

Economically, CBAs can deliver numerous benefits to local communities, including targeted employment, training, and procurement opportunities. They can also address systemic discrimination by providing these opportunities to equity-deserving groups who have historically been excluded from workforce and business participation. Advocates and practitioners agreed that hiring locally can support these goals and help marginalized communities (e.g., individuals experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, or substance abuse) reintegrate into the labour market. Another aspect of CBAs that interviewees championed was their capacity to grow the skilled workforce to support current and future infrastructure projects within a region.

Financially, CBAs can provide value for money and strong return on investment. Although CBAs introduce implementation costs related to coordination, monitoring, and compliance, these are often offset by long-term economic and social gains. For example, hiring locally can generate significant cost savings for developers by reducing or eliminating travel, accommodation, and relocation expenses that are often required when bringing in workers from outside the region. Additionally, practitioners noted that CBA implementation costs are often lower than what developers initially expect – and, in some cases, are fully funded by government agencies. They also emphasized how equitable wages, established through transparent negotiation processes, can provide fair compensation for workers from equity-deserving groups – which supports greater economic inclusion, and addresses longstanding employment and income disparities.

From a deliverability and operations perspective, advocates and practitioners discussed several key elements that were required for successful CBA implementation. They highlighted the importance of robust monitoring and reporting frameworks to ensure that commitments were upheld and communicated. This involves developing clear and measurable targets to evaluate progress and transparent processes to hold all parties accountable. Interviewees also stressed the importance of data sensitivity when managing confidential or personally identifiable information, particularly from equity-deserving groups.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

Community benefits agreements (CBAs) have emerged as a powerful tool to embed community priorities into major development projects. In contrast to many traditional development models, CBAs are grounded in community engagement and are designed so that the economic and social value generated by major development projects are shared with the communities most affected by them. Additionally, CBAs can help align infrastructure investments with broader regional goals and policy objectives (e.g., social inclusion, economic opportunity, community development, etc.) in ways that traditional development approaches often do not.

The evidence presented in this report shows that, when effectively designed and implemented, CBAs can deliver a range of benefits, such as employment and training pathways for equity-deserving groups, local procurement opportunities for diverse suppliers, and public realm improvements, among others. At the same time, CBAs require robust operational and governance structures to ensure that these benefits are fully realized. This includes developing measurable targets and transparent reporting mechanisms to ensure that all parties are upholding their commitments. As Canada continues to invest in large-scale public infrastructure projects, CBAs represent an empowerment model that centres communities as active partners in the development process.

The following recommendations for the successful implementation of CBAs are grounded in the research and findings presented in this report. Additionally, recommendations were developed to align with the four aspects of the business case: the strategic case, the economic case, the financial case, and the deliverability and operations case. This helps address the full spectrum of factors necessary for CBAs to succeed.



## Strategic recommendations

- > A mix of formal and informal community engagement strategies should be employed to encourage representation from equity-deserving groups and to help identify community priorities.
- > Fostering long-term collaborative relationships between partners (e.g., developers, government, community groups) can help identify shared goals and solve issues as they arise.
- > Increasing education efforts can raise awareness about the benefits of CBAs beyond workforce outcomes.
- > Conducting ongoing research can help CBA advocates and practitioners learn and adapt best practices from other jurisdictions.
- > Practitioners should continue to develop and update toolkits, templates, and guides to support more effective CBA delivery and implementation.
- > Developers and contractors should incorporate anti-racism and anti-discrimination practices through inclusive hiring and worksite policies.

## Economic recommendations

- > Hiring should prioritize local residents and equity-deserving groups, with structured pathways for employment and training.
- > Wraparound supports are required for individuals experiencing complex employment barriers (e.g., homelessness, mental health, and addiction issues) to support their re-entry into the labour market.

- > Mandate procurement targets that allocate significant project spending towards local, small, and diverse businesses.
- > Invest in apprenticeships, training, and workforce development to build a pipeline of skilled workers who can support both current and future infrastructure projects.
- > SROI analysis should be integrated throughout the planning and implementation phases of CBAs to better forecast and evaluate social and economic outcomes.



## Financial recommendations

- > Mandate fair and equitable wages for all workers, along with transparent wage negotiations and payroll monitoring.
- > Developers must be educated about the potential cost savings of CBAs such as those resulting from local hiring (e.g., reduced travel and accommodation expenses).
- > Government funding can be leveraged to offset implementation costs borne by developers where appropriate.
- > CBA investments should align with broader policy goals and supplement investments from other levels of government (e.g., federal, provincial, municipal).
- > Incorporate community input to prioritize and rationalize CBA investments.

## Deliverability and Operations Recommendations

- > Clear and measurable targets for hiring, training, procurement, and investments should be established early in the CBA process.
- > Develop transparent reporting mechanisms that track progress against targets, and publish results through progress reports and publicly accessible dashboards.
- > Data management protocols must protect confidential and personally identifiable information, particularly from equity-deserving groups.
- > Multi-party governance structures that bring together government, development, labour, and community representatives can help guide CBA planning and implementation.
- > Ensure that CBAs remain adaptable to changing economic conditions and community needs.

