

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK | YESS PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2025, six communities (Yellowknife, Grande Prairie, Sudbury, Chatham-Kent, Moncton, and the Yukon Territory) will come together to address the complex issue of youth employment through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) project, funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Over three years, these communities will work to respond to systemic and emerging challenges in the youth employment landscape. This will be achieved through strategic, cross-sector partnerships, the use of research and development approaches, and a commitment to centring the voices and leadership of young people.

The aim is to support all youth – particularly those facing systemic barriers – to build the skills, knowledge, and networks they need to successfully transition into the labour market. This includes opportunities for education, skill-building, and meaningful work experience.

To guide the evaluation of this project, the Tamarack Institute has developed a framework to centre equity, inclusion, and collective learning in how change is understood and measured. Rooted in Collective Impact and informed by the Principles of Disability Justice, the framework also recognises and celebrates the lived experiences of young people and their communities. It moves beyond traditional, technical approaches to evaluation, instead embracing a relational, participatory, and reflective process – one that builds capacity, values diverse ways of knowing, and strengthens our shared ability to create just and sustainable change.

Tamarack will support the sharing of these innovations across its network and beyond, encouraging the adoption or adaptation of promising solutions. In doing so, we aim to strengthen organisational and sector-wide capacity to improve employment outcomes for young people across Canada.

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

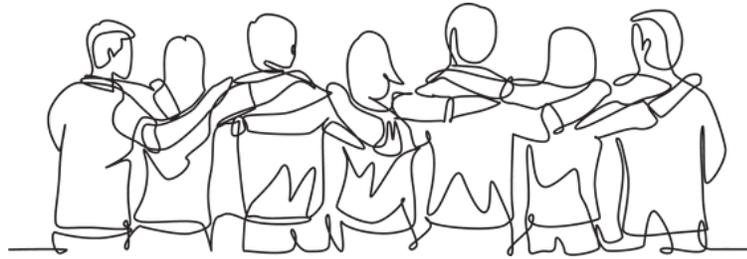
The YESS project has adopted a participatory approach to evaluation: an approach that places communities at the centre of the evaluation process. In participatory evaluation, community members and stakeholders are not just consulted; they take the lead in shaping the evaluation design, determining what data is collected, how data is interpreted, and how findings are used.

As with any evaluation, the goal is to understand what matters most to the primary users of the information and how insights can be gathered in ways that are meaningful and useful. In a participatory context, those primary users are also the beneficiaries of the evaluation. The process becomes an opportunity to listen deeply, while supporting communities to build their own systems for reflection, learning, and change. Ultimately, participatory evaluation equips communities with the tools and confidence to define for themselves what it means to be a learning community, and how to move intentionally toward the futures they envision.

While participatory evaluation allows the six communities to build our strategies and use methodologies that work best for their given geographies and populations, the Tamarack Institute has built out a singular evaluation framework to create a cohesivity to the data gathered. This allows us to collect impact stories and build out/name the larger overall project impacts throughout the data collection intervals.

The evaluation framework was developed with a participatory approach at its core. This means that the value of relationality and the leadership of community members and key beneficiaries were intentionally embedded throughout its creation. As the funder, ESDC provided key performance indicators (KPIs) they expected to be tracked over the course of the project. In parallel, Tamarack team members contributed input on the epistemological foundations that should guide the framework, ensuring it aligned with Tamarack's theory of change, along with indicators they were interested in observing.





To centre community voices, leads from the six participating communities were brought together in an extended virtual session. In this space, they identified critical shifts they hoped to see as a result of the project. These same community leads then engaged in a prioritisation process, voting on which of those shifts were foundational – those that needed to happen first for other changes to follow. Finally, the group proposed indicators they felt would help them recognise whether those shifts were occurring.

All of this input from ESDC, Tamarack, and the community leads was synthesised to form the first draft of the evaluation framework.

Following the draft's creation, both community members and the YESS National Advisory Board were invited to review and provide feedback. After incorporating their input, final revisions were made, and the framework was ready for implementation.

