Members of CCPA–MB have a long history of collaborating on participatory research projects with Aboriginal community organizers in Winnipeg’s inner-city; processes in which the mostly Aboriginal residents are given the opportunity to tell their stories of colonial marginalization and injustice, effectively ‘speaking back’ and unsettling dominant colonial frameworks and practices. These ongoing projects produced a space for the creation of the State of the Inner City Report, a yearly assessment of the socio-economic issues affecting residents in Winnipeg’s disenfranchised neighbourhoods.

Indigenous challenges to Western-based planning practices are growing, and as Indigenous peoples increase pressure to create alternative approaches, a question arises: What can Western-educated planners learn from the CCPA–MB’s participatory research experiences in Winnipeg’s North End? The obvious answer lies in the need to be reflexive, but as the CCPA–MB has learned, this must also lead to an attitude of placing of one’s ego aside, to adopt a sense of being of service; to be willing to let the process go where it will, and to accept ‘murkiness’ as a fact, for there are no easy solutions to resolving the complexity of planning with Aboriginal peoples in Canada.
**Interrogation**  Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a systemic method of inquiry based on collaboration with the people affected by the issues being studied. Problems are identified by the community and, in ideal cases, the community will also determine the methodology it believes will best suit the objectives of the research project. In this sense, PAR is community-led and inclusive, and is often used when working with marginalized and oppressed groups, to educate, take action and/or affect social change; research findings are always widely disseminated, in accessible forms, for all to use. In his studies on oppression, Paulo Freire observed that dialogue and communication are a first step towards empowerment and transformation. This means that transformative research needs to emphasize the value of narratives where people are offered not only a voice but a speaking position. PAR’s tendency to use narratives affirms its transformational ideals and its goal to build social capacity. Because PAR research is collaborative, it is often regarded as complicated and risky since it can and does unfold in unforeseen and complex ways. It also requires a high level of mutual trust between all participants. Nurturing trusting relationships takes time, and is a critical first step in the success of the process.

**Interface**  In colonial countries, like Canada, cultural and social practices are embedded in layers of institutional practices that have, and continue to marginalize Aboriginal peoples. As they interface with these structures, that negate their values and their reasons for resisting, Aboriginal peoples are ‘speaking back’ and challenging colonial institutions into recognizing that processes remain unfair. Planning is one of these cultural practices; some planners are listening, and a call has been made to decolonize planning practices, in real time and space, and to renegotiate the complex web of values, knowledge, meaning, agency and power (see Porter, 2010). As Hart (2010) observes, however, the brunt of this effort is being taken up by Indigenous peoples. The inner-city of Winnipeg - especially the North End - is one real space where these decolonizing processes are occurring in real time, and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba (CCPA-MB) is playing a role in supporting local efforts to expose the colonial legacy of marginalization and poverty.

Critical and liberating dialogue presupposes action.  
*Paulo Freire*
Interpellation CCPA-MB answered the call for social justice in 2005 when it decided to formally engage with inner-city community-based organizations (CBOs) on a project to study the housing, employment and educational issues in three inner-city neighbourhoods, Lord Selkirk, Spence and Centennial. That these neighbourhoods have a high Aboriginal population was an overriding concern of the research, since their socio-economic and planning needs differ greatly from non-Aboriginals, because of the historical and marginalizing effects of colonization. The ‘State of the Inner City’ report (SIC) was created, and in 2006, a second report looked at similar issues in two other inner-city neighbourhoods, West Broadway and North Point Douglas. The knowledge created and shared during these collaborative research projects proved to be such valuable political and educational tools that the Aboriginal-run CBOs asked CCPA-MB to do more.

Intersections The State of the inner-City report has become a yearly project that chronicles the development activities and ongoing challenges in the inner-city. Thus far, six reports have been created, each with its own focus, and each guided and led by the CBOs, as per PAR principles. The success of the collaborative project is due to the decision by CCPA-MB to work with PAR and to adopt Indigenous Research methodologies belonging to Indigenous acts of resistance (see Tuhiwai Smith, 2009; and Alfred, 2009). This commitment has been challenging for CCPA-MB, but its active support of the CBOs’ desire to transform the day-to-day realities of the mostly Aboriginal residents in the inner-city has successfully built strong bridges of mutual trust. While the goal of the first two reports was to create bridges and to influence politicians into reviewing public policy structures, in true PAR form, the SIC research took on a life of its own.