# Appendix



## Interview Questions – CBA Advocates

1. How do you see community benefits agreements (CBAs) aligning with the long-term strategic goals of your organization or community?
2. Can you share an example of how a CBA contributed to long-term social change in your community (e.g., employment, housing, access to services, etc.)?
3. In your experience, how effectively do CBAs consider the diverse needs of different community groups?
4. What role does your organization or community play in shaping the strategic objectives of CBAs?
5. How has the implementation of CBAs affected economic opportunities in your community? What measurable economic benefits (e.g., job creation, local business growth) have resulted from CBAs you've been involved with?
6. In your experience, have CBAs been effective in addressing affordability challenges for housing or other essential services for underserved populations?
7. Can you describe any new revenue streams for local businesses or community organizations that have resulted from CBAs in your community?
8. What challenges have you observed in the delivery of CBA commitments in your community?
9. How transparent has the process been for measuring and reporting on CBA success in your community?
10. How has your organization or community been involved in monitoring and enforcing CBA commitments?
11. How effective have CBAs been in addressing long-term community needs and priorities?
12. What improvements would you suggest for future CBA implementation, based on your experience?

## Interview Questions – CBA Practitioners

1. In your experience, what specific strategies have been most effective in ensuring community benefits agreements (CBAs) reflect the needs of equity-deserving groups?
2. What mechanisms have you implemented to ensure CBAs remain adaptable to changing community needs and economic conditions?
3. What strategies have you employed to balance the interests of developers, local government, and community groups in CBA negotiations?
4. What metrics do you use to assess the economic costs and benefits of CBAs to individuals and the community as a whole?
5. What strategies have been most effective in maximizing the economic value of CBAs for both developers and communities?
6. What measurable economic benefits (e.g., job creation, local business growth) have resulted from CBAs you've been involved with?
7. In your experience, how have CBAs impacted the capital and operating costs of development projects? Can you share any specific figures or percentages?
8. Are there any specific financial incentives or subsidies that have been effective in encouraging developers to prioritize benefits for equity-deserving groups?
9. Have you encountered any unexpected financial costs or savings when implementing CBAs?
10. What challenges have you encountered in ensuring compliance with CBA commitments during the implementation phase? How were these addressed?
11. What strategies have you seen work well to ensure that CBAs remain realistic and achievable within the constraints of a project's timeline and budget?
12. Can you describe how disputes or conflicts between stakeholders (e.g., developers and community groups) were resolved during the operation of a CBA?

## Social Return on Investment (SROI) Analysis

Social return on investment (SROI) is a framework for measuring the social, economic, and environmental value generated by an intervention beyond traditional financial accounting.<sup>82</sup> SROI was first developed in the mid-1990s by the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund (REDF)<sup>83</sup> and has been described as one of the most well-known social impact methods,<sup>84</sup> representing “the nearest to a current industry standard for project or organizational level social impact reporting”.<sup>85</sup> SROI builds on traditional cost-benefit analysis by quantifying the benefits derived from investments and expressing them as a monetary ratio that illustrates the social value generated per dollar spent.<sup>86</sup>

SROI analysis involves six stages:<sup>87</sup>

1. **Establishing scope and identifying stakeholders:** The first stage involves defining the boundaries of the analysis and engaging with stakeholders who are affected by, or can affect, the outcomes.
2. **Mapping outcomes:** In the second stage, the expected outcomes of the activity are identified and documented. This involves predicting the changes that the activity aims to create and mapping them in a structured manner.
3. **Evidencing and valuing outcomes:** The third stage involves collecting data to prove the outcomes and then assigning monetary values to them. This requires a careful approach to ensure that the valuation is accurate.
4. **Establishing impact:** The fourth stage focuses on isolating the changes that are directly attributable to the activity and separating them from those that would have occurred regardless.
5. **Calculating SROI:** In the fifth stage, the total social return is computed by calculating the net value of the impact and dividing it by the investment. This ratio helps stakeholders to understand the efficiency of the investment in terms of social value.
6. **Reporting and using the results:** The final stage involves communicating the findings and insights gained from the SROI analysis. This not only includes reporting the results, but also using them to inform future strategies and improvements.

There are two main types of SROI analysis: **forecast** and **evaluative**. **Forecast SROI analysis** predicts how much social value will be created if project activities meet their intended outcomes. It is useful during the planning and early implementation stages of an intervention to determine how capital can be leveraged to maximize social impact and guide decision-making. **Evaluative SROI analysis** is conducted retrospectively using outcome data from completed or ongoing projects. As such, it is implemented after an intervention has had time to affect change and there are existing outcomes to be measured. An evaluative approach therefore needs quality outcome data to be successful.<sup>88, 89</sup>

Both SROI and community benefits agreements (CBAs) aim to measure and enhance the blended value outcomes (social, economic, and environmental) generated by development projects. In this sense, both concepts redefine what constitutes value by extending it beyond purely financial metrics. Whereas CBAs are designed to ensure that development projects deliver tangible benefits to the local community (e.g., jobs, affordable housing, social procurement, neighbourhood improvements, etc.), SROI provides a framework for measuring blended value outcomes that not only promote economic growth, but support social inclusion and community well-being.

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