

# TOOL | THE MULTILEVEL PERSPECTIVE FRAMEWORK

WRITTEN BY LISA ATTYGALLE, SYLVIA CHEUY, NATASHA PEI,  
AND MARK CABAJ (HERE TO THERE CONSULTING)

## OVERVIEW

Tamarack Institute has adapted the [Multilevel Perspective Framework](#) (MLF) to offer a practical way for communities to visualize systems change strategies. Big changes, such as ending homelessness, improving graduation rates, reducing GHG emissions or creating sustainable food systems, don't happen all at once. They take time, with smaller efforts that build on each other, adapt along the way, and gradually add up to larger, lasting impact.

This tool allows you to:

- Name your goal and see the big picture
- Map current activities
- Figure out what's working, what's missing, and where to go next.

## TOOL SUMMARY

**Purpose:** Visualize and understand complex community change efforts

**Time needed:** 1–3 hours

**Who:** Collaborative partners

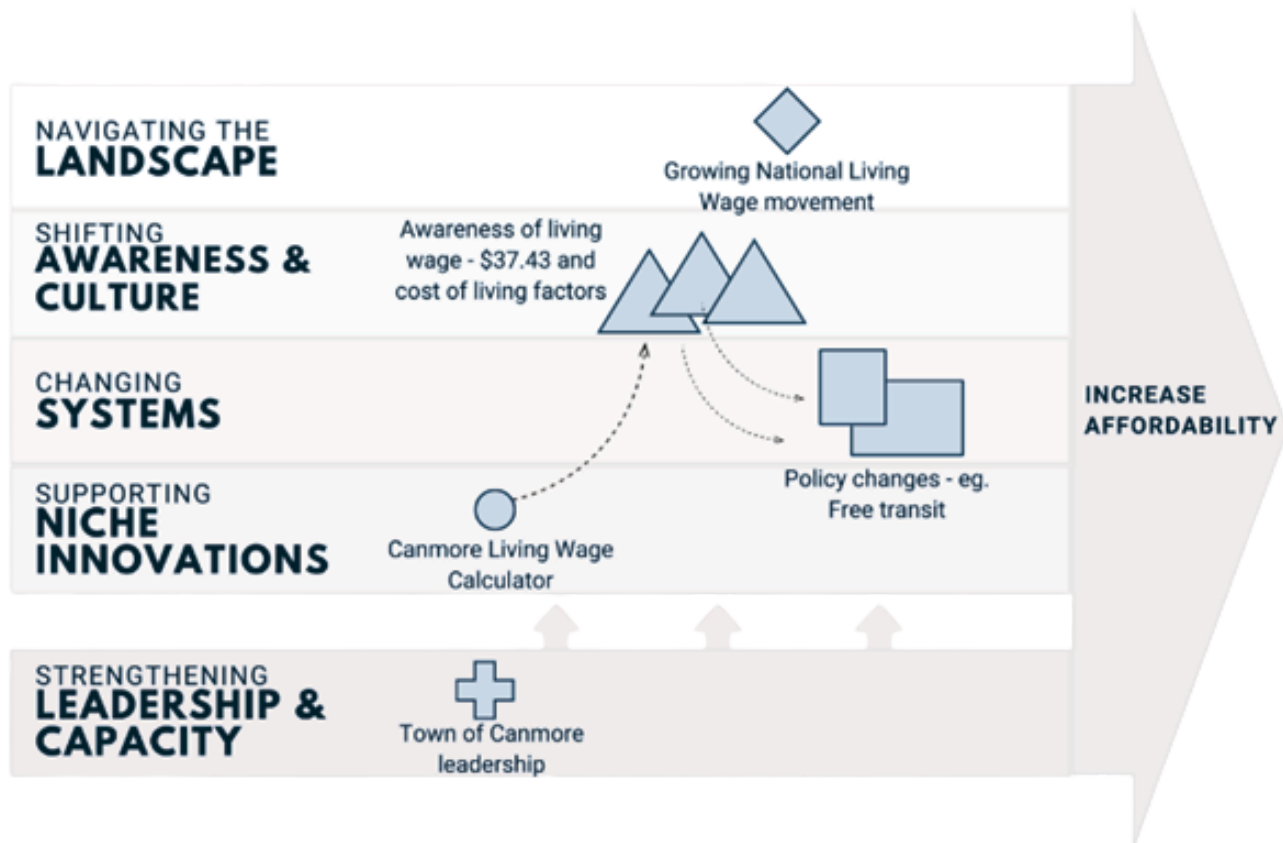


FIGURE 1: TOWN OF CANMORE MLF ON INCREASING AFFORDABILITY

## FRAMEWORK COMPONENTS: FIVE LAYERS OF CHANGE

Tamarack's adaptation of the [Geels Multi-Level Perspective Framework](#) includes the following components:

### NAMING THE IMPACT GOAL AND SCALE

Describe the Impact Goal or population-level change you seek (e.g., increasing high school graduation rates across a city or region). It's important to be as clear as possible about the scope of the challenge you are trying to address, what success might look like, and—if possible—the level of ambition for the scale and pace of change (e.g., double high school graduation rates by 2035).

## LOOKING AT FIVE LEVELS OF WORK

When trying to get to a big community impact goal or population-level change, there are often many different ways to get to the result, but it is always a complex journey. This tool helps you to map activities and relationships across five levels of action:

<b>Navigating Big Picture Trends (i.e., The Landscape)</b>	<b>What's going on in the world around you?</b> Monitor, analyze and adapt to the opportunities and barriers for action created by the larger political, economic, and social context. This might include political events or policy windows, emergencies, or growing movements.
<b>Raising Awareness and Building Will</b>	<b>Getting people to care about the issue.</b> Raise awareness and create the willingness and capability amongst the general public, influential leaders, and decision-makers to change their attitudes and behaviours. This may include campaigns, storytelling, and media.
<b>Changing Systems</b>	<b>Embed changes into existing systems.</b> Work to adjust policies, practices, resource flows, power dynamics, and/or relationships and day-to-day practices of organizations, groups and sectors to make them permanent, or change 'the way things are'.