With the shared framework in place, each community was then tasked with building out their own localised evaluation strategies to align with their context and priorities. To support, Tamarack provided:

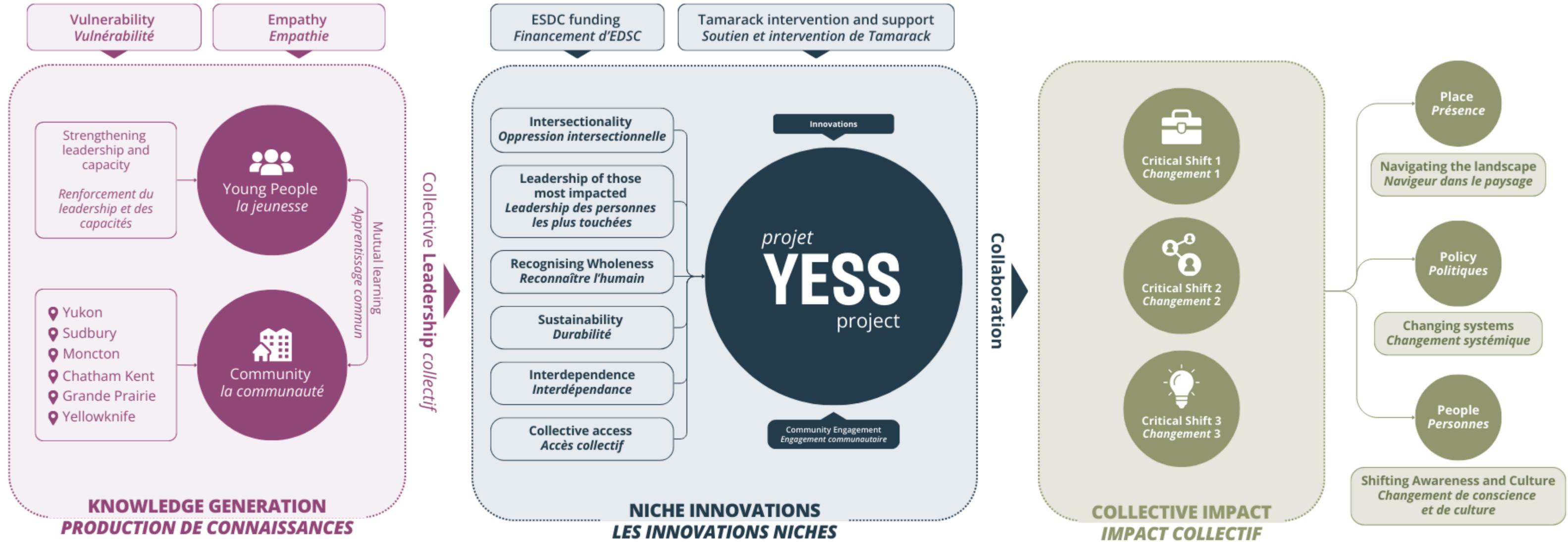
- A three-hour training session on participatory evaluation for YESS project leads to gain the skills they needed to begin building a strategy
- External evaluators to receive community data and data interpretations to provide quarterly reports to Tamarack for Tamarack to meet our reporting requirements
- Regular coaching sessions led by Tamarack staff to support community leads in the design and implementation of their respective evaluation strategy

THE FRAMEWORK

The YESS Evaluation Framework is rooted in the lived experience of young people. As the evaluation framework for a project that centres the economic well-being of young people in six communities across Canada, it was important that the framework be rooted in the knowledges that stem from being a young person in their community. Recognising that young people are community members in their own right, but in turn also exist in relationship to community, we wanted to acknowledge and encourage a consistent flow of information between young people and their community, building out reciprocal learning in the production and mobilisation of knowledge that would then inform and shape the YESS project.

Collective Leadership involves uniting people to address complex issues through collaborative processes. Success is maximised by working collectively across diverse groups, emphasising equity, and incorporating the voices of those most affected. Effective collective leaders prioritise trust-building, power navigation, deep engagement, and the development of impactful collaborative governance practices.

The framework makes evident that empathy and vulnerability are necessary to support the constant reciprocal flow of knowledge between youth and their communities. It takes courage and vulnerability to learn from others, and it takes empathy to engage in the process in a way that is healing and strengthens community ties and relationships. This knowledge exchange and generation informs and shapes the YESS project as a collaboration between young people and other community members, thus allowing for collective leadership.



- Critical Shift 1:** High school-aged young people have already been introduced to or oriented in various critical and relevant employment areas (such as Trades) much younger and see paths to future careers.
Changement 1 : Les jeunes en âge d'aller au secondaire ont déjà reçu une présentation ou une orientation sur divers domaines d'emploi essentiels et pertinents (comme les métiers) à un âge plus jeune et identifient des voies vers de futures carrières.
- Critical Shift 2:** Young people have the employment readiness and networks to pursue paths to employment.
Changement 2 : Les jeunes disposent de la préparation à l'emploi et des réseaux pour poursuivre leur parcours vers l'emploi.
- Critical Shift 3:** Young people report that employers are willing to provide the training required without work experience.
Changement 3 : Les jeunes déclarent que les employeurs sont prêts à leur fournir la formation requise sans expérience de travail préalable.

