

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN, PLACE-BASED CHANGE



Three reasons to avoid it and seven reasons why you can't

By Mark Cabaj with Sylvia Cheuy for the Tamarack Institute



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why this exploration now?

In Canada, many of us are committed to changing the “big systems” that hold complex challenges in place – and yet miss the opportunities to change those very systems at a local level.

Mindsets and actions that impact international, national, and provincial/territorial levers of change are stymieing local, place-based collaboration. These mindsets and actions are also producing an inaccurate depiction of the power of local, place-based action.

The connectivity across current inequities (e.g., including climate change, decent work, social connection, education pathways, and affordable housing) requires us to be as sharp as we can be on how to be as effective as possible at all levels of change.

We're seeing some movement away from place. Why?

1. Globalization creates forces that are beyond the reach of local communities, and yet this reality isn't well understood. Many of the dynamic factors that shape the quality of life in communities operate well outside of the influence or control of local actors. Take, for instance, the unaffordability of housing, one of the major drivers of homelessness. There are multiple reasons for the affordability gap, including the financialization of the housing market, the increase in precarious work, our under-resourced mental health systems, and a prolonged inflationary environment. Those of us who understand these complex forces risk viewing any work that holds accountability to community-wide reductions in homelessness as ineffective.
2. We have fewer informal spaces where people express creativity and share power. Putnam (1993) demonstrated the vibrant local civic life correlates with economic opportunities, responsive health, education, law enforcement, and financial institutions, and longer life expectancy. But in many communities in Canada, the centralization of decision-making with large scale institutions – many of which are outside of local community – has removed decision-making and agency from informal associations and residents. And communities today have fewer community rooted, local institutions able to take on and manage community-driven, place-based responses.
3. Webs of trustful relationships are weakening. Societies with more social capital – a thicker web of trustful relationships – function well. But social capital is on the decline. The consequence for community-driven, place-based efforts are dire; the foundation of collective action – relationships, bonding and bridging social capital – is wobblier than it has ever been.

Why can't we divest from community-driven, place-based approaches?

Place-based approaches and place-based partnerships in particular can:

1. **Design responses that reflect unique local contexts.** Local actors can tailor responses to complex challenges to the unique nature of their local context, rather than one one-size-fits-all approaches.
2. **Weave together integrated responses.** Local actors can weave together more integrated responses to the entangled nature of climate equity, economic mobility, education, housing, health, and other issues.
3. **Leverage untapped local resources.** Local resources are often known to local actors, but invisible to non-locals. They are more likely offered in spaces of high trust than efforts directed by external actors who have not yet fully demonstrated a genuine interest in – and commitment to – the community.
4. **Draw on Local Ingenuity.** The scope of issues in local places (and especially in rural areas and small cities) and the number of local actors allows for rapid cycles of design, testing, reflection, and redesign.
5. **Respond in real time.** Actors located outside of a place are rarely part of systems that support them to respond quickly, efficiently, and flexibly to surprises and crises.
6. **Stick with it over the long term.** Governments work in three- or four-year political cycles. Corporate executives are preoccupied with quarterly earnings. Many institutional leaders must prioritize news cycles and funding deadlines. Local communities (particularly ones that create narratives and offerings that encourage people to stay in their communities for the long term), can think in generations.
7. **Build connections, agency and belonging.** Community-driven, place-based responses provide almost endless opportunities to rebuild a participatory, inclusive democracy. This is critical to addressing distinct yet interrelated challenges, which include a declining sense of agency and growing polarization of political and social life.

What are some implications?

1. View challenges and solutions through a cross-scale lens
2. Less prescription, more flexibility
3. Invest in and employ intermediaries

1.0 PREFACE

Community Acknowledgements

We wrote this statement on Turtle Island (North America), which has been home since time immemorial to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples. We recognize the contributions of Indigenous people around the world and support the ongoing struggle for self-determination and sovereignty. We work to understand the history of the lands upon which we are guests and contribute to justice for all Indigenous Peoples.

We also wish to acknowledge those who came to Turtle Island as settlers – as migrants either in this generation or in generations past – and those of us who came here involuntarily, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery. Tamarack wishes to pay tribute to those ancestors of African origin and descent and thank them for their contributions towards transforming systems in ways that promote everyone's sense of belonging and safety. Black and Indigenous communities demonstrate that we can work together in solidarity towards peace and equity as we use collective wisdom, knowledge and gifts that promote healing within our communities.

Rallying around place-based partnerships

Over the past two decades, place-based efforts – and place-based partnerships in particular – have contributed to a significant reduction in economic poverty across Canada, from 16.7% in 2001 to 6.4% by 2020 ¹. Rates of poverty have increased each of the years since.

Reflecting on this trendline in a period of interrelated and compounding crises, we asked Mark Cabaj, who has worked in place-based change efforts for 30 years, to articulate the advantages of community-driven, outcomes-focused, place-based efforts.

As Mark shared his thinking, we animated it with stories from place-based partnerships that have harnessed the passion, relationships, wisdom, and creativity of local actors to address climate, poverty, health, social connection, and education equity gaps. We're excited to share, discuss, and improve upon this thinking together.



Local, place-based partnerships have contributed to a significant reduction in economic poverty across Canada, from 16.7% in 2001 to 7.4% by 2021¹.

**This paper and its accompanying stories
are organized around four questions:**

1. Why explore the role of community-driven, place-based approaches now?
2. Why are we seeing some movement away from place-based approaches?
3. What can place-based approaches – and place-based partnerships in particular – do that other forms of social change can't?
4. What are the implications for catalyzing just and equitable futures?

We know that place-based efforts are only part of the solution for creating high-impact, lasting transformation at both the local and systems levels. Funding and capability-building intermediaries create enabling conditions for place-based efforts by accelerating, networking, and amplifying their work. Other forms of social change – including voting and formal political activities mutual aid – and demonstrations also play critical roles in achieving equitable outcomes at scale, particularly when they are aligned with other forms of social change.

We also know that there are many types of place-based efforts. While Tamarack supports many different types, our focus is on place-based partnerships. These are partnerships that are:

- Accountable to a shared, measurable, population-level impact and equity gap in a defined geography
- Working toward a shared outcome target by a specific time
- Composed of diverse perspectives (e.g., multigenerational; cross-sector; and inclusive of lived experience experts, entrepreneurs, businesses, governments, and social purpose organizations)
- Aligning a multitude of human, financial, and other contributions toward the shared outcome
- Centring those with lived/living experience of the outcome
- Building understanding of the histories behind and root causes of prioritized equity gaps, and
- Starting with community leadership and other community assets

The number and rate of crises impacting communities is increasing, with disproportionate burden falling on Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled, and other people already

made most vulnerable. Too often, those who are most impacted by these challenges are left out of the conversation about how to address them.

Every changemaker we speak to struggles to find examples of impact at a whole-of-community scale, largely because our efforts are not aligned and our support for local solutions is inadequate.

Communities have the capability to innovate at a local scale, but they need an aligned network of funders, intermediaries and other partners outside the community who share a commitment to social change and a willingness to innovate and become more effective at achieving population-level impacts, closing equity gaps, and mobilizing cross-community responses to our most challenging issues.

Our country is at a pivot point. While appreciation of the critical role that collaborative efforts and social impact organizations play in achieving deep, durable, and sustainable change is growing, the place-based ecosystem is often fragmented. This erodes the potential that this essential work can contribute to our collective ability to meet the challenges of the future.

We hope this paper and its accompanying stories spark a conversation about the strategic relevance of place-based approaches – and place-based partnerships in particular. We hope this conversation also includes how funding and capability-building intermediaries can better support these approaches as they work to transform the systems that perpetuate poverty in all its forms.

We are grateful for your partnership and for your vision for just and equitable communities. We look forward to discussing, learning, and acting together.

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Co-CEOs

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Tamarack Institute Board Retreat in Montreal, 2022

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the contribution that community-driven, place-based approaches can make to addressing the inequities that harm us all, including homelessness, economic poverty, precarious work, physical and mental health, educational achievement, ecological resiliency, and climate change.

The idea is not new. Community builders, activists, policymakers, philanthropists, and researchers have been discussing the strengths and limitations of local action since the early 1900s. However, now is a good time revisit it for three reasons:

- Many changemakers are eager to shift the “big systems” – that hold complex challenges in place yet miss the opportunities to address these challenges at the local level.
- Globalization impacts the effectiveness of local actions. This fosters an inaccurate understanding of the power and potential of local efforts to make a difference.
- The high stakes and highly personal impacts of the poly-crises – climate change, pandemics, loss of biodiversity, war – require those who would like to make a difference to be clear on where the options for doing so are, why, and how.

This paper is for people trying to make progress on complex challenges who might be unclear about the advantages of place-based approaches or who simply need a refresher. Consequently, this resource explores these issues through the lens of a practitioner rather than a researcher in hopes of surfacing some accessible and useful insights that can make the work of practitioners a little clearer, a little more strategic, and a little more celebrated.

The main argument is simple.

- There are profound limitations to the ability of community-driven, place-based approaches to make progress on tough challenges on their own; yet these limitations are more than offset by the advantages of a community orientation.
- Progress on any complex challenge requires coordinated “cross-scale” responses.
- There are two – hopefully practical – ways for how would-be changemakers can organize their efforts.

For readers interested in a more systematic and research-oriented treatment of this topic, we have included several studies at the back of this piece. We encourage you to review some of the resources listed on page 52 of this document.



2.1 An example: Ending homelessness in Medicine Hat, Canada

The experience of Medicine Hat in ending chronic homelessness – hard-won success, followed by a setback – is emblematic of the strengths and limitations of community-driven, place-based approaches.

Medicine Hat is a small city of approximately 62,000 people in southeastern Alberta. It is famous for being located in the middle of one of North America's biggest natural gas deposits. It's also an important service centre for the region's large agriculture and ranching economy.

Like many cities, Medicine Hat began to experience a notable increase in the number of local people without housing in the late 1990s and early 2000s. People experiencing a combination of family breakdown, precarious work, mental health difficulties, and addiction often found themselves couch-surfing, having to use shelters, or "sleeping rough" on streets and in parks.

Like many communities, the local constellation of non-profit organizations and civic leaders focused primarily on ways to "manage" homelessness. Thanks in part to a continual flow of provincial and, to a lesser extent, federal funds, they were able to open up new shelter beds, improve counseling services, and create social housing units. The results were encouraging. A lot of people received services, and many returned to living at home.

