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Community-based responses to exclusionary processes of neighbourhood change in Parkdale, Toronto

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Introduction

Toronto's socio-spatial polarisation is proceeding at a rate much greater than elsewhere in Canada. Spatially, formerly middle-income neighbourhoods are transforming into either high or low income (Walks 2014). Toronto is becoming a strikingly segregated city, with visible minorities concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods and white residents dominating affluent areas in numbers far higher than their share of the population (Hulchanski 2009). In this context Toronto is experiencing both sustained gentrification and advanced suburban restructuring (Walks and August 2008). As Lehrer has pointed out, Toronto's urban changes are strongly impacted by the global economy exceeding the capacity of local policies to govern them (Lehrer 2006). Thus we are witnessing a policy context in Toronto where local government is retreating from public investments, giving more room to the motives of private corporations. This situation has produced problems for the social production of space in the city, as it is now heavily influenced by private property interests.

While Parkdale, a neighbourhood in the western downtown area of Toronto, was considered one of the last affordable downtown neighbourhoods for culturally diverse newcomers to Canada, the situation is rapidly changing. An analysis of 2016 census data shows a mutable situation, particularly in South Parkdale where the recent immigrant population (people arriving in the previous 10 years) is shrinking and the non-immigrant population is growing. Similarly, the population of low-income persons and recent immigrants has decreased while the population of older, Canadian-born working adults has increased. The occupations of residents are also shifting away from middle-income blue-collar jobs towards business people/professionals. A change in residential accommodation is noticeable as well. There has been an increase in apartments removed

from the regular rental housing stock and made available for short-term rental through services like Airbnb[1]; advertised rents in the neighbourhood demonstrate a drastic increase over the 2015–18 period. Overall, simple unweighted average advertised rents increased by over $426 per month, or 36 per cent. The quickly changing environment of Parkdale is creating a more marked process of gentrification, where only households with higher incomes are able to afford to live in the neighbourhood.

In Parkdale, low-income people together with populations with mental health and addiction experiences, refugees and recent immigrants, and people facing homelessness are all strongly affected by these rent increases and the resulting changes in the nature and use of public spaces in the neighbourhood.[2] While the inclusivity of Parkdale is at risk, community-based activism to resist and mitigate the negative effects of neighbourhood change is getting stronger. In the last few years, a social infrastructure that is able to promote the empowerment of diverse community members in a condition where land use decision-making is particularly market-driven, compartmentalised and privatised (PCED 2016) has been built with the collaboration of diverse organisations and community allies. Through a case study of Parkdale, this chapter argues that community-based responses produce positive outcomes in response to the negative effects of neighbourhood change and disadvantage if a grounded and networked social infrastructure that can influence decision-making processes regarding neighbourhood development and planning is designed and implemented. The effectiveness of community-based action is related to the capacity of building on-the-ground and bottom-up governance mechanisms (Garcia 2010), directed at bringing equity not only to the social realm but also to governance and planning systems and practices. Viewed within this framework, Parkdale is a relevant case study due to the presence of effective neighbourhood organisations (Carrière 2016) that are connected through a multifaceted social infrastructure that supports a fundamental rethinking of local planning policy and practice (Hanna and Webber 2010).

In this chapter, I first provide a brief overview of the literature discussing the complex relationship between community-based activism and local governments. I then focus on Parkdale's path-dependent history of community-based activism, by exploring its scope and actors as well as the changing forms of organisation over the years. The chapter also examines the ability and capacity of municipal policies and planning tools and mechanisms to control the negative effects of neighbourhood change. This is based on field research that was conducted in Parkdale between November 2017 and May 2019. The research employed a mixed-method qualitative approach through a literature review of neighbourhood change and community development scholarship, analysis of background data at the City of Toronto and neighbourhood level, interviews with key stakeholders, participant observation at public meetings and in key neighbourhood spaces, and the review of City of Toronto and Parkdale neighbourhood planning documents.