<b>Supporting Niche Innovations</b>	<b>Test new approaches.</b> Lead or support pilot projects, programs or services; small experiments; or prototypes, and – if successful – sustain and scale those solutions.
<b>Strengthening Leadership and Capacity</b>	<b>Build skills and capacity of people and the collective community to lead the work.</b> Increase the networks, resources, skills, confidence, and sense of agency to 'drive' the change process.

Tamarack recommends using the MLF at three key points in a large-scale change initiative.

- 1 **At the beginning:** When a collaborative is creating a community plan (“common agenda”) and needs clarity on what’s already happening to decide what can be utilized, amplified, or built upon, where there are gaps, and what the new opportunities may be.
- 2 **When things feel stuck:** To figure out where momentum is lagging and why. Bring community leaders together, including those with lived/living experience, to take stock of the current work and share insights about why the work may be getting stuck and what opportunities could exist at each level.

No system can be understood or changed by focusing on a single level. Connect actions across levels to understand the dynamics of the system you seek to change. Looking across levels can fuel transformations:

- The lower levels of capacity building and innovation can be used to enable smaller, faster projects to invent, experiment and test new ideas. They drive the momentum upward.
  - Then the higher levels, which tend to be slower moving, can be leveraged to stabilize and cement new approaches as a new paradigm.
- 3 **To show your impact:** When evaluating and communicating impact (often done through annual or bi-annual reports), it can be challenging to account for the contributions your collective efforts have made and how that relates to impacts or changes at other levels. Use the MLF to better understand the contribution of you and your partners’ many actions, and the relationship between them, and use it to create a shared narrative of how you’ve had impact.



# HOW TO USE THE MULTI-LEVEL FRAMEWORK

## STEP 1: BUILD YOUR BASE MLF

Download the [MLF template](#). This can be printed out in large format for in-person mapping or opened in PPT or a virtual whiteboard for virtual mapping. OR draw out the levels on chart paper – something with lots of space.

At the top of the page, name the main challenge you are focusing on. If known, indicate the impact goal on the right side of the MLF.

Define your focus. It's helpful to name a specific scope you're mapping – for example, within a geographic area, on a specific industry or sector, or within one organization.

