

# CREATING FERTILE SOIL | CATALYZING COMMUNITY INNOVATION

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Interested in supporting innovation in your community? This paper highlights some of the important enabling conditions for Community Innovation, explores the many roles that changemakers can play in supporting innovation, and provides a framework for identifying where action might be most needed in your community.

## COMMUNITY INNOVATION IS A NATURAL PRACTICE

“In 2005 in Liuzhou, Guangxi province (China) a group of citizens found that they could not access good, safe food in ordinary markets. They went to villages, about a two-hour drive from the city, and found that traditional agriculture models, though struggling, still survived in the remote countryside. With the intention of helping these farmers and developing a stable channel of organic food, they founded a social enterprise: a farmers’ association called Ainonghui.” (Fang) As Ezio Manzini, the founder of the Design for Social Innovation for Sustainability (DESIS) network puts it, what makes this example important is that it is, “a working model of a brand-new production and economic model. The production model is based on the idea of creating direct links between production and consumption, one that is connected on a local scale but also open to the global flow of people and ideas.” (Manzini). This story is also a fine example of Community Innovation.

With the current intensity of attention focused on innovation in the private, public, and social sectors, it is important to remember that innovation is an innate human capacity. Our current communities and lifestyles are a testament to this fact. At a scale unlike any other animal on earth we naturally change our environments, organizing structures, and beliefs to suit our needs. Similarly, examples of Community Innovation like the story above are naturally emergent. However, our communities still face a myriad of challenges and opportunities, so the work of Community Innovation is not (and will never be) complete. As well, though innovation is a natural human, individual, and community activity, it must be cultivated to achieve the types of impacts our communities hope for.

This is a critical role of community changemakers - cultivating the conditions within which Community Innovation can flourish. With that in mind, how might we best focus our efforts to support innovation in our communities? With all the possibilities and pathways available, where should we start? This paper explores enabling conditions for Community Innovation to provide guidance and starting points to

changemakers hoping to support innovation in their communities. It also explores the different ways that community changemakers can contribute to innovation efforts, highlighting that there are many unique skills and approaches that are all valuable in the context of Community Innovation.

## WHY COMMUNITY INNOVATION MATTERS

Community Innovation a unique and focused form of Social Innovation. It is particularly a place-based and community-driven form of innovation. We define Community Innovation as ‘Change, for good, with and within a community.’ This focus on place is particularly important. At Tamarack we believe that innovation that is championed, led, and enacted by a community itself is more likely to meet the needs of the community, more likely to integrate with local context, and more likely to be sustainable than innovations that come from outside the community. This is the same rationale that has spurred our work in [Vibrant Communities Canada](#) — supporting cities and local leaders to develop and implement large scale change initiatives — and also underpins the work of other initiatives such as Asset Based Community Development. Communities also provide a unique opportunity for the experimentation, iteration, and evaluation that is inherent to the process of innovation. Within place-based communities, it is easier for ordinary residents to effect change and see the impacts of their change. Other forms of Social Innovation must rely on formal structures and activities, whereas Community Innovation is part of the everyday lived experience of residents.

While there are many resources describing enabling conditions for Innovation broadly, such as *The Art of Innovation* (Kelley and Littman) *Creativity Inc.* (Catmull and Wallace) as well as the conditions for Social Innovation such as *The Case for Social R&D* (Schulman), *Patterns, Principles and Practices in Social Innovation* (Huddart), and *Getting to Maybe* (Westley et al.), this paper will explore the conditions that are important for *Community Innovation*.

## EMERGING CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION

Building upon the outstanding resources in Social Innovation, as well as our work in supporting Community Innovation at Tamarack, the following conditions are emerging as important in supporting Community Innovation. While these conditions are not exhaustive, reflecting on the presence or absence of them in your community is a useful way to assess where your efforts as a changemaker seeking to support Community Innovation might be focused best.