Community-based practices as policy-making

Many scholars have highlighted how community-based practices in the contemporary city raise new questions around the relationship between community-based initiatives and local governments. This issue is particularly relevant within the context of global neoliberal conditions, where the state's retraction from social welfare provisions has dramatically increased in recent decades (Alford 2009; Peck et al. 2013; Savini 2016). Some scholars have argued that it is important to consider community-based organising as an arena of opportunities that emphasise bottom-up governance (Garcia 2010) and that focus on reconnecting local communities to their governments as well as scaling up processes of change in governance practices. This bottom-up approach to reconfiguring community–local government relations sits in opposition to the traditional approach to planning and activism in communities or neighbourhoods by local governments. As Uitermark (2015) explains, in the 1980s and 1990s, urban governments in Europe co-opted a great number of moderate activists through targeted neighbourhood policies that emphasised partnerships and similar participatory schemes, effectively dividing radical and moderate activists while imposing government constraints on groups operating within neighbourhood-based social movements. Uitermark points out how this approach was used to address new challenges presented by austerity and the retraction of the welfare state, but in a way that urban governments could still control neighbourhood-based activism and initiatives and ensure that they were palatable to government interests. In similar fashion, the analyses of DeFilippis and other scholars have warned about the risk of depoliticising community-based initiatives when they act as service providers and apolitical moderators between citizens and local governments. Instead, they consider community activism as a potential source for building community power and changing the root causes of social and spatial problems (DeFilippis et al. 2010). Thanks to the agency of more empowered local communities, community-based initiatives can build 'new institutions' to enhance democratic control over unfair processes of neighbourhood change. This strand of the literature considers community empowerment as essential for advocating for more responsive local government (Novy and Leubolt 2005; Swyngedouw 2005; Garcia 2010; Ostanel and Attili 2018).

Similarly, Sendra and Fitzpatrick (Chapter 18) argue that community-based activism in London has had the power to influence decisions, political agendas and the policy-making process. Even though it is not possible to present a picture of complete victory, activism creates more opportunities for further successes as it seems to have a replicating effect in terms of motivating communities to keep fighting at different scales and finding policy alternatives to a politics of austerity. These practices can be seen as part of a politics of 'counter-austerity', with each case offering a particular spatial scale of emergent forms of contestation as new policy-making (Arampatzi 2017; Sendra and Fitzpatrick, Chapter 18). According to this line of thought, conflict and collaboration can be considered as reinforcing

elements in an ongoing political process, where conflict is not only unavoidable but also a necessary aspect of community participation and engagement. Real-life practices of community-based activism can foster and co-produce formal and/or informal changes in how local institutions function (González and Healey 2005; Ostanel 2020).

A path-dependent history of community-based activism in Parkdale

This section aims to reconstruct the path-dependent and context (place)-bound (Moulaert et al. 2013; Bunce 2016) history of community-based activism in Parkdale (see Figure 17.1). Community activism in Parkdale has continuously changed over time, becoming increasingly attentive to the root causes of social and spatial inequalities as well as fostering much-needed conversations across scales – moving from the micro (everyday resistance to neighbourhood change) to the macro level (policy changes and the rethinking of planning regimes). In the following sections, I explore how community activism has championed social equity and inclusivity in Parkdale in relation to planning decisions by Toronto's municipal government and neighbourhood change processes.

Competing visions for Parkdale

Contemporary local activism in Parkdale is largely rooted in community work that was started in the 1990s, when the growing divide between affluent homeowners and lower-income tenants led to a local consultation process guided by the City of Toronto government (Barna 2007). Two competing visions for the neighbourhood were raised at the time, with relatively affluent residents wanting to fight the overconcentration of social services and rooming houses/bachelorettes in the neighbourhood, considered as the cause of drug dealing, prostitution and the presence of numerous very poor residents. Gentrification processes were already at play, producing noticeable financial reinvestment in residential and commercial property and increasing social displacement, evictions and homelessness (Slater 2004). The gentrification process was actively supported by the City of Toronto from the outset (Slater 2004). Public discourse was constructed around the role of bachelorettes (very small bachelor apartments) and rooming houses, because these inexpensive rental housing options were seen by gentrifiers and local government to 'threaten the stability of family neighbourhoods', 'destroy streetscape' and 'bring a host of social problems because of the often-rowdy transients they attract as tenants' (Whitzman and Slater 2006). At the same time, some organisations active in the provision of social services conveyed a counter-vision. In their view, the main challenges of Parkdale were related to high unemployment and

