

# PRIORITIZING ACTIONS

by Brody Osadick  
Indigenous Planning Studio  
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## Summary

This fact sheet demonstrates two ways to prioritize activities, timelines, roles and resources within your community's action plan. In order to continually move towards your community goals, it is important to acknowledge what actions can be taken right now and what actions can be taken in the future—this is where the process of prioritizing actions comes into play.

**Keywords:** direction setting, managing the process, planning team

## Why Prioritize?

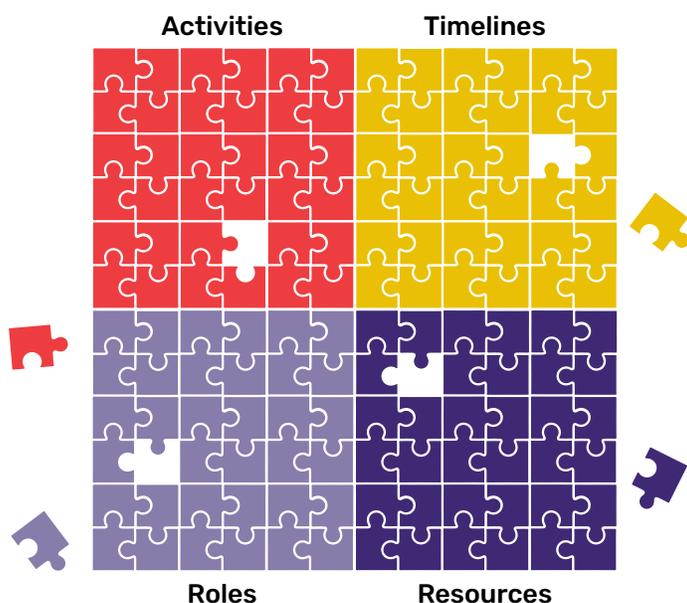
The same questions often come up when implementing a Comprehensive Community Plan. “How will we get there?” and “What do we need to do to get there?”

The laundry list of ideas on how to achieve your community's goals and objectives may at times be overwhelming. There may be a number of ideas, from a number of people, that address a number of issues. This is where an action plan describes in detail the activities, timelines, roles, and resources needed to achieve the objectives identified in your Comprehensive Community Plan (CCP).<sup>1</sup> Prioritization techniques can help measure how feasible it is to reach a particular goal, but also the type of action most appropriate to the local context.<sup>2</sup>

## What is a Selection Criteria?

Selection criteria are a set of principles, values, demands, constraints, and risks used to determine the best course of action to address a community need or objective.<sup>3</sup> The way in which decisions are justified helps build trust and transparency through careful consideration of, and collaboration between, all the people impacted by the decision.<sup>4</sup> There are many different methods to ensure such decisions are based on value and need, as opposed to mere popularity. This fact sheet references two techniques to prioritize actions, both of which include the use of selection criteria.

- Principles
- Values
- Demands
- Constraints
- Risks



**Figure 1 | The four key pieces of an action plan.**

Adapted from (National Aboriginal Lands Managers Association. "Community Land Use Planning Toolkit, Version 1.0." Ottawa: Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. 2016.)

## How Do You Prioritize in Practice?

Whether your community's priority is promoting physical activity, affordable housing, or biodiversity, action plans help brainstorm and coordinate strategies in your CCP.<sup>5</sup> For more information on common challenges and best practices on Action Planning, see *Creating Action Plans* (Sinclair, 2018). Once the necessary components of your action plan are in place, your community planning team must determine which actions are most feasible and cost-effective. This fact sheet outlines two flexible techniques to prioritize your activities, timelines, roles and resources within your action plan: the **Scoring Technique** and the **Strategy Grid Technique**.

For more information on common challenges and successful practices on Action Planning, see the *Creating Action Plans* fact sheet.

### Scoring Technique

The Scoring Technique is useful when many ideas are still in question and only a select few options are needed.<sup>6</sup> The Scoring Technique works by ranking each action item based on a pre-established set of criteria—thus calculating a score for each option. According to the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada CCP Handbook, when prioritizing actions, common criteria include impact, urgency, capacity, cost, risk, and political support from Chief and Council.<sup>7</sup> For example, if your community goal is to increase the number of affordable housing units, possible actions might fall under the themes

of research, advocacy, education, direct funding, building partnerships, grant applications, and so forth. As illustrated in Table 1 below, each action item is numerically ranked on a scale based on its perceived impact, urgency, capacity, cost, risk, and political support. By assigning numerical scores to the criteria, action items can be evaluated in a quantitative manner.

To provide more detailed scores and to ensure collective and individual values are accounted for in the decision-making process, a common practice is to weigh each criterion based on its relative importance.<sup>8</sup> If the community is experiencing a housing shortage, urgency within the community might contain a heavier "weight" despite (for example) the significant initial cost of investing in affordable housing. Items which characterize urgency and immediate action, such as direct subsidies for below-market rental units, will therefore receive a higher score than say, a five-year research initiative.