### CONDITION 1: POWER

While there are many ways of defining power, one of the most useful is simply: the ability to create change. Since innovation is all about the process of creating change, power is clearly an essential ingredient to enable Community Innovation. Power comes in many different forms; it can be held in the power of resources (e.g., financial power), which is the type of power that communities can leverage to influence companies’ behaviour, as was the case when Canadians began switching to French’s Ketchup after Heinz relocated its ketchup manufacturing from Leamington, Ontario, to the United States. (Harris) Another important component of power is social — the degree to which others care about you, will give you their attention, or will hear and respond to your needs, and is best reflected in today’s social media influencers and in celebrity endorsements for various social causes. Power is also supported and managed by legal structures, enabling communities to support or deny resource or land development,

as one example.

If we hope to support Community Innovation, it is important to do a candid assessment of the degree to which our community holds power, where the centres of the community's power are, and where there are opportunities to give the community more power. It is not reasonable to expect that communities will innovate if they hold limited power, and consequently a focus for community change work should be on giving more power to the community.

One way in which this can happen is through funding. Funding opens many types of doors that might otherwise block innovation. In the story of Ainonghui funding might support travel between Liuzhou and the surrounding villages, support the hiring of administrative staff for coordination, and subsidize the project itself. However, funding also creates dependencies. Without a long-term strategy in place for self-sustainability, providing supports like this creates a power imbalance between funder and community, and doesn't ultimately increase the power of the community.

We can also build power by supporting the capacities of community members themselves. Providing training or mentorship that equips community members to navigate the opportunities and challenges they face gives them greater power to drive Community Innovation, instead of being reliant upon others to intercede. Similarly, we can also give community power by giving them our attention. The focus on indigenous reconciliation in Canada has given related movements and groups more power to affect their outcomes than when these issues were less prominent in Canadian discourse.

There are many different forms of power. Changemakers who seek to support Community Innovation can start by exploring power in their own communities and identifying ways that they and others can act to increase the community's power (see sidebar). It is also important to understand what types of power are most relevant to the change at hand. In the case of Ainonghui, political power was less relevant as the community already had the ability to create the structures and relationships needed for change. However, in cases where governmental systems create limits on community power, it might be extremely important to build the community's political power.

Sometimes communities can circumvent the power structures around them and do extraordinary things that seem impossible. Led by Jason Roberts, the first Better Block project focused on rezoning a street in Dallas, with members painting bike lanes, creating patio spaces and crosswalks, and bringing in pop-up businesses all without going through the formal zoning and approval processes. (The Better Block) Rather than waiting for permission and those who hold power, this project simply acted. What does this mean for our understanding of power?

**QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING  
POWER IN COMMUNITY**  
**What types of power are needed  
to effect the changes that the  
community is seeking?**

**What types of power are present  
in the community?**

**How is power distributed in the  
community? Who does and  
doesn't hold power, and why?**

**What types of power are absent in  
the community, and why?**

**What opportunities are there to  
build greater power in the  
community, and what role can I  
play?**

## CONDITION 2: SENSE OF POWER

One of the main purposes of the Better Block project is to, “[show] community members that they have the power to make changes in their neighbourhoods.” Importantly, this power is already latent in the communities in which Better Block operates, but it may not be recognized by the communities themselves. Communities that have repeatedly been marginalized learn over time that they do not hold power, even if in fact they do. Similarly, many different movements have been spurred by the realization that a group holds more (or different types of) power than they originally believed (for example, civil disobedience in the Indian Independence movement).

One of the reasons that famous innovators and innovative companies are able to achieve their successes is that they have a strong belief in their own power. Indeed, it takes an incredible belief in one’s own power to commit to landing a rocket on Mars like Elon Musk (Kettley) or to ‘solve death’ like Google’s Calico project (McNicoll). No one bequeaths this type of power to these individuals and companies, instead they claim it for themselves. Unsurprisingly, innovation methodologies like Sprints and Design Thinking place a strong emphasis on taking action and demonstrating what is possible by making, rather than asking for permission. Part of the appeal of adapting these methods to community development is the promise of helping communities discover their inherent power to create change, but these are not the only potential pathways for discovering power. Much of the work of Asset-Based Community Development focuses on helping communities reclaim their power, rediscover the types of changes that they are capable of effecting without outside intervention, connecting previously unconnected assets, and rediscovering and celebrating their gifts. (Tamarack) This field provides an outstanding starting point for changemakers hoping to build community’s sense of power.