However, the number of people experiencing homeless began to rise. In 2008-2009, civic leaders embraced a shift that was under consideration across North America and in other parts of the world. They took a Housing First approach in order to move away from "managing" homelessness to "ending" homelessness.

Housing First is based on a simple idea: first, provide someone without housing with housing; then offer them additional supports to address other complex issues they might be facing (e.g., mental well-being, addictions, isolation). This contrasted starkly with the traditional approach which required people who were living on the street to demonstrate

that they were “worthy of housing.” After they got a job and overcame addictions, they were offered the chance to undertake a journey of staged housing (e.g., from shelters to temporary, transitional, and then permanent housing).

The Housing First approach is comprehensive and comprises a set of principles and practice elements.

The principles are: (1) provide people with immediate access to housing; (2) give them choices on housing and supports; (3) operate with a recovery orientation (i.e., focus not just on meeting basic needs but also improving overall well-being); (4) integrated services; and (5) emphasize improving an individual's connections with social networks and the community².

Its core practice elements are: (1) system-wide planning with service providers; (2) integrated intake and management information systems; (3) the assembly of tools to ensure that people have multiple rehousing options; and (4) ongoing, in-place, “wrap around” supports so that people can sustain housing and move to a greater level of stability and independence.

In late 2009, the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society (MHCHS), guided by a roundtable of diverse community leaders (Community Council on Homelessness), launched a five-year, Housing First-oriented plan whose objective was to end chronic homelessness in the period of 2010-2015.

They succeeded. By 2015 they had achieved locally set goals for the speed at which they were able to assist homeless persons to secure stable housing. They sustained that level of impact until 2021. In that year they reached yet another milestone, one which the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness stipulates as the “working definition of ending functional homelessness”: less than three people were chronically homeless in Medicine Hat for at least three consecutive months³. Medicine Hat was the first city in Canada to meet this goal, and its success drew applause provincially, nationally, and internationally.

This impressive achievement didn't last. Five months later, during the bi-annual point-in-time homelessness count, dozens of people went out across the city to identify and interview those sleeping rough. It was discovered that the number of chronically homeless had jumped to 20 and that those in and out of homelessness was roughly 50⁴. The survey also confirmed what most citizens had already detected by simply looking around, which was that the manifestation of homelessness had changed. It now included people who previously had enjoyed relatively stable housing. People sleeping rough in public places were increasingly visible. There were more frequent incidences of social disorder in the community (e.g., petty crime, personal conflicts, open use of illegal substances).

This rebound was by no means unique to Medicine Hat. In the last four years, rates of chronic homelessness have risen by 40% across 11 major cities in Canada. Some cities, like Halifax, have seen a 300% increase⁵.

Why the increase? The change is attributed to a wicked combination of three inter-related, external forces: (1) a dramatic increase in rental costs across Canada overall, and Medicine Hat in particular; (2) a rapid, post-COVID pandemic jump in inflation rates that made basic goods unaffordable to persons with modest incomes; and (3) a significant increase in mental health difficulties and addiction, including opioid use, among the most vulnerable.

People without homes, civic leaders, and the community of Medicine Hat are frustrated but undeterred. Local Housing First advocates have committed to “doubling down” on the Housing First approach and once again to eliminate chronic homelessness. They have resigned themselves to another long-term campaign and another cycle of actions that emphasize coordination with higher levels of government. The mayor says, “All we can do is try to make incremental improvements to ensure we’re doing everything we can to get those numbers down – and that involves the provincial and federal governments as well⁶.”



Youth leader at the 2022 Community Building Youth Futures National Gathering in Montreal. © Geoffroy Ingret

3.0 THREE REASONS TO AVOID PLACE

Medicine Hat's experience demonstrates (at least) three major reasons that anyone interested in trying to make an impact on a complex challenge should avoid community-driven, place-based efforts.

3.1 Globalization creates forces that are beyond the reach of local communities.

Many of the dynamic factors shaping a community's quality of life operate well outside of the influence or control of local actors.

Take, for instance, unaffordable housing, one of the major drivers of homelessness in Canada. Housing experts say that prices are at least 60% higher than they ought to be, and the country is currently short anywhere from 3.5 to 5 million homes⁷.



There are multiple reasons for the affordability gap. A big one is the financialization of the housing market. Financial actors like pension funds and real estate trusts are investing in housing primarily to make a profit, rather than to enable citizens' access to a social good. This narrow, profit-making motivation results in higher accommodation costs that turn would-be homeowners towards an already stressed rental market, displacing renters who cannot afford a rent increase. In addition, there is an increase in the number of "vacant" properties – real estate being used as place to park investment dollars.

While the financialization of the housing market is a global phenomenon, the policies of federal and provincial governments have shaped how it has unfolded in Canada. These policies include: (1) the retreat of senior levels of government in the 1990s from planning and investing in social and affordable housing; (2) reduced regulatory control over the



housing market (e.g., rent control); and (3) the increased demand for housing due to high levels of immigration to fill labour shortages and increase the tax base.

This creates a tough situation for people and organizations trying to end homelessness in Medicine Hat. Almost every major action that might be taken to reduce financialization's impact on the housing market is out of their hands. These include a halt to favourable terms on loans backed by Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation to landlords seeking to maximize their economic returns; the elimination of federal tax incentives for real estate investment trusts; the regulation of investments in financial actors by public pension funds; not to mention reform to provincial rent control regulations, pensions, and immigration policy⁸.

There are plenty of other factors behind the dramatic spike in homelessness. Consider the long-term increase in precarious work, a crisis in mental health, an opioid emergency, as well as a post-Covid inflation that puts even basic goods and services out of reach for an increasing number of households. A similar, "back-of-the-napkin" analysis would reveal that each of these challenges is rooted in another constellation of factors beyond the grasp of local actors.

Given such a variety of entangled global dynamics, small wonder that local actors end up trying to "manage" the local consequences while hoping that higher levels of government and progressive industry leaders will address the deeper causes of a particular challenge to quality of life.

3.2 We have fewer informal spaces where people express creativity and power.

The efforts of Medicine Hat's municipal government, non-profit sector, and business community to come together and mount an effective campaign to "turn the curve" on chronic homelessness illustrate the importance of what some people call "civic density." And this too is in decline.

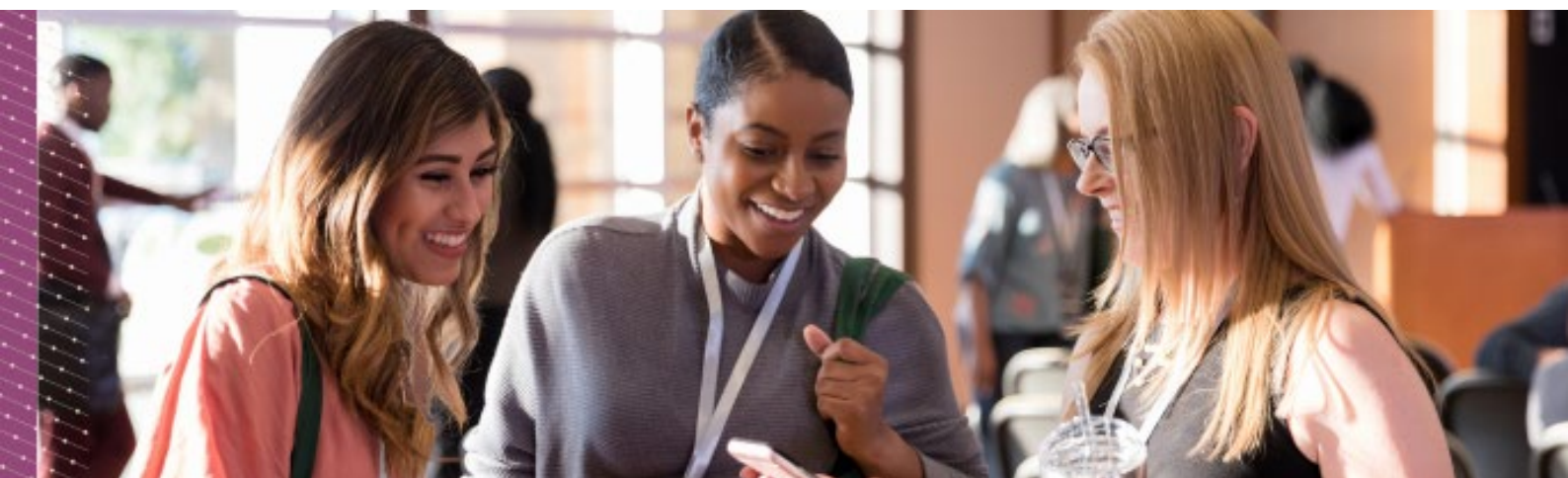
Stewart Perry, a leader in the launch of the community economic development movement in the 1970s, defines **civic density** as "the number, variety and strength of locally valued institutional tools and (in)formal processes" that touch on aspects of peoples' day-to-day lives⁹. The list includes civic clubs, faith-based organizations, political organizations, labour unions, business associations, parent-advisory councils, industry associations, choral groups, book clubs, and recreation leagues, and that's just for starters. The greater the number, variety, and strength of these tools and processes, the easier it is to build strong communities and effectively tackle complex issues.

Robert Putnam's research confirms the point. He and his colleagues demonstrated the link between a community's civic vibrancy and its overall community well-being. The more vibrant the community's civic life, the more numerous are its economic opportunities, the better the performance of its institutions (e.g., health, education, law enforcement, finance), and the longer its residents' life expectancy¹⁰.



The civic vibrancy in Medicine Hat masks a longer-term trend of diminishing civic density. The centralization of decision-making in such large-scale “anchor institutions” as hospitals, schools, financial institutions, and unions means that many public and private facilities, while located “in” the community are not connected “to” the community and its residents. The dramatic shift to online shopping and big box stores has decimated small scale retailers and residential strips. This has deprived Medicine Hat of locally owned stores whose owners have a deep stake in a healthy community. A neighbourhood may have six faith-based facilities sprinkled here and there, but most of their members live outside the neighbourhood. They arrive once or twice a week for a worship service and leave the building empty with locked doors for the other five days.

Overall, while all communities continue to have an array of “locally valued institutions and institutional processes,” they have fewer community-rooted, local institutions with the ability to take on and manage community-driven, place-based responses.