Criterion weighting helps adapt your action and implementation plan to the needs and context of your community.<sup>9</sup> The lead of this type of exercise should encourage input and participation from your planning team, Elders, and community experts. Table 1 illustrates a Weighted-scoring Technique for the affordable housing example.

**Scoring Technique Formula**  
Action Item Score = [Likert Rank] x [Weight]



**Table 1 | Applying the Weighted-scoring Technique to prioritize actions on affordable housing.**

*Adapted from* (National Association of County and City Health Officials. "Guide to Prioritization Techniques." n.d. Accessed October 2020. <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Guide-to-Prioritization-Techniques.pdf>; and, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. "CCP Handbook: Comprehensive Community Planning for First Nations in British Columbia, Third Edition." 2016. Accessed October, 2020. [http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-BC/STAGING/texte-text/ccphb2013\\_1378922610124\\_eng.pdf](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-BC/STAGING/texte-text/ccphb2013_1378922610124_eng.pdf), p. 46.)

Criteria	Impact	Urgency	Capacity	Cost	Risk	Political Support	Total
Weight	1.5	3.0	1.0	2.0	2.5	2.0	
Likert Rank	1 = Low impact 2 3 = Moderate impact 4 5 = High impact	1 = Long-term 2 3 = Med-term 4 5 = Short-term	1 = Not feasible 2 3 = Challenging 4 5 = Very feasible	1 = Very expensive 2 3 = Fair price 4 5 = Inexpensive	1 = High Risk 2 3 = Moderate Risk 4 5 = Low Risk	1 = No support 2 3 = Some objections 4 5 = Full support	
<b>Research</b>	4 (x 1.5) = <b>6</b>	1 (x 3.0) = <b>3</b>	4 (x 1.0) = <b>4</b>	3 (x 2.0) = <b>6</b>	5 (x 2.5) = <b>12.5</b>	4 (x 2.0) = <b>8</b>	<b>39.0</b>
<b>Advocacy</b>	3 (x 1.5) = <b>4.5</b>	4 (x 3.0) = <b>12</b>	3 (x 1.0) = <b>3</b>	4 (x 2.0) = <b>8</b>	4 (x 2.5) = <b>10</b>	2 (x 2.0) = <b>4</b>	<b>41.5</b>
<b>Education</b>	1 (x 1.5) = <b>1.5</b>	2 (x 3.0) = <b>6</b>	5 (x 1.0) = <b>5</b>	4 (x 2.0) = <b>8</b>	5 (x 2.5) = <b>12.5</b>	2 (x 2.0) = <b>4</b>	<b>37.0</b>
<b>Direct Funding</b>	5 (x 1.5) = <b>7.5</b>	5 (x 3.0) = <b>15</b>	2 (x 1.0) = <b>2</b>	1 (x 2.0) = <b>2</b>	2 (x 2.5) = <b>5</b>	5 (x 2.0) = <b>10</b>	<b>41.5</b>
<b>Partnerships</b>	4 (x 1.5) = <b>6</b>	3 (x 3.0) = <b>9</b>	4 (x 1.0) = <b>4</b>	4 (x 2.0) = <b>8</b>	3 (x 2.5) = <b>7.5</b>	5 (x 2.0) = <b>10</b>	<b>44.5</b>
<b>Grants</b>	4 (x 1.5) = <b>6</b>	3 (x 3.0) = <b>9</b>	2 (x 1.0) = <b>2</b>	3 (x 2.0) = <b>6</b>	2 (x 2.5) = <b>5</b>	5 (x 2.0) = <b>10</b>	<b>38.0</b>

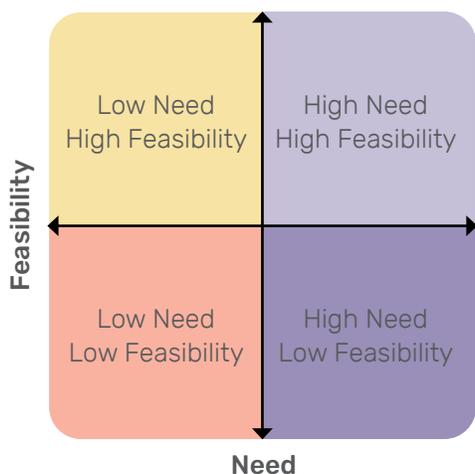
|  
Action Items

## Strategy Grid Technique

The Strategy Grid Technique takes a hands-on, qualitative approach to prioritize actions. As illustrated below in Figure 2, the Strategy Grid works by having four quadrants with one criteria assigned to each axis.<sup>10</sup> Each action item is strategically placed within one of the four quadrants to measure each item's relative importance.