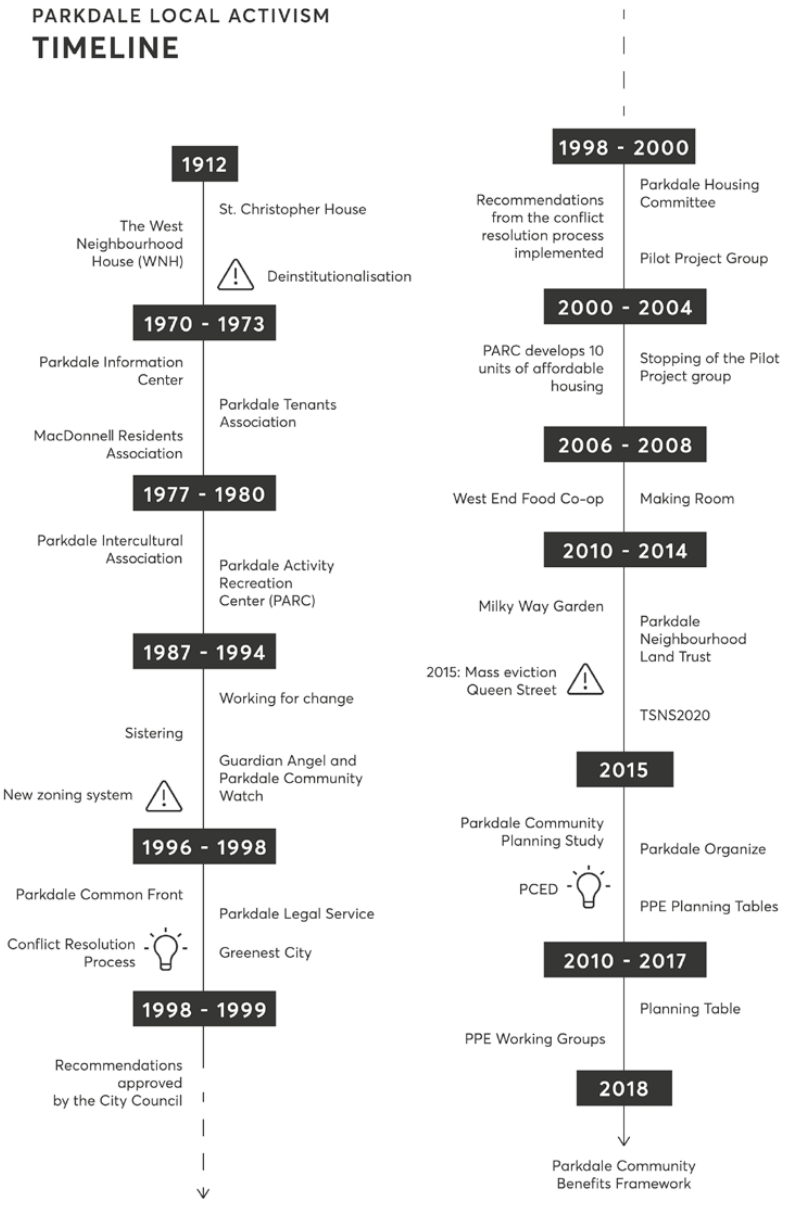

Figure 17.1 The timeline of community activism in Parkdale (organisations' websites and Barna 2007)

lack of jobs. They argued there was an increased need for the provision of more social services and social housing in Parkdale. In that period, the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) was among the most active community-based organisations supporting a different narrative about Parkdale and working in collaboration with other dynamic social agencies in the neighbourhood, including West

Neighbourhood House, Sistering and Parkdale Intercultural Association (Barna 2007). The tension between the two competing visions for Parkdale erupted in 1996 in response to the introduction of the City of Toronto's 'interim control by-law' that prohibited any new rooming house/bachelorette development or conversion in South Parkdale designed for low-income tenants (Slater 2004).