3.3 Webs of trustful relationships are weakening.

Local action depends on having strong networks of relationships, an attachment to your surrounding community, and a willingness to interact and work with people of different opinions, cultures, perspectives, and even economic classes. These once timeless assets are now eroding.

In 1995, the residents of Chicago experienced one of the highest heat waves on record. A combination of consistently high temperatures (well over 37° Celsius.) and unusually high humidity paralyzed the city. Thousands suffered physical distress and approximately 750 people died.

The author of *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* pointed out that the pattern of heat-related deaths during the city's 1995 heat wave closely mirrored the general pattern of poverty. Unsurprisingly, residents struggling with limited incomes either lacked air conditioning or the means to pay the utility costs of using them¹¹. Upon closer examination, he also discovered that individuals and neighbourhoods with more social capital had lower mortality rates than those without. For example, elderly women, who are typically more

socially engaged, did better than elderly men; neighbourhoods with stronger social networks fared better than those with weaker ones. In both cases, socially connected people had more people willing to check in on them, were more likely to answer the door, and were more likely to accept the assistance offered by their neighbours.

Twenty-six years later, in 2021, the residents of British Columbia experienced the deadliest heat wave in Canadian history. Fueled by climate change and wildfires, temperatures consistently surpassed 40° Celsius with a "heat dome" that lasted 27 days. During that time, 619 people lost their lives and 98% of those deaths occurred indoors. Of those who died, 56% lived alone and 67% were senior citizens. Most of the people who died lacked access to cooler buildings or air-conditioned spaces and lived in socially and materially deprived neighbourhoods. Moreover, what came to light was that lives could have been saved if more people had knocked on their neighbours' doors¹².

Local action is essential during times of emergency and its effectiveness depends on strong relationship networks, people's attachment to the community, and their willingness to work together across different, cultures, perspectives, religious backgrounds, income levels, and political views. BC's experience is a tragic illustration of the risks experienced by those who are vulnerable and the importance of community connectedness.

Robert Putnam popularized and expanded research on the role of "social capital" and its link to civic vibrancy and overall community well-being. Societies with more social capital (i.e., a thicker web of trustful relationships) simply function better¹³. He also distinguishes between "bonding social capital" – the relationships between people of similar experiences and orientations – and "bridging social capital" – the relationships between people with diverse class, race, religion, and orientation¹⁴. Each type is important. Bonding social capital promotes cooperation and self-help. Bridging social capital ensures an exchange of ideas that builds relationships and "working agreements" between people of diverse interests.

Both types of social capital are abundant in Medicine Hat. Close working relationships were essential in helping local service providers make the difficult transition between a philosophy of "Housing-Maybe-Eventually" and one of "Housing First." They helped overcome the reluctance of several city council members to develop new working relationships with health care organizations and law enforcement. Social capital has been critical to helping those who are homeless to rebuild their connections to family and community.

Unfortunately, research also suggests that both bonding and bridging capital are in decline. People are generally less connected to their neighbours, less active in civic life, and have a weaker relationship to the geographic places in which they live. The culprits include the amount of time spent on technology (watching screens), car-oriented cities (so people's daily

lives need not involve the neighbours), economic segregation, and residential mobility – people move more and settle less. All contribute to less social interaction and relationships with those immediately around us.

The new types of community created online (e.g., Facebook, chat rooms, etc.) are impressive in number but the depth of connection and trust associated with each are not as strong as those that develop when people's daily lives are deeply entangled. The Community Foundations of Canada's most recent Vital Signs report has found that the number of people reporting a strong sense of belonging in their local community has dropped by 12% over the past decade. Today, 29% of people do not have close friends in their community and people who have experienced discrimination are 2.75 times less likely to have someone they can depend on¹⁵.

Weak social capital creates the soil for social and political polarization. We simply are less obliged to work with people whose viewpoints and experiences differ from our own. Online media often serve to create echo-chambers that "enemy-ify" non-members. Cynical political rhetoric and identity politics (from all sides) combine to create social conflict and a distrust of local institutions that aim to create common civic space.

The net effect of weakened social capital and the rise of polarization make collective action difficult at any level – local, regional, or national. Theda Skocpol notes:

The decline of social capital, especially in the form of civic and political engagement, poses a serious challenge to the health of our democracy. Without robust social connections and shared norms, citizens are less able to work together to solve collective problems.



Community partners reflect on the collaboration journey of Communities Building Youth Futures Yukon.

4.0 THE SEVEN REASONS WHY WE MUST FOCUS ON PLACE

Globalization. Depleted civic infrastructure. Declining social capital. Combined, these three factors make a compelling argument to avoid spending time and energy on community-driven, place-based responses, and instead to invest more heavily in efforts at the regional, sectoral, or national level.

However, seven powerful attributes of community-driven, place-based response indicate that our ability to achieve and maintain a high quality of life depends – in part – on strong and consistent local action.

4.1 Designing responses that reflect unique local contexts

Local actors are best placed to address complex challenges with responses tailored to unique local contexts, rather than with the “cookie-cutter” or one-size-fits-all approaches typical of top-down solutions. Their intimacy with and commitment to the locality increase their chances of coming up with something relevant and effective.



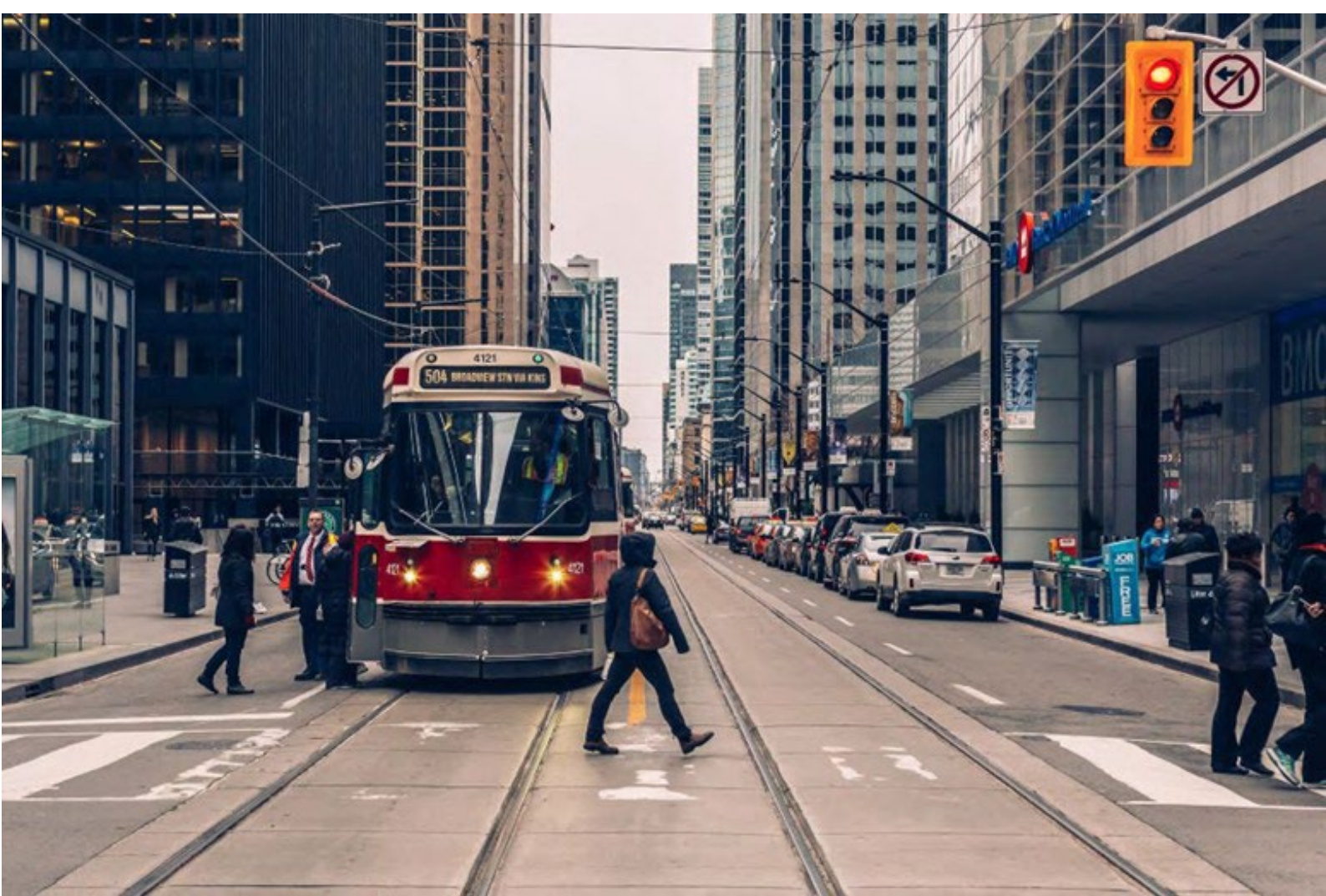
The complexity of local challenges demands solutions that are nuanced, adaptive, and contextually relevant. We must resist the temptation to apply generic fixes and instead invest in empowering communities to find their own paths forward.

– Unknown

While most community efforts to end homelessness in Canada over the last 15 years have embraced a Housing First approach, all have been adapted to reflect unique aspects of each community. Medicine Hat's strategy has been characterized by a relatively centralized, relational approach that reflects the city's relatively small size and close prior connections between the key actors.

In Toronto, local organizations had to craft a response that reflected a very different local context: a much bigger metropolitan geographic area; a much larger number of persons without houses; a more complex constellation of human services; and the immense cultural diversity of a city in which the cost of living is substantially higher. Trying to shoehorn either approach into the other city would be a classic example of fitting square pegs into round holes, and with terrible results.

Many groups, eager to make an impact on some important issue on a broad scale, have crafted programs to such specific standards that they cannot be applied in local conditions. Operating at such a high level, these groups simply cannot discern the immense diversity of



communities. Moreover, they are often hamstrung by a powerful urge to design and develop “consistent” strategies, programs, or policies that appear easier to “manage” from the center and treat every community “equally.” The failure to take into account the inevitable need for (at least some) variation sentences these programs to low productivity.

Working in place offers better visibility about how the system works or does not work for all the community and equity ensures there is a deep understanding of the problem from the perspective of individuals with lived and living experience. This ensures that change is designed with integrity that also often reveals radical and unforeseen opportunities.

Local actors, not external ones, are the ones best placed to develop custom-built responses from scratch or to adapt big ideas, policies, or programs to distinctive local conditions.

