

Take a Seed, Give a Seed: A Community-Engaged Exploration of Seed Library Sustainability and Accessibility

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Introduction

This project seeks to identify experiences and perceptions held by individuals involved in developing and maintaining seed libraries, understand challenges associated with that work, illustrate successful strategies that contribute to the sustainability and accessibility of seed libraries, and evaluate the extent to which community is deeply connected with the seed library's mission.

Ultimately the intention is to develop recommendations for developing a seed library program which is both accessible and sustainable. Insights will be shared with LifeCycles to help inform the creation of their seed library, with the hope that the findings can be applied more broadly to different organizations as well.



Analytical Frameworks

Sustaining the Motivation to Volunteer in Organizations, Meijs and Karr (2006)

- Understanding intrinsic motivation and volunteer management as the determining factors for an organization's sustainability

Knowledge-Emotion Connections, Bateman (2024)

- Explores the role that connecting intellectual and emotional can have in extending one's sense of self, therefore cultivating feelings of deep care

Community-Engaged Sociology

- An approach in which a researcher partners with a community organization or group to conduct research that provides benefits for both the researcher and the partner
- Grounded in the values of **reciprocity** and **collaboration**
- The community partner identifies an issue that they face and research is carried out with the intention of addressing this problem **with** and **for** the community

The LifeCycles Project

- A nonprofit in Victoria that provides "opportunities for people to learn and interact with the local food system, [...] changing the way the community lives, thinks, and eats" (LifeCycles, 2026)
- Ran a seed library from 2013-2021 but ceased operations to develop a more accessible system
- By removing the expectation for users to save and bring seeds back at the end of each season, LifeCycles identified a concern that these contributions alone will not suffice to match the demand for seed library users

Timeline and Methodology

I. Preliminary research

- Connected with LifeCycles, initiated consultation and project development

II. Project creation

- Formulated initial research questions, conducted a review of existing literature, and began to write a research proposal

III. HREB approval

IV. Primary research: in-depth semistructured interviews

- Interview participants purposively sampled via their connections to LifeCycles or due to their relevant involvement with seed library projects
- Conducted five virtual interviews with individuals who have experience developing and/or coordinating various seed libraries in British Columbia and Alberta

V. Data analysis, coding, and synthesis

- Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed;
- Data coded by hand using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis; focus on key quotes, overlapping narratives, and inconsistencies to interpret data collected

Research Questions

- I. How do seed library coordinators describe barriers and opportunities for sustainability and accessibility within seed libraries?
- II. How do individuals and communities engage with coordinating seed libraries in a way that indicates deep connection with the mission of the seed library?

Main Themes

- I. Diverse and resourceful means of obtaining stock: critical avenues through which to deeply and meaningfully engage community
- II. Clarity at every level is key: the many expectations of what a seed library should be impacts engagement
- III. Having one does not necessitate losing the other: the intersecting & interdependent nature of sustainability and accessibility
- IV. It takes a village: the role of consultation in developing a mutualistic relationship with the community
- V. "They're magic": seeds as vessels of care, wonder, and constant growth

Key Quotes

"One seed doesn't turn into two seeds, it turns into 10,000 to 300,000 seeds. So, just a few people saving seed created an abundance for the entire community."

"People loved [the seed library], it was so apple pie. It was not hard to get public support behind this, and so I think there are a million ways you could leverage that interest into seed, into stock, right?"

"There's such a magic that's housed within seeds that if we can tap that magic, it has the power to create real profound, transformative learning for people, and an understanding of the world that I think we sorely need right now."

Key Sources

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