An immediate effect of this top-down planning decision by the City of Toronto was the creation of an alliance of stakeholder groups in Parkdale. The Parkdale Common Front in Defense of Poor Neighbors group was established in 1996 to support the idea that Parkdale should remain a diverse neighbourhood and accessible to low-income people. Many non-profit organisations became part of this association, including the Bachelorette Owners Association. The City of Toronto's planning decision also resulted in the creation of more unusual alliances between groups in Parkdale and citywide organisations, such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. The level of concern and conflict was so high that in 1998, the Toronto City Council decided to institute a formal conflict resolution process in Parkdale, aimed at opening up a dialogue with all stakeholder organisations in the neighbourhood. With the support of an external facilitator, different organisations and City of Toronto staff met for 12 months in order to discuss 'the approach that the City should take on the existing illegal rooming houses and bachelorettes in Parkdale' (Toronto Community Council 1999). In 1999, Toronto's City Council drafted and adopted a report with recommendations to legalize rooming houses. A Parkdale Housing Committee was created and a 'Pilot Project Group' was initiated in the neighbourhood. In 2000, the recommendations started to be implemented and 266 illegal rooming house properties were identified for potential legalisation (Barna 2007). In 2004, however, the City of Toronto abandoned the Parkdale Pilot Project. Barna highlights the lack of long-term support by the City, both from a financial and a political point of view, as one of the main reasons why the programme was stopped (Barna 2007, 37). Slater's analysis is directed at the City of Toronto's unwillingness to support single-room occupancy housing in the neighbourhood (Slater 2004).

Towards equitable planning in Parkdale: The role of PARC

Since the end of the 1990s, PARC has had a key stakeholder organising role in advocating for access to affordable housing. In 2000, PARC created and managed 10 units of supported housing on the third floor of its offices at 1499 Queen Street West. Commercial units were given to charitable or non-profit organisations in order to create a local hub for community services, thus promoting the inclusion of new community stakeholders (PARC 2007). Starting from a mission related to more traditional drop-in community services, PARC has increasingly built efforts to advocate for affordable housing and to organise against evictions caused by gentrification. PARC's first mission statement was written in 1994. It stated that 'Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre is to be a stable and meaningful self-directed

resource for the community of psychiatric consumer/survivors and socially isolated people, a focus for inspiration and a source of pride for every individual Member. We aspire to contribute to the health and well-being, comfort of person, richness of spirit, and the expression of individual truth of all PARC Members' (PARC 1994, 1). In 2007, PARC changed its mission statement to 'a community where people rebuild their lives', with a consequent decision to shift part of the mission towards supporting equitable development in the neighbourhood. PARC subsequently decided to become a landowner in Parkdale, purchasing 1499 Queen St West and 194 Dowling St to protect residents from eviction but at the same time forming closer links with both the government and the private market through this process (Epstein et al. 2017).

Starting in 2010, PARC started to seriously explore how a community land trust might work within the context of Parkdale (see Bunce, Chapter 19). In 2012, an interim board for the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT), hosted through PARC, was formed with the contribution of different organisations. In 2014, a non-profit organisation was incorporated and run by a board of directors, consisting of local non-profit organisations and groups that represent the diversity of Parkdale. These organisations included PARC, the West End Food Co-Op, Greenest City, Roncesvalles-Macdonell Residents Association, Parkdale Community Legal Services, Parkdale Village Business Improvement Association, West Neighbourhood House (formerly St Christopher House) and Sistering. PARC actively works with PNLT and other Parkdale organisations to promote community participation in guiding how neighbourhood land is used to benefit the community and exploring on-the-ground methods to keep Parkdale affordable and diverse. In 2018 the work of the PNLT pushed for the approval at the City of Toronto level of a $1.5 million fund that a non-profit could use to purchase and operate a Parkdale rooming house.

Community-based planning: Planning and organising against gentrification

The Parkdale Community Economic Development (PCED) Project (now called the Parkdale People's Economy), an initiative of PARC, has the objective of bringing diverse stakeholder efforts together to form a common strategy under the umbrella of a 'community wealth building' approach. Community wealth building is defined as 'a system approach to economic development that creates an inclusive, sustainable economy built on locally rooted and broadly held ownership' (Kelly et al. 2016, 16). The community wealth building approach explicitly emphasises the democratisation of the ownership of community assets. Starting in February 2015, different organisations met on a bi-monthly basis through a Neighbourhood Planning Table, facilitated by PARC, to develop a plan for action to support community participation in planning and organising in the face of gentrification (PCED 2018). As a product of this work,

the Parkdale Community Planning Study is a plan to address displacement pressures by building decent work, shared wealth and equitable development in Parkdale. According to an analysis of meeting minutes, 63 stakeholders were present at the different planning table meetings among community-based stakeholders (both active in Parkdale and across the city), different departments of the City of Toronto (City Planning, Public Health and Social Development Finance and Administration), community services, faith groups and the University of Toronto.[3]