Place-Based Impact Story: CBYF Yukon: Youth Leadership to Advance a Territorial Youth Strategy

Tailoring Responses That Reflect Unique Local Contexts

Cultivating a sense of belonging for youth is the primary focus of a collaboration of Yukon Territory organizations that have come together to amplify youth voice through Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) Yukon. Collectively, these organizations decided that a territory-wide, shared leadership model would provide for the most sustainable structure guided by an aspirational vision and shared long-term outcomes to ensure that all Yukon youth feel a sense of belonging in every aspect of their lives. The strategy focuses on immediate intervention and upstream prevention and prioritizes the issues that matter most to young people.



CBYF Event, Yukon Territories

Youth are equal partners and key players in this collaboration. All the CBYF Yukon staff are youth themselves, and young people lead in the decision making. They are intentional in creating optimal conditions and safe spaces for youth to be involved at their own level. Young people can choose how they wish to share their unique knowledge, perspectives, and expertise.

The partners of CBYF Yukon are committed to the shared purpose of improving the lives of young people and is values-driven in how it engages youth. It has created Calls to Action, which are the basis of the Yukon Territorial Youth Strategy. The strategy is informed by an annual Yukon Youth Summit, which provides an opportunity for ongoing input and evaluation. All these activities place youth at the center and are mutually reinforcing.



Youth panel at the 2022 Community Building Youth Futures National Gathering in Montreal
© Geoffroy Ingret

CBYF prioritizes youth leadership and is committed to providing equity supports for young staff and leadership to be mentored and participate fully, ensuring that youth are at the centre of the Yukon Territorial Youth Strategy and its outcomes. Through trust, honesty, competency, and consistency, CBYF Yukon is shifting policy and making big changes in the territory and in the lives of youth.

Working together, CBYF's collaborative leadership team of youth and community focused organizations from across the territories work locally with youth and their allies to engage all sectors, map existing assets, understand youth and community needs, and use the collective impact framework to develop a whole of society plan for youth wellbeing and prosperity that is transforming communities in the North while reshaping relationships between the Government of Canada, community organizations and young people across the Northern Territories.

4.2 Weaving together integrated and aligned responses

Local actors are in a better position than external ones to weave together integrated and aligned responses to the entangled nature of complex challenges.

External actors are often aware that very sharp and focused interventions that employ a single powerful device – a funding program, a service model, a regulation – fail to address the need for an integrated, flexible orchestration of many different elements. Their capacity to do so effectively, however, pales in comparison to those of local actors.

An obvious example is Medicine Hat's development of a coordinated, long-range approach to homelessness, with horizontal linkages between local actors and vertical linkages with provincial and federal governments. There are many other examples, but one of particular note occurred in Winnipeg's historic North End in the 1990s, where a group of local organizations was presented with an opportunity to renew the area's housing stock. They decided to use housing as a driver to address the interlocking issues of social isolation, economic development, community safety, and environmental sustainability¹⁶.

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The problem with strategies that address only one element of a complex problem at a time is that they only address one part of that complex problem.

– Lisbeth Schorr

- First, they decided to cluster their efforts in certain neighbourhoods, rather than scatter the program across the North End's 11,000 households. They hoped that this would generate a critical mass of improved housing in a single area. Such visible progress would build a sense of momentum and bypass the well-known pattern of isolated renewal projects that deteriorate quickly. (Why do they deteriorate? Because the social conditions in the surrounding area – that led to poor state of affairs in the first place – have gone unaddressed.)
- The success of their clustering strategy made it possible to build social capital and reorganize resident associations. This in turn led to the creation of community gardens and block parent and citizen patrol programs.
- As the work continued, organizations created a social enterprise and carpentry training program to hire and train local residents (something mainstream companies struggled to do). They also enacted a buy-local strategy. Encouraging residents to purchase as many locally manufactured materials and supplies as possible created even more economic spin-offs.
- The group continued its efforts in "integration and alignment" in ways that connected to and reinforced other elements of the strategy. Eventually, it developed rent-to-own programs, established a community land trust, and administered a government energy-efficient home incentive program.

The reasons external actors struggle with the type of careful orchestration demonstrated in Winnipeg were fulsomely uncovered in the book, *Implementation*¹⁷. In that now famous study, two seasoned public policy leaders evaluated the experience of the planning and implementation of a comprehensive urban renewal strategy in Oakland, California. Their conclusion was that the strategy failed because the central agencies managing it were too big, too distant, too prescriptive, too rigid, and too slow. Decades of public sector reform efforts in the 1990s and early 2000 with 'joined up government' have demonstrated that even when it is possible for senior levels of government to improve the vertical and horizontal alignment with the diverse actors and activities in a given situation, these structural limitations of big and distant actors remain¹⁸.

Orchestration, rather than specialization, is the comparative advantage of local actors. Whether through coordinated services, community planning, collective impact models or comprehensive community initiatives, local actors are best placed to "connect the dots and untie the knots" when it comes to tackling stubborn societal challenges.



Place-Based Impact Story: Montréal's Collective Impact Project

Weaving Together Integrated, Aligned Responses

Montréal's Collective Impact Project (CIP) was launched by Centraide of Greater Montréal and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation in 2015 as a unique collaborative partnership that mobilizes a dozen funders, institutions, and community organizations across the city in a united, long-term effort to combat poverty and social exclusion. What began in 17 of the city's neighbourhoods has now, in its second phase, expanded to include almost every neighbourhood in the city with a neighbourhood roundtable. The CIP approach brings together partners with diverse perspectives together into a network unified by a commitment to work and learn together.

Each neighbourhood receives multi-year funding and capacity-building supports to implement initiatives defined together with residents. This collaborative, community-led response to poverty and social inclusion allows for a diversity of creative responses. This experimentation is particularly important given that poverty is much more than not having enough money, but is a complex issue linked to an array of factors including health, education, discrimination, and access to opportunities with many of these factors being interconnected and systemic.

CIP neighbourhoods have championed a wide variety of collective initiatives such as: improvements to community engagement processes and dynamics; improvements to living conditions and quality of life in the neighbourhood; and systemic issues that affect the welfare of local residents. This demonstrates that local partners have embraced a shared understanding of poverty's impact on many dimensions of life. The transformations generated by CIP neighbourhoods through the combined efforts of their various strategies is significant. These include improvements for people living in poverty; greater knowledge and understanding both about the challenges being faced by those living with low incomes; the creation of new relationships and connections; and the development of promising neighbourhood-based solutions. A recent article published in *The Philanthropist Journal*, shared lessons learned from the first phase of the CIP (2015-2023). In it, Isabel Heck, Head of Knowledge and Learning for the CIP, emphasized the importance that the CIP places on supporting and strengthening collaborative practice.



"The support provided by the CIP extends beyond funding, to include training and coaching on various topics, in particular evaluation and collective impact. This has strengthened several collaborative practices, which is precisely at the core of the collective impact approach: we can succeed in transforming a situation by enhancing engagement and collaboration around a common goal and use strategic learning to adjust our actions."¹

The CIP Partners' willingness to engage in a learning journey that tests the hypothesis that "the actions of a network of diverse partners, if it is well-organized and coordinated, will allow for greater local and regional coherence and consistency and will have a more powerful collective impact than the isolated outcomes achieved so far"² is both courageous and innovative.

CIP's neighbourhood action has created ripple effects including greater alignment between public institutions in the city; new partners and resources to redevelop abandoned sites and community infrastructure spaces; and strategies to fill gaps and better support local food systems. Many of the partners involved in the CIP project have also become involved in several regional initiatives focused on housing, homelessness, the built environment, and education.

Montréal's neighbourhood focused Collective Impact Project has demonstrated that people's proximity to the issues that affect their lives makes relevant actions more practical and tangible. Embracing a design that balances neighbourhood uniqueness and self-determination within a common poverty-reduction approach has generated a sense of shared ownership across a broad and diverse set of stakeholders while also achieving significant impact.



Tamarack's Deepening Community event in Montréal, 2017

4.3 Leveraging untapped local resources

In every community there are untapped local resources and assets that are more visible and readily shared with local actors, but may well be hidden from external actors, that have not yet fully demonstrated a genuine interest in and commitment to the community.

Take, for instance, the innovative approach to grant-making developed by the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative (CUAI)¹⁹. It was established in 1999 to address the issues surfaced during listening circles with Indigenous people and organizations in and around Calgary. The CUAI's main goal was to facilitate "discussion, coordination, and informed action" on Aboriginal issues and initiatives

in the city. For direction, it drew upon eight domain groups, each comprised of residents, elders, and organizations focused on a specific topic (e.g., health, education, justice, housing). As part of its new Urban Aboriginal Strategy (1997), the federal government announced a funding program that would distribute roughly \$3 million among Indigenous organizations providing services to Indigenous communities. In response, CUAI developed the Collaborative Granting Process (CGP), a unique initiative with the following features:

- A focus on funding the priorities established by CUAI domain groups
- The participation of a dozen additional public, philanthropic, and private sector funders
- A streamlined application process that required Indigenous organizations to fill out only one form (rather than dozens)
- A proposal review process that included a combination of domain-group rankings and funder reviews
- A collaborative process that made it easier for diverse funders to co-fund proposals that could not be readily funded by one organization alone

The CGP's results were impressive. The CUAI network mobilized and/or re-routed tens of millions of new dollars to address Indigenous priorities in Calgary over the next 14 years. It also became a significant exemplar of a philanthropic and reconciliation-oriented model that inspired adaptations across other Canadian cities.

This CUAI story focused on leveraging local financial resources. Others would highlight on how CUAI succeeded in mobilizing other types – human, institutional, cultural, natural, social, physical, and economic – to support the well-being of Indigenous people in the city. John McKnight challenges changemakers to systematically map and mobilize – not neglect – the community assets that abound even in most struggling communities²⁰. Local actors, unsurprisingly, are most likely to know where they are and how to engage them.



We are surrounded by all the capacity that we need to care for our families, to build our neighborhoods, to improve our schools, and to enhance the quality of our lives. It's in our streets, in our schools, in our organizations, and in our families. All we have to do is recognize it, connect with it, and nurture it.