The image of the YESS project has 6 bubbles, each holding a value that must inform every activity, innovation, communication, and working process that makes up the project: intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, recognising wholeness, sustainability, interdependence, and collective access. These principles are six of the ten principles of disability justice as defined by Sins Invalid, a disability justice-based movement and performance project that celebrates disabled people, centring and led by disabled Black, Indigenous, and people of the global majority, and queer, trans, and nonbinary disabled people. The values are defined as follows:

- **INTERSECTIONALITY** “We do not live single issue lives” – Audre Lorde. Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered most of the world “invalid.”
- **LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED** “We are led by those who most know these systems.” – Aurora Levins Morales
- **RECOGNIZING WHOLENESS** People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.
- **SUSTAINABILITY** We pace ourselves – individually and collectively – to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.
- **INTERDEPENDENCE** We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives.
- **COLLECTIVE ACCESS** As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other.
- **COLLECTIVE LIBERATION** No body or mind can be left behind – only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

We selected values we knew we could uphold and be held accountable to. Through collaboration informed by continuous community engagement and community innovations, we are thus able to witness the three top-ranked critical shifts identified by the communities themselves:

- **Critical Shift 1:** High school-aged young people have already been introduced to or oriented in various critical and relevant employment areas (such as Trades) much younger and see paths to future careers.
- **Critical Shift 2:** Young people have the employment readiness and networks to pursue paths to employment.
- **Critical Shift 3:** Young people report that employers are willing to provide the training required without work experience

These critical shifts constitute the collective impact we are aiming for. In seeking to determine whether these critical shifts have taken place, we look towards the impacts that moving towards these shifts has had on people, place, and policy as defined through Tamarack's theory of change:

- **People:** Surrounding changemakers and communities with tools, case studies, and other resources that can spark imagination, impact, and progress on equitable outcomes.
 - **Place:** Providing flexible options for member communities that are working on poverty or one of its related symptoms or causes. Connecting communities to funding, finance, and compensation that honours their contributions and meets the scale of their vision.
 - **Policy:** Deepening our exploration of how to sustainably fund systemic change in place (and the ecosystems that must support local, place-based efforts). Amplifying stories of learning, progress, and impact.
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This framework aligns nicely with the Tamarack Institute’s adaptation of the **Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) Framework** which provides communities working on complex social issues like poverty, homelessness, and just climate transitions with guidance on their efforts to create lasting systemic change. The adapted MLP framework encourages changemakers to think about, plan, and evaluate a more comprehensive approach to achieve that goal. This includes attending to five levels of work:

MLP Five Levels	Navigating Landscape	Shifting Awareness and Culture	Changing Systems	Supporting Niche Innovations	Strengthening Leadership and Capacity
Definition	Constantly monitoring, analysing, and adapting to the opportunities and barriers for action created by the larger political, economic, and social context	Raising the awareness of the public and influential leaders about an issue and why it deserves attention and even deeper work on shifting societal paradigms to ‘disrupt’ and ‘re-orient’ societies’ cultures in more fundamental ways (e.g., centering eco-logical health and climate)	Adjusting the policies, structures, processes, resource flows, power relationships, and day-to-day practices in a way that encourages widespread changes behaviour of people and organisations that align with (e.g., schools dialing back zero tolerance policies which often leave at-risk students out in the cold)	Supporting the development, testing, and –if appropriate – sustaining and scaling of novel solutions (e.g., a new wrap-around program that provides students with complex needs to develop the resiliency they need to succeed at school and home)	Increasing social innovators’ networks, resources, skills, and sense of agency to ‘drive’ the change process through ongoing and iterative cycles of planning, implementation, and evaluation
YESS Evaluation Framework	Place	People	Policy	YESS Project	Young People (knowledge generation)



INDICATORS

Indicators can be generated to reflect the different project components. For example, indicators to confirm that a continuous exchange between young people and their communities is happening to evaluate the knowledge generation; demographic data to confirm that the value of intersectionality is well represented in the project; indicators to witness the critical shifts as they happen; and indicators can be designed to track the emergence of critical shifts as they unfold, and/or to identify the broader impacts of the project on individuals, communities, and policy.

REFERENCES

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