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Driving Transformation: Land Trusts in African Nova Scoatian Communities

Submitted By: Upper Hammonds Plains Community Land Trust



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Upper Hammonds Plains Community Land Trust

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: www.uhpclt.com

Practice Details

Country(ies): Canada

City(ies): Upper Hammonds Plains

Start Year: 2022 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

Upper Hammonds Plains, founded in 1815 by Black Refugees of the War of 1812, has faced two centuries of structural inequity in land and housing. Colonial land policies issued “tickets of location” instead of deeds, leaving families without clear title. Exclusionary zoning, underinvestment, and racial bias in lending compounded dispossession. Today, only 38% of land remains in descendant hands. Speculative development and rising costs now threaten to erase this historic African Nova Scotian community. Policy frameworks failed to protect Black landholders or recognize community-based ownership, reinforcing economic marginalization and intergenerational displacement.

Solution Developed

UHPCLT has reclaimed land and now stewards it for permanent community benefit, addressing the root causes of displacement through collective ownership and policy innovation. The Trust anchors land in perpetuity, ensuring housing remains affordable and governed by community members. Target beneficiaries include low-income descendant families and marginalized residents displaced by market forces. Its objectives are to: (1) restore secure tenure and descendant benefit, (2) build affordable, community-governed housing, and (3) reform land and planning systems. Innovative elements include tracing titles to original Black settlers, co-designing membership and land governance through Canada’s first CMHC-funded Solutions Lab, and integrating housing, solar energy, and policy reform within one regenerative model.

Implementation

Transformation began in 2021 with community advocacy that led Halifax Regional Municipality to amend zoning in Upper Hammonds Plains, halting speculative development and requiring development agreements for large projects, an unprecedented planning reform driven by residents. This policy victory laid the foundation for the creation of the Upper Hammonds Plains Community Land Trust (UHPCLT). Building on this, in 2023 UHPCLT led the Driving Transformation Solutions Lab, the first CMHC-funded Solutions Lab in Atlantic Canada where over 80 community members co-designed membership and land governance frameworks. These informed the launch of the 136-unit Co-operative Housing Development, the largest Black-led housing project in Canada, backed by $61.2 million in CMHC funding. Concurrent initiatives include Land Reclamation Projects (reclaiming Crown land), the Emmanuel Baptist Church Partnership (faith-based affordable housing), and a 7 MW community solar farm generating revenue for long-term affordability. Partners include Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Housing Nova Scotia, Halifax Regional Municipality, HarbourTown Group, zzap Architecture, CHF Canada, and the Nova Scotia Black Community Housing Council. Together, these actions embed community ownership and policy change in practice.

Enablers & Obstacles

The initiative was powered by unprecedented community mobilization, the highest participation rate ever recorded in a rezoning process. This galvanized strong political will at the municipal level while creating conditions for policy reform and planning. Provincial collaboration followed through the reclamation of Crown lands, and later, federal partnership advanced our co-operative housing project. UHPCLT also secured investment from national foundations to strengthen organizational capacity and support policy research and recommendations on equitable land reform. Key obstacles included legal complexities surrounding historic land titles, limited capacity, and the realities of a volunteer-led effort with members working full-time. These were overcome through persistence, adaptive learning, and unwavering collective commitment, demonstrating how community leadership, backed by political will and cross-sector investment, can transform systems and restore land governance to the people.

Results & Impact

We have redefined what community-led housing and land governance can achieve in Canada. Through sustained advocacy, the organization shifted municipal policy, leading to landmark zoning reforms that now protect historic African Nova Scotian communities from speculative development. UHPCLT's work directly informed Halifax's African Nova Scotian Community Action Planning process and contributed to the creation of Nova Scotia's first provincial Community Land Trust Strategy.

The Trust now holds permanent ownership of community land, advancing multiple projects that blend affordable housing, renewable energy, and cultural revitalization. Partnerships with government, industry, and philanthropy have mobilized more than $80 million in investment and positioned UHPCLT as a leading voice in equitable land reform. Its model is being replicated across four additional African Nova Scotian communities, forming a provincial movement for collective ownership and economic resilience.

The long-term impact is systemic: transforming policy, reclaiming land for community benefit, and demonstrating how descendant-led institutions can drive just, inclusive, and sustainable urban futures. UHPCLT has restored community control over 16 acres of land, is securing 68 acres of reclaimed Crown land, and is developing an additional 8 acres with Emmanuel Baptist Church—advancing 136 co-op homes, stabilizing 85 homesteads, and supporting 400 more in pre-development.

Replication & Scale Up

Three additional African Nova Scotian Community Land Trusts: Weymouth Falls, Down the Marsh, and New Roots North End were established following UHPCLT's model. Replication was enabled by UHPCLT's descendant-led governance framework, strong community collaboration through the B3 CLT Collective, and shared policy supports developed under the African Nova

Scotian Housing Strategy, creating a coordinated provincial movement for land reclamation and community-led housing.

Scaling the UHPCLT model requires enabling policy, sustained investment, and greater awareness of CLTs as proven, low-risk housing solutions. Recognizing CLTs in legislation and funding frameworks would unlock financing and attract lenders. As governments and investors gain confidence, investment will grow. Continued documentation and public education will embed CLTs in housing policy, supporting replication across Canada and globally in historically displaced communities.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice is a new or innovative practice that is not yet adequately or fully integrated into formal policy frameworks.

Governments should formally recognize Community Land Trusts as a distinct non-profit housing model within legislation and funding programs. Municipal plans should include CLTs as tools for affordability and anti-displacement, while provinces enable land transfers and financing. Federally, integrating CLTs into national housing strategies will secure institutional support, access to capital, and long-term policy alignment.

Lessons & Takeaways

In hindsight, we would invest earlier in organizational capacity and staffing to match the scale of our vision. Relying on a volunteer-led structure slowed progress and stretched resources. Establishing stronger administrative systems, dedicated project management, and early partnerships for evaluation and financing would have improved efficiency and reduced delays in implementation.