– John McKnight

Place-Based Impact Story: Reimagining High School in Portage la Prairie's Roving Campus

Leveraging Untapped Local Resources

Portage la Prairie's Roving Campus began as a one-year prototype to provide an alternative learning pathway to a high-school diploma, employability skills and other trainings, as well as certification for 22 young people who were not succeeding in the traditional high school program and not on track to graduate. It was developed and implemented by three local teachers with support of the local school board and a one-year \$50,000 innovation fund grant provided by the [Communities Building Youth Futures Initiative](#).

Three days a week, students participated in a wide variety of hands-on learning opportunities throughout the community which incorporated an array of high school courses in an integrated way. The other two days were reserved for coaching and one-on-one instruction. The program also provided students with transportation, lunch, a laptop, and internet access to address barriers to learning experienced by all its participants.

By the end of the year, 100% of the students who completed the program graduated or are on track to graduate with mature student status in the next school year. What's more, 30% of the students were accepted and successfully transitioned into post-secondary education. Students leave the Roving Campus program with a high school diploma, employability skills, specific training certifications and targeted supports that helped them secure part-time employment, gain self-confidence and increased their opportunities for success after graduation.

As one student of the Roving Campus initiative told the leaders, "No one ever asked me what I want to do. People usually tell me what not to do." The incredible successes of the young people in the Roving Campus project affirm that youth can achieve their education and employment goals when they have clear pathways to success, basic needs such as food and housing, and adult allies who believe in and support their success.

The impacts of this highly localized one-year prototype have been monumental. They include:

- 100% of students completing the program graduated or are on track to graduate as mature students in the next school year.
- 30% of students were accepted at post-secondary institutions and successfully transitioned.
- Many Roving Campus students wanting to serve as ambassadors and mentors for the project.
- The Roving Campus teachers were recognized as "Teacher of the Year" for the province of Manitoba.
- Securing a **\$250,000 grant** from a new funder to continue the project.
- Recognition as one of [20 Innovations in Canada](#) to know about by Canadian Geographic Magazine.
- Being adopted as a permanent program within the Portage la Prairie school system with an expansion to include grade 11 students.
- Its design and approach being adapted and prototyped in Digby, Nova Scotia.



Youth studying outdoors in Portage la Prairie

4.4 Drawing on local ingenuity

Community-driven, place-based efforts are better able to develop inventive responses to stubborn challenges. Working in place provides a centre of focus and experimentation to imagine, prototype, implement at a scale which can be agile and adaptive. Equity is one of the most important principles of place-based practice. It is both a foundational value and a core methodology. When equity places those most impacted at the centre, their wisdom and perspectives increase the likelihood that the solutions developed will be supported and effective.

The Maranguka Justice Reinvestment project in Bourke, a small town in northwest New South Wales, Australia offers²¹ an example. In 2013, the state government arrived with an invitation to explore how community-led efforts might address the root causes of crime and reduce incarceration rates, while redirecting resources into early intervention, prevention, and diversion. It found in Bourke a willing network of leaders, residents, and partners.



As dynamic 'living labs', communities offer the perfect container for innovation. They are effective because they have an appreciation of the issue being addressed as well as a deep understanding of the community where it will be implemented.

– Sylvia Cheuy

This network had a record of invention in the reform of counter-productive justice system practices (For example, they provided people with transportation to court, rather than having them incarcerated for not showing up due to a lack of transportation options.) Through this work, they crafted a life-course approach. It aimed to improve the outcomes of families and youth at various phases of their lifetimes, largely through collaborative and Indigenous-informed service delivery and community supports. The initiative quickly evolved and became more ambitious and comprehensive. Its participants are now guided by a five-pillar framework: (1) cultural authority and governance, (2) collaborative and flexible service delivery, (3) shared decision-making amongst organizations, (4) first nations data sovereignty, and (5) a brokering of local solutions to systemic challenges.

The initiative is one of a kind. An Australian social change veteran noted: "Everyone understands the importance of Indigenous leadership and a prevention focus but we don't really know how to go about it. Well, the community of Maranguka is showing us."²² And the results are impressive. Many social outcomes for families have improved and the interactions with the justice system have declined. The "costs avoided" in the public treasury are significant: the authors of a 2018 KPMG study concluded that the initiative is responsible for reductions in public expenditures that are five times greater than its investment²³.



The inventiveness displayed in Maranguka is the rule, not the exception. Trace the history of many examples of social innovation in Canada today (e.g., eco-system-based management, social finance, community land trusts, participatory budgeting, wrap-around human service models) and the stories almost always begin with grassroots experimentation in local communities. To complete an inventory of all the innovative local responses in a single city would take a lifetime. Communities, in turns out, are the original social innovation labs.

Place-Based Impact Story: Kahnawà:ke Indigenous Wisdom Mobilizes Community Leadership

Drawing on Local Ingenuity

Kahnawà:ke Collective Impact (KCI) is a grassroots movement launched in 2017 to foster greater collective action to address social and economic issues for this Indigenous community of close to 12,000 people, the majority of whom live on the reserve, which is just south of Montréal. KCI honours traditional Kanien'kéha ways which include working together for the interests of the collective and the benefit of future generations. Its aim is to support positive change that nurtures a thriving Kanien'kéhaka community rooted in a connection to its culture, identity, and traditions.

Community leadership and ownership is central to KCI's approach. More than 300 members of the community – including business owners, elders, residents, community groups, youth, organizations, spiritual leaders – were engaged to raise awareness about the changing economic realities impacting Kahnawà:ke, share data about the community's socio-economic conditions and build consensus on opportunities for action. A diverse Steering Committee of volunteers took responsibility to translate the countless ideas and input generated from various events into a clear and compelling plan of action. After considerable reflection and dialogue, the Steering Committee ultimately narrowed its initial list of seventeen potential community priorities down to a short-list of six.



Kahnawà:ke Open House. © Kahnawà:ke Collective Impact

The Steering Committee felt strongly that it was important to get input from a broad cross-section of the community to confirm that the six priorities resonated and to gather input about which of the priorities should be implemented first. To do this, they had to be able to describe each priority in a clear and tangible way that the community could see, understand, and ultimately want to be part of, making it a reality. To do this, they divided themselves into six Research teams—one for each priority—and recruited a few additional community volunteers. Each team's task was to better describe their priority; highlight current community's strengths and challenges related to it; showcase examples of how other communities were addressing the priority; and outline a proposed Action Plan for what Kahnawà:ke could do to address it. The Steering Committee understood that to achieve long-lasting, positive change in Kahnawà:ke, it was important to respect traditional ways. Because Kanien'kéhaka people are known as visual storytellers, the Steering Committee decided that the research on each priority should be consolidated and communicated, on a highly visual, one-page poster that was clear and easy to understand.

These posters were the centrepiece at a 2-day, drop-in Open House that ran till 8:00 p.m. both nights. The space was decorated with a woodland theme with each priority having its own station hosted by members of that Research Team. Mock campfires were created around each of the priorities so participants could be invited to join in conversations to learn more about each priority, ask questions, provide feedback, and indicate their interest in being part of a future Action Team for that priority. In Indigenous tradition, people gathering around a fire are considered family. This helped to create comfortable safe spaces for ideas and opportunities to be explored by people of all ages. The drop-in format, which included both traditional food and childcare, encouraged participation, engagement, conversations, and a sense of celebration. As participants left the Open House, they were given three stickers to "voice their choice" for which of the priorities they personally were most interested in seeing be first.

The Open House was an overwhelming success with more than 200 members attending. Participants stayed, on average, two hours and feedback indicated that people found that the event's format of learning suitable and relevant to a significant cross-section of community.

People appreciated the family-friendly nature of the event and said the posters were perfect discussion starters and were a great way for people to engage informally, share information and collect valuable feedback about each priority. It also generated valuable feedback which gave KCI insights into why people made the choices they did, and 'how' they arrived at their decisions. The Open was also a highly effective way to recruit new volunteers and expand the network of community members involved in implementing the community's chosen priorities.

4.5 Responding in real time

In a world where the pace of change seems to increase – and the shocks induced by poly-crises (e.g., economic dislocation due to pandemics) grow more frequent – local communities can see and react to changes faster simply because they are already there.



In a world of constant disruption and uncertainty, the ability to respond to events in real time is the ultimate superpower.

– *Unknown*

This is most apparent in natural disasters. In 2016 forest fires in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Alberta (aka Fort McMurray) devastated 580,000 hectares, destroyed 2,400 businesses and homes, and displaced 90,000 people. The evacuation was managed so effectively that not one life was lost and much of the city and its industry districts remained untouched.

The excellent emergency management response was due in part to the fact that industry towns like Fort McMurray have a strong culture of “safety-first.” They have a variety of well-rehearsed disaster management plans. However, the more universal and timeless ingredients of success were active local leadership and abundant social capital. As a researcher specializing in disaster response has noted, “The biggest lesson learned for the community – for any community – in preparing for a disaster is to have connections and know people”²⁴.

Real-time responses to a changing world do not always involve high speed. The anti-homeless network in Medicine Hat had a built-in early warning system for the ever-evolving nature of homelessness. Every time a member interviewed someone eager to get off the street, they got a worm’s-eye view of the rapidly changing nature of homelessness.

Similarly, people and organizations in forestry towns across Canada have played a key role in detecting the spread of the rapacious red pine beetle. They then initiated a variety of early responses, such as forest management (e.g., thinning forests and diversifying tree species) and integrated pest management, holding the line until major industries and senior levels of government eventually developed larger scale strategies to prevent even greater forest losses.

Many people whose job it is to find ways to mitigate and adapt to the effects of the poly-crises argue that communities will increasingly be central to this effort. This is simply because communities (1) see the effects of these crises before anyone else, and (2) are best able to cobble together an initial response while a larger response is in preparation²⁶.

In a turbulent 21st century, communities are the obvious “first responders” and “early warning system”, and “on duty officer” and simply because they are always on scene – their home.

Place-Based Impact Story: PEI's North Shore Climate Action for Resilience

Responding in Real Time

Gulf Shore Consolidated School in North Rustico is home to 280 students from Kindergarten through Grade 9 (K-9) along the North Shore on Prince Edward Island. A total of 13 communities feed into the School. Baseline data shows that Hurricane Fiona and the fear-based media has built awareness of climate change, but anxiety and uncertainty on what can be done locally prevents action.

In response, the North Shore Climate Action for Resilience Collective have partnered with the Gulf Shore Heath Corporation and engaged Gulf Shore students, parents, and teachers. Their question? How might we support youth to take up climate equity, and how might building this power affect local carbon emissions? The collective organized quickly to set up agile responses to community needs and goals. Starting with one school ecosystem proved to be a key leverage point for change.