## STEP 2: MAP ACTIVITIES WITH COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS

Bring partners together – ideally representatives from different parts of the ecosystem you're mapping. Each person brings their unique perspective and together you are looking to understand the system and the dynamics at play.

Individually or collectively, write down on sticky notes the initiatives (related to your impact area) that are already happening to move towards the outcome you seek. (15-45 mins)

These prompts may be helpful:

- What are all the things currently happening?
- What new programs, services, or pilots have been tried recently?
- What relevant media, reports, and stories are being shared widely?
- What structures and resources (e.g., funding or other coalitions, tables, working groups, and strategies) are in place to support the work?
- Have any of these initiatives become permanent?

Draw lines between activities to link them chronologically. For example, the media attention from the latest data being shared resulted in increased funding for specific initiatives. Or findings from a pilot project were shared in a way that is changing the public discourse on the issue. (5-15 mins)

### **STEP 3: MAKE SENSE OF IT TOGETHER AND LOOK FOR STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES**

Once current initiatives are mapped, begin sensemaking together about what you see (30-60 mins). Use the following prompts depending on your goals:

#### **Developing a shared understanding of current activities:**

- Where is most of our work happening?
- What has enabled work at that level?

#### **Using the MLF to look forward for strategic opportunities:**

- What opportunities jump out when you see what has been done so far and what might be missing?
- Focus on one activity/initiative and ask – what could be done at different levels to expand the impact of this work?
- Thinking about the partners in this room, what can we (the community) build on and contribute to?
- How might we better coordinate our resources, tasks, and strategies across scales?
- What else needs to happen to achieve these outcomes?
- What will not happen unless we do it together? (Something that a single organization can't do alone)

## Getting unstuck, or finding leverage points

After mapping existing efforts on the MLF, observe any patterns. Three archetypical flows we tend to see, are:

- Niche innovations trying to break through into the “norm” of awareness and systems change.
- Direct pushes on systems change (e.g., policy proposals), that create ripple effects in increased public awareness and more ‘space’ for innovation.
- Driving hard on awareness-raising outcomes create the conditions for policy, systems, and niche innovation change.

Consider whether any of these flows would help to push towards the outcomes you seek. Read the [full article](#) for communities stories that demonstrate each of these common flows.

## STEP 4: PRIORITIZE FUTURE STRATEGIC ACTIONS

As a group, prioritize which actions to focus on to achieve the impact you desire. Consider using dot-voting to help make a collective decision. Ask:

- Which initiatives would have the greatest impact?
- Which initiatives are achievable right away with the resources we have?
- Which of these initiatives could be led by a single organization?
- Which of these initiatives require collaboration?
- Use a different colour dot sticker, different coloured marker, or different symbol for each question.

## STEP 5: TELL YOUR COLLABORATIVE STORY

Use the following format to explain your collective work in shifting systems:

- The issue we faced was: [describe your community's context and challenge]
- Therefore, we came together to: [share your vision, scope, and outcomes]
- So far, we have made progress towards these outcomes through: [describe key initiatives in chronological order]
- Based on this, our next strategic opportunities are to: [describe priority strategic actions]
- We believe that if we can [describe the impact of the future actions] it will [connect the dots to achieving macro-outcomes].

Once you have the narrative written out, play with the order to see what is most compelling. For example:

- Describe the most significant outcome
- This is significant because [describe your community's context and challenge]
- [Name the time interval (eg. last year)], collaborative partners came together to [describe the key initiatives/activities]
- This is all part of a plan to [name vision, scope, and population-level outcomes]
- To make this a reality, [describe next steps] [and call-to-action if relevant]

See the [Building your Collaboration Impact Story Tool](#) if you are looking to create a more comprehensive impact narrative.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

We hope this tool is useful to collaborative groups. Please adapt these steps to suit your context and goals.

Please share your Multi-Level Framework with us at Tamarack. We would love to hear from you! Share your stories with us by tagging us on LinkedIn or Facebook or send us an email at [tamarack@tamarackcommunity.ca](mailto:tamarack@tamarackcommunity.ca).

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