It is important to remember that power is demonstrated through action. Actions and their consequences show whether power truly exists. Tangible demonstrations of power are critical to building a community’s sense of power. The role of changemakers can then be one of demonstrating the latent power held by community and, like the Better Block project, spur community action by taking the first step to show what is possible.

## CONDITION 3: CAPACITY FOR RISK

There is another important attribute that is a critical foundation for innovation — capacity and tolerance for risk. This is what enables innovation in the technology sector, as well as the type of guerilla changemaking that groups like Better Block undertake, but its absence is a barrier for those who are most marginalized in our communities. People who face the largest consequences from failure (e.g., people living in poverty) understandably become more risk-averse. As Muhammad Yunus identifies in *Banker to the Poor* (Yunus and Jolis), unlike the wealthy who can offer money and other assets as

QUESTIONS FOR BUILDING A SENSE OF POWER IN COMMUNITY  
**What forms of power does the community hold, but not recognize?**

**How can this power be used to effect change for the community?**

**How can this power be demonstrated in practice, to show the community the power they hold?**

collateral when taking out loans, the poor must succeed because their very livelihoods are at stake. This results in much lower default rates on loans than their wealthy contemporaries, but also highlights a much lower tolerance for risk. This is not to say that people experiencing poverty are not innovative, but rather the focus of their innovation is more likely to be on the pressing need of immediate, short-term survival, rather than longer-term community change. Sudhir Venkatesh's sociology of urban poverty in Chicago, *Gang Leader for a Day* (Venkatesh) highlights the many 'hustles' that community members engage in – profoundly creative approaches that they take to making ends meet and getting by.

This highlights a significant barrier to diversity and inclusion within the innovation ecosystem. Innovation thrives with a high tolerance for risk. Approaches to innovation are dominated by phrases such as “failing fast” and “asking forgiveness, not permission,” and methodologies that follow suit. But what happens for those who can't afford to fail, not even once? We cannot expect people facing pressing survival challenges, like lack of food, housing, stable work, savings, and safety to participate in community innovation in the same ways that another community member might. From this lens, participating in long-term, systems-level innovation is a luxury of the upper classes, implicitly closed to others.



**Participating in long-term, systems-level innovation is a luxury of the upper classes, implicitly closed to others.**



So, what can be done to resolve this tension? Many of us recognize the importance of working with those with lived experience in community change initiatives but struggle to do so effectively. Acknowledging that risk may be a barrier to participation gives us a clear focus for our efforts: on reducing risk. How might we help minimize the risks that others face? Paying context experts for their participation is one approach, but it too is limited. It focuses solely on short-term financial risks – but what about the potential consequences of broader community change? There are no clear answers here, but for those hoping to engage a whole community in innovation this is a critical question.

There is another side to the risk-tolerance barrier. Sometimes, a crisis can loom large enough that it forces us to act, despite the risk. This ‘burning platform’ can also be a powerful motivator for change. The development of Fogo Island in response to a dying way of life (Lewis) and the innovative approaches, such as using Uber for public transit or allowing residents to pay their property taxes in bitcoin, adopted by the town of Innisfil in direct response to a need to attract new residents (Borzykowski et al.) are two examples of this type of motivator at play. Importantly, there is some controversy over whether a burning platform really drives innovation, as fear is a barrier to creative thinking (Gupta), but these examples show that creating a sense of urgency may also help overcome the barriers posed by a low capacity for risk.