Scavenger hunt activity conducted by the PEI Invasive Species Council (PEIISC)

First, they coordinated resources to make climate resiliency “cool” among secondary school students. Between September 2023 and March 2024, ten initiatives launched targeting specific groups of K-9 students, parents, and teachers. One initiative teaches young people about invasive plant species. Another replants areas that lost trees to Hurricane Fiona. Another advocates for a school community garden and for learning about food insecurity. Another offers young people “climate action language” and aims to use the power of peer influence to spread the language and mindset. Twenty parents have explored the concept of two-eyed seeing (or Etuaptmumk in Mi'kmaw), learning to see from one eye the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing with the aim of learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all. Two teachers are leading climate-focused art projects, forming an Environmental Club, and sponsoring environmental projects at the annual Science Fair. Nearly every K-9 student has been part of at least one initiative.

Outside of the school, the Collective engages residents in the 13 communities that feed into the school to nurture a community receptive to climate actions. They identified 40 actors that play key roles in climate equity; these include entrepreneurs, firefighters, fishers, watershed managers, seniors, and food bank staff. They have contacted half so far, with a 100% response rate. At least three organizations who were supportive of environmental actions but unsure of how to take action, changed their practices based on interactions with the Collective. Lennon House, for example, who provides housing and support to people living with addictions and mental health challenges, conducted an energy audit which resulted in actions to reduce use of fossil fuels (e.g., installing heat pumps in four resident cottages). Lennon House has shared that, during the next hurricane, some clients may be ready to offer support to community residents seeking emergency shelter, rather than being on the receiving end of support.

All these local activities came together rapidly, harnessed local gifts and strengths, and are flexible enough to adapt as local aspirations and needs change.



Waterkeeper Elder Methilda conducting a traditional sharing circle with students and parents

4.6 Sticking to it over the long term

Governments work in three – or four-year political cycles. Corporate boards are preoccupied with quarterly earnings. Many organizational executives must manage 24/7 social media and news cycles. Communities, on the other hand, can think and act in decades and generations.

It took a decade for local actors in Medicine Hat to end chronic homelessness, if only temporarily. In that time: (1) Alberta and Canada have both held five elections with each winning party demonstrating uneven levels of interest, commitment, and supports in regard to homelessness; (2) the regional oil and gas economy experienced two cycles of boom and bust; and (3) the world weathered years of dislocation due to COVID-19. Amidst this ebb and flow of external events, leaders in Medicine Hat kept their noses to the grindstone, completed their first ten-year plan and then created another version to guide the next ten years. They, not external actors, were the consistent and stable changemakers in their impressive story.

It took almost as long for the residents of Saskatoon to build a much-needed real estate project. The idea for Station 20 West emerged in 2001 in grassroots conversations between local organizers about the possibility of a facility that would house a food market in a food desert, 55 affordable housing units, and a local library. Over a five-year period the group engaged a diverse set of stakeholders to undertake feasibility studies, raise funds, complete a business plan, and rally a diverse coalition of supporters. Then, in 2008, just as construction was to begin, a newly elected provincial government withdrew a critical \$8 million investment. Unable to convince the new government to honour the pledge, the community re-grouped and raised \$3 million through local donations. The facility, smaller yet still vital, opened its doors in 2012 and continues to adapt and evolve²⁷.

Sasha Haselmayer, author of *The Slow Lane: Why Quick Fixes Fail and How to Achieve Real Change*, concludes that it can take 20-40 years to achieve real progress on addressing a societal issue. Key is to maintain a sense of urgency about an issue without expecting meaningful results in the near term, while committing to work on it through trial and error over the long term²⁸. Local actors who experience the effects of complex challenges firsthand for years yet remain driven by the desire to shape (not endure) their future – have that commitment in abundance.

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“Change is a marathon,
not a sprint”.

– Unknown

Place-Based Impact Story: A Commitment to Communities: The Path of Ending Poverty in Canada

Sticking to It Over the Long Term

Good things start with a conversation. So do good communities. Communities that work are places where people from different walks of life come together to discuss ideas that matter to them. Over time (sometimes long periods of time), trust and understanding emerge and individuals agree to work together. They discuss ideas and eventually develop plans to act. Once the foundation for action is set, people engage deeply and work together relentlessly to realize the dreams they share.

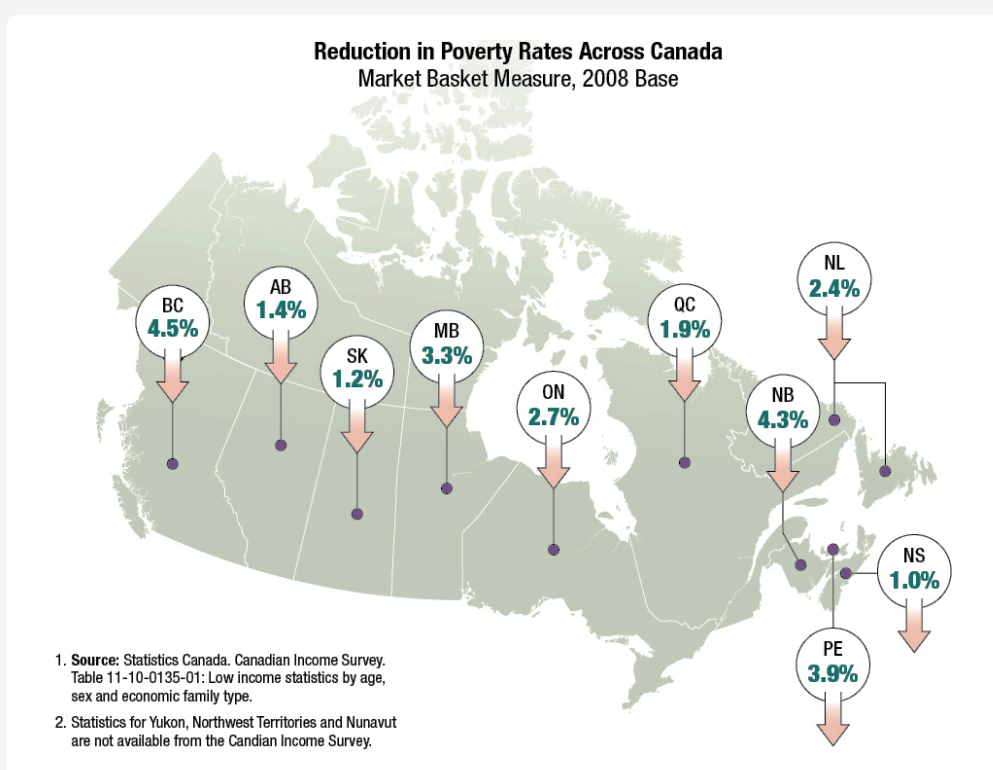
– Creating Vibrant Communities, Introduction

The origin of Tamarack's commitment to ending poverty started as Opportunities 2000, a place-based initiative in Waterloo, Ontario. The bold goal was to move 2000 individuals out of poverty by the year 2000. It was led by entrepreneur Paul Born. Philanthropy noticed. The McConnell Foundation approached the Opportunities 2000 team to consider scaling this place-based approach to reducing poverty. The Tamarack Institute and Vibrant Communities were born.

The first phase of Vibrant Communities (2001-2012) invited a group of communities to determine whether they could convene a cross-sector table of leaders to build a local plan to tackle the complex challenge of reducing poverty. First, six communities said "yes" and then a further seven communities joined. Over a 10-year period, these 13 Vibrant Communities built local plans, engaged together as a learning network, and worked intentionally through locally based actions focused on reducing poverty. They were supported by a national network including the Tamarack Institute, McConnell Foundation, Caledon Institute and a small team of coaches and evaluators. The impact was substantial.

In 2012, Vibrant Communities moved into its second phase, which included an ending of the McConnell Foundation's funding commitment. Tamarack reached into its network of Vibrant Communities members and beyond to additional communities also working to reduce poverty across Canada to co-create the next phase. During Phase 2 the initial network of 13 communities grew to 35 communities and, by 2022, included nearly 100 communities representing over 400 municipalities across Canada and in the USA.

Tamarack continued to convene this dynamic network of place-based leaders determined to end poverty in Canada. The impact continues to be substantial. Collectively, the network has influenced Canada's Poverty Strategy, has contributed to improving access to housing, transportation, income security, and health services and continues to shape the conversation about ending poverty. The [2022 Communities Ending Poverty Impact](#) report highlights the depth of impact.



Source: Government of Canada—[Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy—An Update](#)

Ending poverty in all its forms is Tamarack's North Star. This commitment, over more than 20 years, illustrates the relevance of place-based change. It also provides a powerful example of the impact that can be achieved with a shared long-term commitment and the value-added contributions of a focused and dedicated intermediary achieving collective impact. Local leaders and community partners, when engaged in aligned actions, can influence solutions at the local, provincial, territorial, national and global levels. They are also susceptible to short-term funding and political cycles and other sustainability changes.

As communities experience fluctuations in resources, momentum, and action over the long-term, Tamarack and its Vibrant Communities national network are a steady source for support and credibility. The network supports members by providing encouragement and hope, a wide range of poverty reduction and community engagement information, pathways towards impact, and skills building tools and training that communities can access when the time is right. Tamarack's role as convener, host, intermediary, cheerleader, evaluator, and policy leader that links local efforts into a national movement is core to communities achieving collective impact.

**Vibrant Communities Collective Phase 1 Results
(June 2011)**

- 197,575 individuals and households have received 407,578 benefits from Vibrant Communities including increases in income, and access to food and shelter
- 238 poverty reducing strategies and projects have been completed or in progress
- 45 strategies have expanded community involvement in the policy making process
- 40 strategies have provided substantial policy changes in areas such as transportation and housing

Source: Cities Reducing Poverty, Mark Cabaj, Editor

4.7 Building connections, agency, and inclusion

Community-driven, place-based efforts are able to create opportunities to address and reverse the growing sense of disconnection, civic apathy, and political polarization described earlier.

They do so in three ways.

First, they offer an immense variety of opportunities for civic participation at the local level. Seattle, Washington's well-known neighbourhood-organizing model offers an astonishing variety of examples of grassroots action. They include improving retail strips, establishing green spaces and gardens, restoring wetlands, establishing recreation facilities, and inter-cultural exchanges²⁹. The widespread use of participatory budgeting gives ordinary citizens a voice in the expenditure of portions of municipal or institutional budgets for community improvement. (The Toronto Community Housing Corporation offers another example of Participatory budgeting. Each year, its diverse residents decide how to spend roughly \$9 million across their units³⁰.) In any

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Small is beautiful.