PCED describes it as a community planning initiative envisaging a range of tools for action: (i) community-based research and community development; (ii) direct action, demonstrations and community voting; (iii) community benefits framework; and (iv) letter writing and media campaigns. In addition to the planning table, community working groups have been set up to cover the areas of interest envisaged by the planning study, focusing on the following topics: decent work; participatory democracy; community finance; affordable housing; food security; cultural development; and community health (PCED 2016). The working groups were designed to facilitate the direct participation of residents beyond the planning table. Community groups set up their own agendas and action plans with the aim to incrementally implement the planning actions envisaged and eventually revise them.

The community planning process in Parkdale has intersected with the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy (TSNS) 2020 (City of Toronto 2012),[4] a neighbourhood policy released by the City of Toronto in 2012 and aimed at providing 'an equitable set of social, economic and cultural opportunities for all residents, leading to equitable outcomes across all neighbourhoods' (City of Toronto 2014, 2). The Parkdale People's Economy planning table has been recognised as the institutional table of this municipal government strategy in Parkdale, a situation that seems to facilitate a smooth flow of communication between municipal departments and policies and different community groups. Nevertheless, the TSNS appears to have limited room for action regarding the more structural and systemic elements that are causing inequitable development in Parkdale, particularly in relation to constraints on affordable housing as well as democratic control over neighbourhood change.

Impacts on planning and development in Parkdale

With an increase in gentrification pressures, Parkdale community organisations have needed to reinforce their capacity to respond to how official planning and development tools and mechanisms are designed and implemented. One of the ways this is being done is through the Parkdale Community Benefits Framework, developed in 2018 by Parkdale community organisations 'to center community needs and community benefits when planning for neighbourhood growth and development rather than highest and best use, as defined by density and profit'

(PCED 2018). The vision of the Parkdale Community Benefits Framework is a 'call for equitable development that respects and benefits existing community members, that values people's lives over profits, and that promotes development without displacement' (PCED 2018). In terms of equitable development, the document calls for the use of 'transparent and fair process that ensures historically marginalized community members can share power and meaningfully participate in the development process through participatory planning and direct democracy' (PCED 2018). In order to ensure accountability, it states that 'developments can mitigate the risk of displacement through tools such as Equity Impact Studies, Inclusionary Zoning, and Community Benefits Agreements' (PCED 2018).

The Parkdale Community Benefits Framework was used in 2019 as a recommendation in the City of Toronto's consultation process on inclusionary zoning. In this consultation, Parkdale residents and organisations asked for a minimum of 30 per cent permanently affordable housing with commitments to deep affordability, accessibility and adequately sized units for families in new buildings (PCED 2018). They advocated for the approval of inclusionary zoning by the City of Toronto in order to expand housing options for low- and middle-income renters. While the City of Toronto's inclusionary zoning regulation is still being decided, what is interesting is the effort to establish a more strategic and spatial approach to social inclusion through the activism of community-based organisations in Parkdale.

Discussion and conclusion

Parkdale serves as an excellent case study for assessing the capacity of community-based initiatives to resist or mitigate the negative effects of neighbourhood change. Community activism in Parkdale shows the presence of a strong network of community organising, which is considered a condition for successful collective mobilisation for positive change (Sampson 2004; Lin Cheng-Chen and Peng 2010; Carrière 2016). This chapter showed how community activism in Parkdale has developed over time and how it is context-specific and place-bounded. Over the years, community-based activism in Parkdale has become increasingly attentive to the root causes of social and spatial inequalities, as well as fostering much-needed conversations across scales – a movement from the micro (everyday resistance to neighbourhood change) to the macro level (policy changes and rethinking of planning regimes). While community-based action is intrinsically related to different scales, it is also important that it is multi-scalar and interrelated: from everyday activism, to a broader cultural politics and agency of a neighbourhood (Rankin 2009), and to broader levels of decision-making, such as local government.