2005 - The Promise of Investment in Community-Led Renewal

2006 - Inner-city voices, Community-Based solutions

2007 - Step by step – Stories of Change in Winnipeg’s Inner City

2008 - Putting our Housing in Order

2009 - It takes all day to be poor

2010 - We’re in it for the long haul
**Inter-alia** Winnipeg has the highest Aboriginal population in Canada (census 2006) and as Silver (2006) states, Aboriginal residents in the North End experience lower incomes, higher rates of unemployment and poverty, a higher incidence of single parenthood and domestic violence and lower levels of educational attainment, and high mobility and household crowding. The day-to-day reality is that housing is sorely lacking, social assistance incomes are inadequate, and access to good jobs, childcare and training is limited. While residents have no control over these issues, they are critical factors in their (in)ability to move out of poverty. As the Aboriginal-run CBOs offer programming based on traditional values, participants are being educated into understanding and recognizing how colonial systems are failing them. Storytelling plays a critical role in these processes of empowerment because stories provide insights into the meanings people give to their own experiences and to their sense of well-being.

**Interstices** Healing the damage of colonialism is slow and painful work. The journey, for many, is made longer because systemic racism, sexism and classism is ongoing, and healing is occurring within a context of recurring injury (MacKinnon and Stephens, 2007). That CBOs have been able to raise individual capacity through participation, is a testament to their value-based approach, and follows Freire’s observation that creating individual awareness of structural oppression is a critical first step toward social transformation. The yearly SIC project provides yet another venue for residents to ‘name their world’ (see SIC 2007). As their stories are being told to the larger public, participants are learning to work within Western-based systems, destructive cycles are breaking, children are reunited with their healthier parents, and some are going back to school or finding jobs; and as people move from being ‘clients’ to being volunteers and then mentors to new participants, a spirit of hope, of reclaiming culture, of neighbourhood revitalisation and community building is growing in the North End. Participation is transforming their journey into one of community involvement and independence.

It is used by CBOs when meeting with politicians, citations are used in their reports and funding applications, summaries and FAST FACTS are made for easier dissemination - while non-Aboriginal housing organizations, poverty reduction and social planning councils also use the research to meet their own needs.

Some uses come from unusual sources, as when a group of refugee women asked the CCPA-MB to translate the 2006 report into Arabic to send it back home to Afghanistan for use there, and to explain why their situation in Canada prevented them from sending more money back home.

**The SIC research has far-reaching implications.**
Intermediaries  In 2007, after the first two SIC report were produced and disseminated, C.L.O.U.T. - Community Led Organizations United Together, a coalition of nine inner-city CBOs - asked CCPA-MB to collaborate on a research project to develop a measurement of the difficult to measure positive impacts of participation in their programs. That this request was made shows the extent of the mutual trust that had developed between CCPA and the CBOs through joint participation in the earlier SIC projects. The research project called Is Participation having an Impact? created some important new learnings for CCPA members as it challenged them to test, while fine-tuning, the PAR methods they shared with the CBOs. And, consistent with PAR, the research model they developed involved a significant community role - from planning, to process and to dissemination of findings.

Interference  Even if individual progress is visible, and is resulting in the building of social capacity in the inner-city, these outcomes are mostly intangible. This creates difficulties for the CBOs and the Western-based funding institutions that require program effectiveness to be measured in narrow quantifiable terms; ironically, the very same institutions that are responsible for much of the historical neglect and damage of colonialism. Counting the number of participants who have become employed, or returned to school, for example, is seen by the CBOs as an unrealistic expectation, given that the greater issues facing people in the North End is the day-to-day need to attend to basics, like food and shelter (see SIC 2009). Inner-city CBOs are questioning mainstream funders in the hopes of increasing awareness and teaching politicians that reversing the damage of colonization requires them to be more flexible, to adapt policies, programs and methods of measurement to better reflect the needs of inner-city residents. The yearly SIC reports are playing an instrumental part in this politicized educating effort.

‘How do we measure?’ evolved into a discussion around ‘what are we measuring’ and ‘who determines what needs to be measured’?...