Unlike the Scoring Technique, the Strategy Grid relies on two criteria only. There are numerous combinations of criteria that can be used in different planning contexts. The two criteria in the example below are 'Need' and 'Feasibility.'

- **High Need / High Feasibility:** Actions in this square have high impact and can be easily implemented. These actions should be first choice.
- **High Need / Low Feasibility:** Actions in this square have high impact but require additional resources to be implemented. These actions are likely worthwhile.
- **Low Need / High Feasibility:** Actions in this square have low impact and can be easily implemented. These actions may need to be reconsidered—might be worthwhile.
- **Low Need / Low Feasibility:** Actions in this square are the lowest priority items. Action items in this square have low impact and are not easily implemented.



**Figure 2 | Strategy grid technique to prioritize actions.**

Adapted from (National Association of County and City Health Officials. "Guide to Prioritization Techniques." n.d. Accessed October 2020. <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Guide-to-Prioritization-Techniques.pdf>; and, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. "CCP Handbook: Comprehensive Community Planning for First Nations in British Columbia, Third Edition." 2016. Accessed October, 2020. [http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-BC/STAGING/texte-text/ccphb2013\\_1378922610124\\_eng.pdf](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-BC/STAGING/texte-text/ccphb2013_1378922610124_eng.pdf). p. 46.)

The Strategy Grid is commonly used in many other planning contexts, which may include engaging youth, establishing a planning team, setting goals and objectives, mapping community assets, and so forth. Need and feasibility represent one of many ways the Strategy Grid can be applied when implementing your action plan.

## Dotmocracy

Dotmocracy, also known as dot-voting, is a common facilitation method designed to engage people and solicit input on decisions affecting the community at large using dot-stickers on poster boards.<sup>11</sup> Dotmocracy can be incorporated into a wide variety of community engagement exercises.



Source (Stairs, Haley. "Dots and Dotmocracy." 2018. Accessed October, 2020. [theaquinian.net/tag/dotmocracy/](http://theaquinian.net/tag/dotmocracy/))

How dot-voting typically works is each participant is given a set number of dot stickers as determined by the facilitator. Each participant then places dot stickers next to each option or action item presented. A Strategy Grid can also be used in a dot-voting setting to help guide participants through the decision making process. Other variations of dot-voting may include using different colour dots to illustrate alternative viewpoints or values (e.g., green for "like" and red for "dislike").

## Final Thoughts

The process of prioritizing actions involves deciding between overlapping actions while incorporating the agreed-upon criteria into the final decision.<sup>12</sup> But who makes the final decision about which actions to implement? And what, if any, is the role of the planner and the community in the decision-making process? While the two techniques provided in this fact sheet have limitations in terms of the depth of detail produced, both are a general reflection of the relative importance of competing wants, needs, and resources among various groups and actors. Your community planning team, which may consist of land managers, Chief and Council, Elders, youth and family groups, and leaders of local community organizations, should play a large part in the process of prioritizing and implementing actions.

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An action plan answers the "How will we reach our goals?" whereas this fact sheet attempts to address the question "What do we need to do, and what can we actually do to reach our goals?" The way in which your planning team approaches the implementation stage has a large influence on the outcomes your community plan achieves. By providing two adaptable techniques for prioritizing the most appropriate policy, program or project, your community will be better equipped to continually move towards your overall vision.

## Further Reading

### **Gaining Momentum: Sharing 96 Best Practices of First Nations Comprehensive Community Planning** by Jeff Cook

Jeff Cook provides a number of principles, strategies, and techniques to create and implement your community's comprehensive plan. Page 82 describes in detail how to "Sequence Actions for Easy Wins" by providing descriptions and applicable examples of best practices.

### **Comprehensive Community Planning Toolkit: Finding Bimadizowin** by Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund

Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund is a non-profit aboriginal organization that provides financing, business, and community planning supports to First Nations in Ontario. Pages 100 to 106 of this toolkit illustrates alternative approaches to prioritize and select actions by outlining the process, tips, examples, and templates.

### **Guide to Prioritization Techniques** by National Association of County and City Health Officials

This report outlines the preliminary steps that are needed to prioritize actions, and demonstrates the range of techniques health authorities across the United States are using to address widespread health issues.

## Endnotes

1. Sinclair, Evan. "Creating Action Plans." *Indigenous Planning Studio, University of Manitoba*. 2018. Accessed October 2020. <http://indigenousplanningstudio.ca/assets/creating-action-plans2.pdf>. p. 1.
2. National Association of County and City Health Officials. "Guide to Prioritization Techniques." (n.d.) Accessed October 2020. <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Guide-to-Prioritization-Techniques.pdf>.
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12. Harper, Jack. 2009. p. 93.