#### QUESTIONS FOR INCREASING CAPACITY FOR RISK

**What risks do our most marginalized people face, and how might we assume those risks to enable their participation?**

**Is there a ‘burning platform’ in our community? How can we communicate this in a compelling and urgent way?**

**How can we provide the greatest supports to those who face the greatest risks?**

## CONDITION 4: INTERCONNECTION

Community innovation is not undertaken by a single person. As we have seen at Tamarack, “It is only when these individuals join together in a movement and also team up with champions from a diversity of sectors that promising ideas evolve to have the kind of lasting impact that changes systems.” (Cheuy). Much of our work in supporting poverty reduction across Canada begins with convening cross-community conversations, enabling a diverse group across the community to meet, make connections, and identify ways to work constructively together. Cross-pollination and collaboration are also foundational components of Collective Impact approaches to social change.

Community changemakers can play a catalyzing role in Community Innovation by fostering and supporting the connections within the community, whether through formal convening such as town hall discussions, collaborative design sessions, open houses, or through informal network-building in connecting disparate individuals across a community. When seeking to support Community Innovation we can explore the degree to which members of our community are connected to each other, as well as to the community itself.

Without connections, it is difficult for the preceding conditions to exist. Individuals hold less power than a collective or a movement. Working collaboratively in a group helps to share and distribute risk. To support Community Innovation we need to help connect disparate individuals who are motivated by change.

## CONDITION 5: UNIFYING PURPOSE

Lastly, a group of connected individuals does not become a movement or a force for wide Community Innovation without a unifying purpose. A critical component of Collective Impact initiatives is a common agenda – this helps create the ground for collaboration rather than competition, for collaborators to identify the mutually reinforcing actions they can take, and for individuals to see progress towards a goal that is meaningful to them. The examples shared above all have a unifying purpose behind them. In Ainongui it is the desire for sustainable, safe, and healthy food. In Innisfil it is the desire to be unified and different from neighbouring communities. In the Better Block project it is the desire for more vibrant and healthy neighbourhoods.

One challenge with this condition is that it is often easy to focus on differences and divisions rather than on similarities. The

### QUESTIONS FOR INCREASING INTERCONNECTION

**To what degree are members of our community connected to each other?**

**Who cares about the issue at hand, and how can we connect with them?**

**Who is disconnected from the rest of the community and why?**

**How will we create time, space, and opportunity for residents to connect with each other?**

### QUESTIONS FOR BUILDING A UNIFYING PURPOSE

**What are common themes that come up again and again within our community?**

**What makes our community a unique place to live?**

**What is a common threat or challenge that our community faces?**

**What is a common strength or asset of our community?**

political sphere is a great example of this. Many people want essentially the same things – prosperous, safe communities, where opportunities are available to all. However, politics can get bogged down in the differences in *how* we believe those aims should be achieved (e.g., by raising or lowering corporate tax rates, by supporting traditional values or integrating new ones, and so forth). This creates a win-lose mentality that block effective collaboration.

A critical role for changemakers to support Community Innovation is to bridge the conceptual divides between groups of people – to highlight the common desires over the more explicit differences. While this is a challenging role, it is one that consistently appears in many large-scale movements for change.

## THE FACES OF COMMUNITY INNOVATION

These five conditions: Power, Sense of Power, Capacity for Risk, Interconnection, and Unifying Purpose, begin to form a structure and focus for changemakers who seek to support Community Innovation. Instead of solely focusing on techniques for innovation, such as Design Thinking, Behavioural Economics, or Social Labs, using these conditions places the focus on the types of supports that are needed to create fertile ground for Community Innovation. This approach also places an emphasis on understanding the unique assets, constraints, and opportunities within our community, as opposed to attempting to replicate a model from elsewhere. To support Community Innovation, it is critical to have a deep understanding of what makes our community unique, and to develop strategies that reflect that uniqueness. Through this approach, the latent ability of communities to innovate will emerge.