– E.F. Schumacher.



community, the number of boards, advisory committees, and volunteer organizations eager to receive engaged citizens is countless.

Second, they allow those who want to make a difference to “shrink the change” of overwhelming wicked problems. Their local perspective allows them to translate these daunting issues into tangible and practical actions. It may not be possible to reduce Canada’s overall GHG emissions. But it is possible to advocate for local regulations on building codes or to pilot a model for net-zero homes in a revitalization zone. It’s difficult to turn the needle on “youth poverty,” but to create a social enterprise that provides young people with income and work experience – that’s doable. Ljeoma Oluo’s new book, *Be A Revolution*, explores a score of stories about how inventive changemakers are challenging “big systems” – education, law enforcement, labour, health – often in local settings³¹. The 1970s phrase, “think globally, act locally” is more relevant now than ever. It reminds people that their actions can make a difference.

Third, community-level efforts can result in entirely new institutions that are more inclusive and responsive. For example, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston designed a governance board to provide the area’s four major community groups (Cape Verde, Latino, African and European) with an equal voice in shaping grassroots renewal. Now decades old, DSNI is considered one of the best neighbourhood renewal stories in North America³². The Parkdale Peoples Economy initiative in Toronto engages 30 community-based organizations and hundreds of local residents to work on issues related to decent work, food security, health, and housing. It has resulted in what an expert has called a sophisticated “development system” for a more humane society³³. In BC, the prolonged evolution of the Nisga’a Nation towards sovereignty and self-government may not be perfect, but it demonstrates that profoundly new ways of governing ourselves are possible³⁴.

Local action alone cannot reverse the larger structural forces that lead to disengagement from social and civic life. However, it offers a rich and inviting recruiting ground to those eager to join what Shaun Loney calls “an army of problem solvers”³⁵.

Place-Based Impact Story: Peel's Participatory Grantmaking Project

Building Connections, Agency and Inclusion

In July 2021, the [WES Mariam Assefa Fund](#) partnered with the [Tamarack Institute](#) to develop a participatory grantmaking project. The intent was to mobilize community input and knowledge to ensure its funding was aligned with the actual needs and priorities of the community. The aim was to **build more equitable economies for immigrants and refugees in Ontario's Peel Region**.

Peel was an ideal place for this Pilot Project since 51.5% of the region's 1,37 million residents are immigrants. Among these, 94,105 are newcomers who arrived in Canada during the 2016 Census period and another 26,000 arrived in 2021. Peel Region is also incredibly diverse and has the highest percentage (62.3%) of visible minorities in the GTA.

The [Peel Newcomer Strategy Group](#), an established local collaborative of service providers and stakeholders supporting newcomer settlement and integration, were a valuable local partner to the project. Their knowledge of the local landscape and trusted network of connections throughout the region was essential to the project's success.

A 12 person [People's Panel](#) – six individuals and six representatives from newcomer-serving organizations who were recruited through an open call to the community – were another foundational element of the Pilot's success. They reflected a diversity of ages, genders, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, work experiences, and most importantly lived experiences as immigrants or refugees. Panel members were compensated above living wage for their time and were responsible for drawing upon their lived experiences and community knowledge to define the key funding priorities for allocating \$600,000 in one-year grant funds.

The funding opportunity was promoted widely throughout the region. Interested applicants had access to support from Tamarack to develop their proposals. This support ensured more equitable access and transparency in the application process. In total, 20 strong grant applications were received.

The members of the People's Panel spent considerable time reviewing the applications and rated them using an assessment matrix that reflected the criteria and priorities they developed during the grant design phase. Tamarack supported the Panel's vetting process by reviewing the financial and activity reports submitted by all applicants and facilitated the Panel to ultimately reach a consensus to fund a total of six projects.

After the successful proposals were identified, Tamarack's role shifted to provide ongoing coaching and capacity-building to the grantees both individually and as a cohort. This facilitated peer support and increased connection between the projects. Though the mandate of the People's Panel was completed, some of its members stayed involved in the project in a variety of ways including serving as an Advisory Board to Grantee Projects as well as supporting the evaluation of the Participatory Grantmaking Project.

The findings of the Project's [comprehensive evaluation](#) confirmed the impact and value of this innovative project. Participants at all levels perceived the pilot as "legitimate and relevant" and, People's Panel members felt it "meaningfully engaged their lived experiences." The Pilot was credited for its ability to process "successfully infused the voices of community at every level of the project" and "led to grantmaking decisions that were highly responsive to the unique local context." However, the most significant change the project generated among all partners was the decision to "trust in the 'deep' participatory process and generate consensus-based decisions firmly grounded in the community's needs."



Participatory Grantmaking Group. © Peel Newcomer Strategy Group

5.0 THE NECESSITY OF CROSS-SCALE RESPONSES

There you have it: three good reasons why community-driven, place-based efforts may seem to be a bad choice when responding to complex societal challenges, and seven reasons why they are the best choice. Together, these ten reasons point us to a conclusion that already might be obvious: progress on complex societal challenges requires a variety of responses that are coordinated across multiple scales – the local, the national, and everything in between.

The progress that Medicine Hat made on homelessness would have been impossible without local action. Local people and organizations (e.g., service agencies, housing providers, city council, volunteers) led and/or made essential contributions to the effort. They leveraged local assets. They wove together multiple actors and techniques into an integrated, made-in-Medicine-Hat strategy. They stuck to it over the long term, developing and adapting their work in real time along the way.

The effectiveness of their local efforts was dramatically strengthened by the activities of external actors. Provincial and federal policymakers have made significant and (somewhat) sustained investments and implemented policies that target social and supportive housing. Sector leaders experimented with new angles on the Housing First approach. Civil servants untangled and reinvented regulations, policies, and structures to make the new model more feasible.

Progress on homelessness over the next ten years requires a new round of committed invention and reform at both levels. Research confirms the effectiveness of Medicine Hat's cross-scale experience.

Over the years 1990-2010, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change researched community-based initiatives across dozens of US cities. Their findings were definitive. Indeed, relatively well-funded, community-driven efforts were able to improve program-level outcomes, build local infrastructure, and change some local systems. Nevertheless, on their own, such efforts by and large were not powerful enough to achieve change at population levels of income, housing, and overall well-being³⁶.

Then came a second generation of community-driven, place-based change efforts, arguably still more ambitious and systematic: the Collective Impact Approach. Its performance record across North America has also been examined, and the results are slightly more positive – but the conclusion the same. From a study of 25 collective impact efforts, researchers concluded that communities had achieved some population-level impact in terms of a variety of indicators of well-being. Nevertheless, local contributions to these impacts occurred “alongside other efforts or enablers” (e.g., policies of senior levels of government, changes in the economy)³⁷. The study maintains that even well-managed, longer-term collective impact initiatives alone did not achieve population-level impact. Other contributors were essential.

Progress on complex societal challenges requires that we drop romantic notions that “bottom-up” or “top-down” responses can be effective in absence of each other. Instead, we have to embrace the necessity to support and coordinate intelligent responses across multiple scales.

6.0 STARTING POINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Having reviewed the potential of community-driven, place-based responses to complex societal challenges, this final section offers three practical steps for unleashing the power of such responses.

6.1 View challenges and solutions through a cross-scale lens

The first step is to see and understand how a complex issue manifests at the local, regional/provincial, national, and – when appropriate – international scales. This line of inquiry can reveal actions required at each scale and how they might be knit together for a more integrated and impactful response.

Cross-scale thinking and action were abundant in the Medicine Hat example. They were equally evident in the current attention-grabbing headlines across Canada about the dramatic surge in car thefts in the country. The diverse participants at a national summit on the issue concluded that an “all society effort”, with coordinated actions at multiple levels, was required to “turn the needle” over the next decade³⁸. (See Table 1.)

This requires new habits, practices, and structures. John Kania noted that zooming in and out on complex challenges with diverse stakeholders is not counter-intuitive: it makes good sense and happens organically when discussing complex issues such as homelessness, car thefts, conserving biodiversity of a watershed or trying to great decently paying, equitable employment. However, it is counter-cultural because it requires us to think outside our personal, organizational and sector silos.

Countercultural perhaps, but doable. There are scores of helpful methods, frameworks, and techniques to assist changemakers to understand and plan cross-scale interventions. They simply need to create the time, resources, and space necessary to see and map out more comprehensive, aligned and mutually reinforcing responses together – and avoid the rush for narrow, isolated quick fixes.

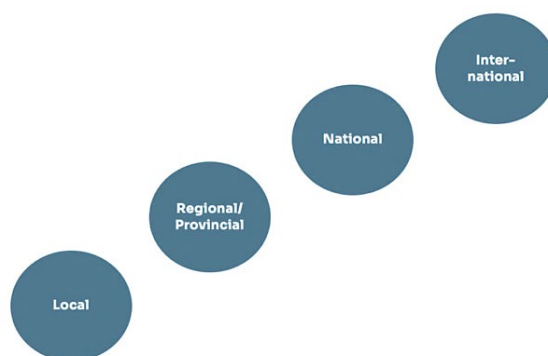


Table 1

Summary of Ideas to Reduce the Rapid Increase of Car Thefts in Canada

Scale	Preliminary Responses
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and/or legislate car manufacturers to innovate anti-theft technologies (e.g., engine immobilizers) as well as prepare upgrades as criminal organizations invent ways to get around these devices. Insurance companies can encourage and support car owners in taking anti-theft measures themselves (e.g., steering-wheel locks).
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjust the federal criminal code to apply tougher penalties to the criminal organizations behind auto-thefts. Ban the import of "Flipper Zero" technology. (It allows thieves to copy wireless signals and then gain access to vehicles.)
Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve security and monitoring of cargo handling at the ports of Montreal and Vancouver, from which an estimated two-thirds of stolen vehicles are shipped from Canada to international buyers.
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build greater public awareness of measures for keeping vehicles secure through local media and public awareness campaigns. Increase local police resources for prevention and criminal investigation activities.

6.2 Less prescription, more flexibility

Flexibility is key to unlocking the power of community-driven, place-based efforts: customization, integration, invention, local resources, real-time responses, stick-to-itiveness, and a broad sweep of opportunities for meaningful civic participation.