MacKinnon & Stephens, 2007
Reflecting on her experiences with PAR, Shauna MacKinnon, Director of CCPA-MB, observed it is not for everyone; it requires someone who can take risks, who can changes courses and let the process go where it will, in spite of the murkiness it creates. Giving up control, however, does not mean losing sight of what needs to be accomplished; it means staying grounded and being clear about your values and those of other participants, offering self, putting the needs of CBOs in front, taking a back seat, and listening, because “they don’t need a leader”\(^\text{,}\) they need collaborators and allies. Recognizing that PAR processes exist on a continuum of levels of collaboration and integration, she learned that the most valuable research for CBOs derives from processes that go ‘as pure as possible’, where working together is what is valued, because everyone is a participant, and everyone learns and grows; the ultimate outcome. Being of service also includes creating research that CBOs can use; it means parking pre-conceived ideas of how ‘real’ and rigorous academic research should be done since it is rarely relevant to CBOs whose realities and needs are very different from dominant society. In this light, Western-educated researchers need to adopt resistance-minded Indigenous research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2009), and believe the process will always yield something of value. Despite its challenges and ‘murkiness’, PAR is very satisfying work to MacKinnon, where ‘how we do’ is as critical as ‘what we do’; an attitude that has earned her the respect of inner-city CBOs.

**Interweaving** The research collaborators decided the best way to achieve their goals was to capture participants’ stories and their perceptions of what participation means to them. It was also decided that ‘insiders’, local Aboriginal residents, would conduct the interviews because it was felt that interviewees would share (and did share) information they would not feel comfortable sharing with an outsider. This decision created many challenges as there was a very limited number of local residents with the experience to do such research work. At every stage of the project, these grass-roots researchers needed to learn how to proceed, slowing the process down and creating many unforeseen difficulties; as MacKinnon and Stephens (2008) note, “hiring locally added an additional layer of complexity, but it was critical to the project’s capacity building objectives. The benefits far outweighed the costs” (p. 42). Keeping PAR principles in mind, however, led researchers to create a rich array of knowledge and a valuable document that is still being used by all participants. The project also led to the formation of a community-based research team that still gathers regularly to discuss research projects relevant to the needs of the community. This project, as well as the yearly SIC reports, also created important lessons for the CBOs, helping them to refine their programs.
Interpreting  Research participants for the project ‘Is participation having an impact’ made it clear that measuring ‘success’ to them is about looking at how people are affected by the fundamentally unjust policies and systems that exist today. Participants also believe Aboriginal-run CBOs play a critical role in decolonization because Western-based agencies are unable to deal with the colonial realities experienced by Aboriginal peoples. They identified ‘government systems’ as one of the top three causes of stress, along with lack of money and fragmented relationships. Planning belongs to these governing systems and as Porter (2010) and Roy (2006) argue, it has also been complicit in maintaining the discourse that led to colonialism and the continued production of unjust spaces. The PAR approaches adopted by CCPA-MB reveal critical tools in the needed process of decolonizing planning practices in Canada, especially given the growing political demands Aboriginal individuals and communities are making; at stake is the future ability of planning to operate within increasingly complex spaces.

Interposing  Following the lead of inner-city CBOs, for whom success is measured as transforming the lives of one person at a time, Western-based planners can begin their decolonizing work by using a progressive social justice lens. And, as Roy (2006) argues, they should also work as ‘mediators’ because mediation is an act of being simultaneously inside and outside a system, and this double act can create radical spaces where complicity can transform into subversion. Mediating is also a political act of making things right; when performed by an activist planner who has located self, culture and purpose, it will result in a building of bridges of mutual trust. As per PAR, we all have a role in influencing the development of viable and progressive policy alternatives; educating efforts should be aimed at whoever will listen. Following the teachings of the CBOs and CCPA-MB, planners must work to create spaces for Aboriginal peoples to speak back against the practices that dispossessed them of their lands, their culture and their identity; following Alfred (2009), we need to give “voice to this long-silenced wisdom”. It will be messy but “the decolonization process will be for nothing if indigenous government has no meaningful indigenous character” (p. 11). This process is not a destination; it is a journey, where social transformation occurs one individual at a time.

CBO participants also feel that if participation does nothing more than keep children safe and out of the justice system, then an important service is being provided to individuals and the broader community.
References


“I don’t mind if you put my real name on the report. Our people have been silent for way too long… without a name or a face, which is known as an identity”.

Nancy - project researcher and participant

Image sources: all photos by Carole O’Brien