

# Phase **2. UNDERSTAND** the issues

## What ?

Now that the project has been launched, the time has come to create a diagnostic portrait of the project area. Its purpose is to highlight the key issues and list findings that can be used to guide design solutions. During this phase, the contributions of citizens, civil society groups and urban professionals are used to collect various kinds of information and establish a reliable portrait.

### Data collection

In most cases, existing data constitute an excellent basis for understanding the neighbourhood. The first step is to research, collect and organize the information so that it can be of use to the project. It may be socio-demographic data and other types of statistics previously collected by different stakeholders, or studies and plans completed during the last few years.

It is necessary, however, to collect data specific to project issues to supplement existing information. Collection methods may take the form of field studies (see box) or participatory activities bringing together citizens, representatives of community organizations and local professionals. Their observations and anecdotes as users of the area are collected.

**Quantitative data are necessary to compare sites, problems and scenarios objectively. They are particularly useful to convince people who prefer to trust “the numbers.” Qualitative information can enrich the data, especially on diversity of uses and points of view. The combination of both types of information allows you to build solid and balanced arguments.**

### *Understand the use of public space through field studies*

Primarily quantitative data collected through field studies are used to support the findings and requests expressed during the participatory activities. During field studies, you will observe, count, compile and document to assess preliminary findings and supplement the qualitative data.

Here are some examples of actions done as part of a field study:

- Pedestrian and cyclist count
- Profile of public space users
- Audit of pedestrian potential
- Evaluation of greening potential

For more information, check out the MUEC's online toolbox  Transformer sa ville : [www.ecologieurbaine.net](http://www.ecologieurbaine.net)

## Why ?

- To promote a common understanding of the issues in the project area;
- To create documents that are accessible for everyone and record and organize findings about the project area (e.g., diagnostic portrait, public presentations, photos and videos);
- To identify priority actions and key places to guide the development of appropriate solutions.

## Who ?

- Project area citizens;
- Local community groups representing the entire community;
- Representatives of schools and public health;
- Store owners and other economic stakeholders;
- Professionals from various spheres (urban planning, transportation, urban design, landscape architecture, sports and leisure, social development, etc.) who are with the municipality or a public agency and have the power to intervene in the area;
- Municipal elected officials, whose understanding of the issues and citizens' needs is essential.

Participatory activities may be limited to certain groups when focused on a particular issue or place (e.g., an exploratory walk with seniors or youth activities).

## How ?

Here are the recommended steps for guiding your actions in the *Understand* phase. The importance given to each step can vary with the context, but the order should be followed.

<b>1 Observe</b>	What do you see in the field?
	What are the preliminary findings?
<b>2 Consult the literature</b>	Who are the players and what are their perceptions?
	What information already exists?
<b>3 Identify missing information</b>	What information is missing regarding the use of the project area?
	Can some findings be supported by existing data?
<b>4 Find missing information</b>	What activities or studies could you use to find this information?
<b>5 Analyze and refine your understanding</b>	What findings have you established from the collected data?
<b>6 Establish priorities</b>	What issues or project sites are priorities?
<b>7 Make the portrait come to life</b>	What are the different ways to communicate that data and findings of the diagnostic portrait to implement proposals?

### Practical tips

To avoid repeating work, contact other local stakeholders to see if they have created portraits for the same project area that may be useful for you.

You can take advantage of participatory activities to collect a list of potential participants for later phases.

## Example 1

### Consultation kiosk in Southeastern Notre-Dame-de-Grâce

The Southeastern Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Green, Active and Healthy Neighbourhood project was begun in 2010 by Mobiligo and the MUEC. They took advantage of the many summer activities in the neighbourhood (end of primary school celebrations, Urban Arts Festival, Italian community celebration, etc.) to hold kiosks to inform citizens about the

process, create a list of interested people, and target areas of interest and problematic spaces. Approximately 140 people were consulted during these events.

Participants were invited to mark on a large map of the project area places and spaces that they liked (with green dots) and those they disliked (red dots).



Citizens discussing issues related to active transportation in Southeastern NDG.



Photo-booth of the Longueuil housing board

### Practical tips

To add a bit of fun and collect visual materials to document the project, you can include a photo-booth with your kiosk. It is quite simple: people write a statement or their answer to a question on a board in the form of a speech bubble, and then they hold it up like in a comic strip and have their picture taken.

Examples of questions asked at the NDG kiosk:

- In your trips on foot or by bicycle, what place do you avoid in the neighbourhood? Why?
- Name a feature in your ideal or dream Green Neighbourhood.

## Example 2

### Exploratory walks in Bridgeland, Calgary

As part of the Active Neighbourhoods Canada project, the Sustainable Calgary Society (SCS) organized a series of exploratory walks in the Bridgeland neighbourhood in Calgary. SCS wanted to understand how pedestrians use the neighbourhood and how they feel in response to certain developments.

**An exploratory walk is a field observation method done by a small group. It is designed to identify characteristics that can limit the mobility of individuals or generate safety concerns. It also can identify positive aspects of the target area. The data collected are qualitative, i.e., participant testimonies and observations.**

**The participants should live in or spend time in the area (residents, workers, etc.). The group can be mixed or composed exclusively of one particular group (e.g., women, people with reduced mobility).**

Prior to each walk, SCS established a route on which the elements of the built environment to be analyzed were identified. It also prepared an observation checklist for noting comments during the walk.

At the start of the walk, SCS went over the goals and instructions with participants. During the walk, participants briefly discussed points of interest and problems. One person was designated to take photos to illustrate the information collected. After the walk, participants discussed the major difficulties and positive aspects that they observed. Project leaders collected all the comments, which were later used in the neighbourhood portrait.



Participants of an exploratory walk discuss the built environment.

#### Practical tips

Form groups of six to eight people.

Invite elected officials and planning professionals to help implementation happen in the future.

If weather is bad, reduce the number of stops and amount of information to record.

Plan for a sheltered area for discussion periods. Providing food is always a plus!

Limit the length of the walk to 90 minutes.