When external actors view local actors as mere delivery vehicles for centrally conceived and over-designed interventions, locally based advantages remain untapped. They do not disappear but remain dormant. However, when such interventions come with clear parameters yet sufficient "wiggle room" for local actors to be part of an organic response, these same resources are more likely to be unleashed.

The success of Medicine Hat has been due in part to the flexibility that was enabled in multiple ways. These included:

- Block grants that provided local authorities with resources that they can allocate in a way that best suits local priorities and challenges.
- Design approaches that featured Min-Spec (aka Minimum Specifications) and/or MVP (Minimal Viable Product) criteria to help identify and prioritize the essential or core

features of a policy, model, or response. Other actors were then able to build in less critical features in ways that are contextually responsive.

- Vertical agreements between diverse actors that spelled out their respective roles and responsibilities, and processes for how resources would be shared, and actions would be coordinated.
- Collaborative/collective impact processes that provided a methodology that enabled diverse actors to develop the trustful relationships that are essential to encourage experimentation and adaptation.

While the case for greater local flexibility is clear, achieving it in a way that is effective, efficient, transparent, and equitable is not straightforward. This issue is a central and timeless preoccupation of federal, provincial, regional, and local governments, central and front-line agencies, corporate headquarters, and their field offices and/or subsidiaries, as well as national federations of non-profits and their grassroots members.

Thankfully, it is also an extraordinarily hot topic in the field of public policy, philanthropy, and social change circles right now, which means that there is no shortage of thoughtful proposals on how to go about it. These range from the incremental (e.g., Grassroots to Joined Up Government), the reformist (e.g., Just Giving: Why Philanthropy is Failing Democracy and, How It Can Do Better; The New Localism: How Cities Can Thrive in the Age of Populism), and the transformational (e.g., The Revolution Will not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex; Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance). The renaissance of ideas and experimentation on how to rebalance the power from external – often big, centralized – institutions to smaller, local ones, and ensure a more productive relationships between the two is arguably already underway. It needs to be illuminated, nurtured, and expanded³⁹.

6.3 Invest in and employ intermediaries

Addressing complex challenges across multiple scales can be made much more effective by employing intermediaries and field catalysts.

Their network of relationships and unique vantage point enable them to build bridges, strengthen capacity, and amplify, accelerate, and leverage place-based innovations. They connect policymakers, funders, service providers, activists, and other actors to facilitate the sharing of information and the coordination of action. They also offer research, training, aggregated resources, and policy options to enable ambitious change agendas to advance more easily and effectively⁴⁰.

Field catalysts go one step further. They push stakeholders to pursue higher ambitions and “do whatever it takes” to achieve them. This includes raising the public profile of an issue, highlighting innovative examples that illustrate promise, creating broad-based campaigns to support the longer-term work of addressing deeper systemic barriers, and advocating, engaging, and building new networks (see Table 2 on the following page)⁴¹.

TABLE 2: FOUR TYPES OF FIELDBUILDING INTERMEDIARIES

Type	What It Does	Examples
Field Catalyst	Deploys different capabilities, influencing the field's efforts to achieve large scale change (e.g., convening, public awareness, campaigns).	Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, Tamarack's support of place-based partnerships focused on poverty reduction
Capability Specialist	Provides one or more supporting capabilities to the field (e.g., research, technical assistance, media).	Tamarack Institute's work on Living Wage
Evidence-Action Lab	Focuses on research and development, advising policymakers, and helping the field's practitioners learn, improve, and scale solutions.	Making the Shift (Youth Homelessness)
Place-Based Backbone	Coordinates local and regional cross-sector stakeholders and supports them in collectively transforming a fragmented effort or field.	Alberta Seven Cities Network Local Housing First Planning Bodies



Each played a role in Medicine Hat's success. The Alberta Seven Cities Network offers a forum in which anti-homelessness leaders and public agencies in the province's major cities can share their experiences and coordinate their planning and policy activities. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness provides robust training, research, technical assistance, and policy advice to communities, government, and philanthropic organizations. The Alliance is also the sponsor of the 20,000 Homes and Built for Zero campaigns, each of which mobilizes stakeholders to address one of the field's strategic challenges.

Furthermore, the Tamarack Institute's long-term support for place-based models for reducing poverty (including the adoption of local living wage strategies) has opened up new ways of preventing homelessness from taking root in the first place (See Sidebar 1).

SIDEBAR 1: The Tamarack Institute's Contribution to Medicine Hat

Prior to Medicine Hat developing its community-driven plan to end homelessness, Tamarack supported several community sessions where local leaders discussed tackling poverty. They had discovered the work of Vibrant Communities and were interested in exploring its potential. In many ways, these gatherings, hosted by staff from the City of Medicine Hat, created the conditions and built the will of community leaders to tackle their city's challenges with poverty and homelessness. They were also inspired by collaborative efforts in Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer.

Medicine Hat was part of a seven-city alliance where information and progress was shared across the larger cities in Alberta. Collective efforts were emerging, and change was happening. Medicine Hat, inspired by their peer communities, were deepening their networks, and understanding of what it takes to work collectively together to drive change.

Peek behind the curtain of any effort to address a complex challenge or generate a systemic innovation and you will find intermediaries and field catalysts hard at work. The Toronto Community Benefits Network has helped to catalyze the spread of community benefits agreements across neighbourhoods in the country's largest cities. Quest Canada is a go-to resource for local, regional, and national organizations that want to accelerate the journeys of municipalities towards greater energy efficiency and net zero emissions. The growth of the social finance and social enterprise sectors in Australia is impossible to imagine without the direct and indirect contribution of over a dozen intermediaries in that country alone, whose advocacy, facilitation of knowledge exchange (especially best practices) and collaboration created "invaluable scaffolding" among actors and stakeholders in these sectors ⁴².

Though intermediaries and field catalysts have operated for many decades their role and contributions often remained unseen. However over the past five years or so, those eager and impatient to find ways to accelerate and broaden progress on wicked issues have made it a point to better understand the work of intermediaries work and how it can be supported.



Some of the best thinking on the topic comes from the Bridgespan Group who point out the need to take action in five areas: 1) Provide flexible, long-term capital suitable for tackling entrenched problems; 2) Support the building of their organizational capacity and sustainability 3) Improve the use of metrics to monitor progress and results; 4) Create spaces for leaders to share experiences and novel ideas; and, 5) Promote the value and use of intermediaries for and effort that aims to tackle a societal challenge⁴³.

The ideas explored in this paper remind us that community-driven, place-based efforts have a powerful, central, and enduring role in correcting these trends. However, this also points to an obvious conclusion that easily gets lost in the search of quick fixes: deep, broad, and durable progress on any and all of the poly-crises depends on intentional, well-designed, and supported action that is coordinated across local, regional, provincial, national and, in some cases, international scales.

Happily, we are not starting from scratch. Examples of vibrant community action, and thoughtful cross-scale cooperation, abound. We simply need to build on them with a level of commitment, resilience and ambition that matches the complexity, scales, and stakes of the challenges we want to, and must, overcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Mark is President of the consulting company [Here to There](#). He was the Coordinator of the Waterloo Region's Opportunities 2000 project, an initiative that won provincial, national, and international awards for its multi-sector approach to poverty reduction and was the Director of Vibrant Communities Canada (2002-2011).



Mark is a seasoned practitioner with decades of experience implementing locally based change. He brings a breadth and depth of understanding about the work of community change that is rooted in the Canadian context and also informed by an international perspective. His practitioner perspective confirms that the case for place-based change is not something new and unproven, but rather it is something that is known and well-documented that we may need to be reminded of in the face of our current challenges.

As an early member of the Tamarack team, he spent 10 years helping to build the foundation of our work. He has a gift for sense-making, that enables him to bring a coherence to the case for place-based change that can strengthen our collective appreciation of the value of investing in it and illuminate ways it can be enhanced.

Sylvia Cheuy

Sylvia is the Consulting Director in Collaboration with the Tamarack Institute's Learning Centre. Prior to joining Tamarack, Sylvia was the founding Executive Director to Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA), a grassroots citizen initiative fostering collaborative leadership and action to advance a long-term vision of well-being for Ontario's Headwaters region. Sylvia completed her undergrad at the University of Toronto and a graduate diploma in Social Innovation at the University of Waterloo in 2013 where she explored opportunities to reimagine regional food systems.



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ADDITIONAL READINGS ON PLACE-BASED CHANGE & PLACE-BASED PARTNERSHIPS

- Paul Ramsey Foundation – Mark Cabaj – [Evaluating the Results of Intermediary Organizations](#) – 2021 Report
- Social Venture Australia – [Social Sector Intermediaries: What are they and What do they Need?](#) – blog post and report – December 2022
- Bridgespan – [Equitable Systems Change: Funding Field Catalysts from Origins to Revolutionizing the World](#) – March 2023
- Stanford Social Innovation Review – [How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change](#) – Taz Hussein, Matt Plummer and Bill Breen – November 2018
- Bridgespan – [Field Building for Population-Level Change](#) – Lija McHugh Farnham, Emma Nothmann, and Cora Daniels – March 2020
- Stanford Social Innovation Review – [How Field Catalysts Accelerate Collective Impact](#) – Cabaj, Cheu and Weaver, Tamarack Institute – 2022
- Stanford Social Innovation Review – [Filling the Gaps in Collective Impact](#) – Blatz, Long, Piff, and Jancarz – September 2019
- Nonprofit Quarterly – [How to Fund Place-Based Partnerships, if We Want Them to Work](#), Chan, Knowlton, and Miller – October 2021
- Social Innovation Journal – [Community Innovation: A Place-Based Approach to Social Innovation](#) – all articles in Volume 17 (2023)
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- [Blog post: Centring Equity and Place-Based Approaches in Systemic Transformation](#) by Anna Powell, Megan Courtney, Liz Weaver, Danya Pastuszek, Emily Sun, Jo Blundell, and Ritika Kurup – July 2023

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[The Tamarack Institute](#) supports communities and individuals to break free from poverty, adopt sustainable climate transitions, invest in youth, and inspire belonging and purpose through [coaching and collaborative partnerships](#) and [guiding resources](#). Learn more about what we do [here](#).



Tamarack is located in Turtle Island (North America), the ancestral home of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples. We acknowledge historical oppression and commit to addressing ongoing inequities in this territory.