These conditions also suggest the different ways that changemakers can support Community Innovation. There are many skill sets, assets, and abilities that help to support innovation. In his book *The Ten Faces of Innovation* (Kelley and Littman) IDEO Partner Tom Kelley helps to dispel the myth of the lone wolf innovator – acknowledging the many varied people and skills that are important in enabling innovation. Many of these ‘faces’ – roles and attributes needed for innovation – are also critical for Community Innovation. There are also other faces that have appeared in our work supporting community change across North America that, while perhaps less relevant in the world of corporate innovation, are critical for Community Innovation. What follows is the faces of Community Innovation, inspired by Kelley’s original framework and adapted to the community context.

## THE CONTEXT EXPERT (ADAPTED FROM KELLEY’S *ANTHROPOLOGIST*)

As Kelley puts it, the Anthropologist “brings new learning and insights into the organization by observing human behavior and developing a deep understanding of how people interact physically and emotionally with products, services, and spaces.” (Kelley and Littman) While this contribution is important, we need to go even further in Community Innovation and include people with real lived experience (context expertise) in the process of innovation. For meaningful and sustainable community change, those with direct experience bring a unique and critical perspective of the needs, opportunities, and possibilities for innovation. This is why context expertise is such a core focus of our convening work at Tamarack – changes made ‘for’ a community rather than ‘with’ and ‘by’ a community are much more likely to fail. Within communities we can support Context Experts by intentionally seeking out their involvement, creating supporting structures for their participation, leveling power differentials, and building their capacity to communicate and collaborate with other changemakers. Context experts are those who participate in driving change while relentlessly bringing their personal lived experience, and the lived experiences of others into focus.

## THE EXPERIMENTER

The experimenter “prototypes new ideas continuously, learning by a process of enlightened trial and error. The Experimenter takes calculated risks to achieve success through a state of ‘experimentation as implementation.’” (Kelley and Littman) Changemakers like Muhammad Yunus are fantastic examples of Experimenters. In Yunus’ case, the story of how the multinational microfinance organization Grameen bank was built is one of ever-larger experiments focused on both building and learning. Yunus began with a first experiment of a small personal loan to 42 people, then expanded to numerous experiments in formalizing these loans within existing banking infrastructure. (Yunus) In the context of Community Innovation, Experimenters are critical in advancing the community’s knowledge about what works and why.

## THE CROSS-POLLINATOR

The Cross-Pollinator “explores other industries and cultures, and then translates those findings and revelations to fit the unique needs of your enterprise.” (Kelley and Littman) It is very likely that you can identify the cross-pollinators in your community, and if you are reading this paper chances are that you may also be one. Cross-Pollinators are critical for Community Innovation because they bring inspiring examples and approaches for change from other places and communities that can help get the innovation process un-stuck. Cross-Pollinators are relentless at gathering new tools, making new connections, and learning what works in other places. At Tamarack, we try to play the role of Cross-Pollinator on a large scale – gathering the latest tools and thinking to inspire change.

## THE HURDLER

The Hurdler “knows the path to innovation is strewn with obstacles and develops a knack for overcoming or outsmarting those roadblocks.” (Kelley and Littman) Jason Kenney of the Better Block project is a perfect example of a Hurdler in action. Faced with the obstacles of lengthy approval processes and municipal bureaucracy, the Better Block project helps to minimize these barriers by simply making the change they hope for with the resources that are available, provoking conversations about rezoning and change at a municipal level. In Community Innovation, hurdlers are critical when the community is faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers or resistance to change. Hurdlers like Kenney help the community approach persistent problems in new ways.

## THE COLLABORATOR

The Collaborator “helps bring eclectic groups together, and often leads from the middle of the pack to create new combinations and multidisciplinary solutions.” (Kelley and Littman) Collective Impact initiatives are made possible by the contributions of many different Collaborators who seek to break down silos between groups, organizations, and residents and find new ways of working together. The Collaborator is on full display when a business leader seeks to build connections with faith groups and local organizers to reduce homelessness. Being a great collaborator in the context of Community Innovation means being adept at finding common ground, at adapting your assets to the needs of others, and in bringing others into the fold.