In line with this, I suggest that community-based responses such as those in Parkdale are more able to control the negative effects of neighbourhood change when they acknowledge the importance of how planning and development mechanisms are designed and implemented. This is particularly important in a

context where the municipal government is weakened in the governance of land use decision-making processes because of the interests of private developers and where the benefits of improvement are not shared equitably (Walks and Maaranen 2008). As Sendra and Fitzpatrick (Chapter 18) highlight, community-based activism in London has contributed to proposing equitable community-led regeneration as well as influencing current policies, as evidenced in the cases of the West Ken and Gibbs Green communities. In a similar fashion, Parkdale's social infrastructure has pushed for and co-produced an innovative plan to preserve some of the neighbourhood's rapidly dwindling stock of affordable housing (i.e. the pilot project on rooming houses). In addition to this, community-based activism in Parkdale is advocating for mandatory inclusionary zoning regulations with high 'set asides' – defined as the percentage of a new residential building that will be made affordable and ideally provide deep affordability. The concurrent work on the Parkdale Community Benefits Framework, being inserted into a broader campaign regarding community benefits in development, is identified as an important step for envisioning what community benefits can be gleaned from future developments in Parkdale. Parkdale's social infrastructure has acknowledged that a successful inclusionary zoning policy needs to be integrated with the Toronto Official Plan, affordable housing plans and local neighbourhood plans, and geared towards the revision of municipal planning and development mechanisms. In this sense, Parkdale is particularly interesting for its capacity to merge community development practices, such as collective action and solutions to neighbourhood-based problems (Carpenter 2015), with community organising strategies directed at changes in policies and approaches at the city level and on a broader scale (Brian and Speer 2015).

Community-based activism in Parkdale confirms the idea that contestation can be considered as a valuable form of policy-making (Arampatzi 2016 in Sendra and Fitzpatrick, Chapter 18). In Parkdale, conflict and collaboration are reinforcing elements in an ongoing political process whereby disagreements (between community and local government or between competing neighbourhood visions) are not only unavoidable but also a necessary aspect of community participation and engagement (Ostanel 2020). Parkdale can be considered as a community 'trading zone' (Balducci and Mäntysalo 2013), where the ordinary structures and processes of community planning are transformed in alliance with and relation to other stakeholders and different scales of decision-making within and outside the neighbourhood sphere. The story of Parkdale's community organising and activism efforts demonstrates the creation of a strong social infrastructure in response and relation to larger institutional and structural processes and impacts. Over time, community activism in Parkdale has enabled the development of community-based interventions that combine social and economic justice approaches with building cohesive plans intended to influence the decisions of Toronto's government. In this way, community action in Parkdale exemplifies a bottom-up, networked approach to resisting impactful neighbourhood change, while at the same time challenging any detrimental 'top-down' municipal government decisions.

Acknowledgements

This chapter is the result of research conducted within the project NEIGHBOURCHANGE, which has received funding from the European Commission under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships, Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, project NEIGHBOURCHANGE grant agreement no. 707726. This work would not be possible without the support of Parkdale People's Economy and all their partner organisations in accessing the research field. Data analysis has been provided by the Neighborhood Change Research Partnership based at the University of Toronto (Professor David Hulchanski, Principal Investigator; Richard Maaranen, Senior Data Analyst).

Notes

1. Data analysis was developed by the Neighborhood Change Research Partnership, http://neighbourhoodchange.ca.
2. Parkdale is a neighbourhood approximately 4 kilometres west of the downtown core. Queen Street, an important commercial artery for both Parkdale and Toronto, runs east–west through the neighbourhood and is used as the dividing line between North and South Parkdale. In this study, South Parkdale is the focus of the investigation. Data have been collected considering census tracts 4, 5, 7.01 and 7.02. Liberty Village neighbourhood has been analysed considering the impact of its transformation into a hub for creative and cultural industries in the late 1990s on South Parkdale.
3. During the field research I had the opportunity to participate in planning tables and working group meetings, observing interactions as well as analysing meeting schedules and minutes.
4. The TSNT was aimed at providing 'an equitable set of social, economic and cultural opportunities for all residents, leading to equitable outcomes across all neighbourhoods' (City of Toronto 2014, 2). The TSNT assessment identifies 31 out of 140 neighbourhoods 'below the benchmark' and defines place-based action plans.

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