## THE COORDINATOR (ADAPTED FROM KELLEY'S *THE DIRECTOR*)

The Director “not only gathers together a talented cast and crew, but also helps to spark their creative talents.” (Kelley and Littman) This is certainly an important asset in Community Innovation, but unlike in the private sector, within many large-scale community change initiatives leadership is shared and distributed, rather than held by a single person. At Tamarack, we call this Collaborative Leadership - a form of leadership that focuses on gathering the right people and groups, creating processes of constructive collaboration, and surfacing the information and insights that are needed for collaborative decision-making. Groups like backbone organizations and funders often play Coordinator roles by gathering people together from across the community, helping to synthesize and articulate a unifying purpose, and finding new ways to catalyze the creativity of the community.

## THE SET DESIGNER

The Set Designer “creates a stage on which innovation team members can do their best work, transforming physical environments into powerful tools to influence behavior and attitude.” (Kelley and Littman) In the context of Community Innovation, Social Labs are a powerful example of the Set Designer role in action. Social labs and the changemakers who support them intentionally create cognitive and physical spaces to inspire, provoke, and incubate innovation. These changemakers draw upon tools and resources from the broader field of Social Innovation to give others new ways of conceptualizing change in their community. Community hackathons and collaborative design sessions are great examples of Set Designers at work.

## THE CAREGIVER

The Caregiver “builds on the metaphor of a health care professional to deliver customer care in a manner that goes beyond mere service. Good Caregivers anticipate customer needs and are ready to look after them.” (Kelley and Littman) Like the Context Expert, Caregivers play a critical role in making sure that the change the community is working towards reflects the needs of those who are affected. They relentlessly engage other community members and advocate for others through the innovation process. They also provide a useful counterpoint to quick-moving roles like the Experimenter and Hurdler by helping to manage the risks that community experiments may pose. Caregivers are also adept at examining issues of power and identifying ways to empower marginalized community members. Social workers are natural caregivers through their focus on helping and supporting others.

## THE STORYTELLER

The Storyteller “builds both internal morale and external awareness through compelling narratives that communicate a fundamental human value or reinforce a specific cultural trait.” (Kelley and Littman) In Community Innovation, storytellers are needed to help articulate a unifying purpose, to inspire other community members to act and share their skills, and to communicate in a clear and compelling way to external stakeholders such as governments and funders. Storytellers help maintain momentum for Community Innovation and inspire action both within and outside the community. Community organizers are often fantastic storytellers.

## THE CAPACITY-BUILDER (A NEW ADDITION FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION)

In Kelley's *10 Faces of Innovation* it is taken for granted that all roles have the capacity and capabilities to participate as equal members of an innovation team. However, in Community Innovation it is critical that there are people focused on elevating their fellow community members. As discussed earlier, not all community members have an equal ability to participate in community change initiatives. Therefore, the Capacity-BUILDER is necessary for Community Innovation. Capacity-BUILDERS help to make sure that all members of the community are equipped and supported to bring their unique gifts to the innovation process. Capacity-BUILDERS are often coordinators of lived-experience advisory councils, or a part of training and mentorship organizations in the community.

### CREATING FERTILE SOIL – WHY THIS MATTERS

What is important about these faces of Community Innovation is that they highlight that no one person can possibly catalyze innovation on their own, though they may be able to act as many of these faces. Instead, it takes a diverse range of skills, abilities, and contributions to drive change. For those hoping to support Community Innovation, these faces provide a framework for building a collaborative team. In your community, which roles are already involved and in what way? Are there any roles that are missing that need to be included? What unique contribution can you make to your community change initiative?

There is no blueprint for Community Innovation – no recipe that can be followed in a repeatable way. Community change is far too complex and context-specific. However, if we begin from the premise that innovation is a latent ability that we all have, we can then view our work as changemakers as one of removing roadblocks and gathering a diverse team of community members whose skills, assets, and sweat, when combined, create fertile soil for Community Innovation.

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