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PEOPLE, PLACES & PROGRAMS

The Untapped Value of Community Hubs



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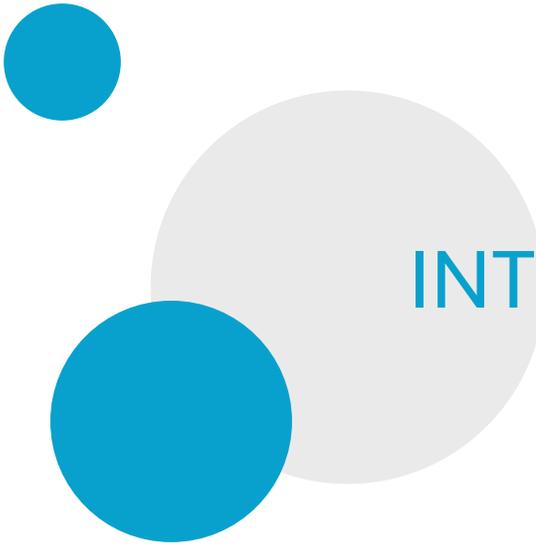
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INTRODUCTION

Spaces that support and connect communities play an essential role in providing public benefits and economic opportunities, and instilling a sense of belonging for residents. When properly resourced and adequately community-driven, community hubs are invaluable to flourishing communities. Different from typical “essential services” such as food banks or shelters, a community hub still provides another type of essential service, supporting community power in removing barriers to meeting basic needs.

However, unlike essential services, the impact of a community hub may not always be linear or quantifiable. This proves challenging when many hubs rely on grant and philanthropic funding that requires linear impact reporting. As a result, many of these hubs remain underfunded, thus limiting both their potential and their sustainability.

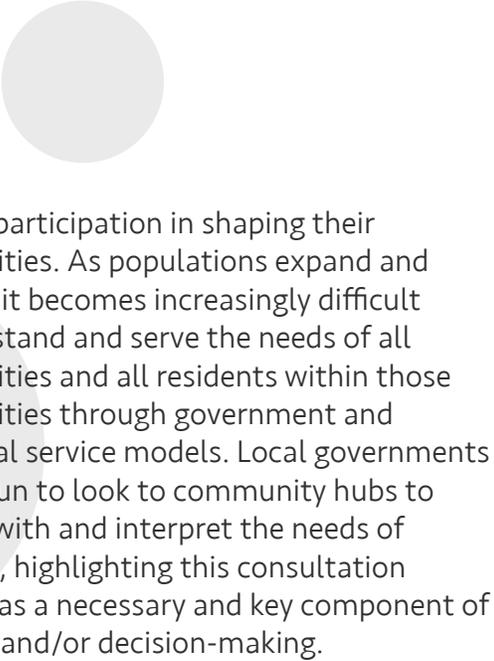
The Civic Commons Catalyst, a program by Future Cities Canada, seeks to address these barriers in search of bold paradigm shifts and systemic change. Through twelve case studies from coast to coast to coast, this research demonstrates the great potential that is unlocked when community hubs are properly supported by funds, relationships, and physical assets. These

twelve examples showcase the innovative toolkits, partnerships, and business models that help community hubs thrive. The research also suggests scaling opportunities intended to support the municipalities, businesses, developers and other stakeholders well-positioned to bolster them. These case studies illustrate the value of community hubs and demonstrate what is uniquely achievable in their work.

Community Hubs

Hubs are combinations of people, place, and programs. Being a place-based hub means that location and local context inform the hub’s strategy and operations, from the kinds of programming offered to the people and organizations engaged. Underinvestment and resource instability are defined as key reasons community hubs struggle to maintain their roles as consistently vibrant public places. Yet community hubs continue to co-create value with residents in ways that only they are positioned to do. Alongside this work, they strive to transform what we expect from them and how we engage with them.

Many community hubs are well-positioned to represent resident needs and to increase



resident participation in shaping their communities. As populations expand and diversify, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand and serve the needs of all communities and all residents within those communities through government and traditional service models. Local governments have begun to look to community hubs to connect with and interpret the needs of residents, highlighting this consultation function as a necessary and key component of planning and/or decision-making.

Community hubs are increasingly taking sophisticated change agent approaches.

Initiating, stewarding and scaling solutions that are connected to research and evidence. The following collection of case studies documents the broad range of innovations, solutions, and programming offered by community hubs to the communities they serve. More so, they confirm that community hubs are indeed necessary services that demand greater consultation, funding and collaboration with municipalities, businesses and one another in order to continue to support the development and maintenance of thriving communities.

How to read this...

This document clusters community hub solutions by the core role they play within their communities. Though each of these community hubs has a wide variety of programming, we focus on and showcase ones that speaks to the uniqueness of the organization. Each cluster of programs is accompanied by considerations of what [scaling out](#), [scaling up](#), and [scaling deep](#) might look like for the solution at hand.



CONNECTING AND SUPPORTING COMMUNITY

BC Artscape Sun Wah

Located on unceded lands belonging to the x^wməθk^wəyəθm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and sə́lilwə́taʔl/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations in Vancouver, British Columbia

In their words...

“BC Artscape Sun Wah is a community cultural hub in Vancouver’s Chinatown that spans the Lower Ground, 3rd and 4th floors of the Sun Wah Centre at 268 Keefer Street. By providing affordable and secure rental space to cultural organizations and artists that share a commitment to being engaged and responsible to the area’s communities, we strive to nurture a community cultural hub that supports our tenants’ work while serving the neighbourhood.”

At first glance, this hub is very similar to many others that bring together arts and cultural organizations, with [401 Richmond](#) in Toronto perhaps the best-known example. What sets Sun Wah apart, however, is not what it is, but how it came to be. Most hubs

strive to engage and listen to their members or tenants on how to better serve their needs, through dedicated staff, budget, and actions. But when establishing or expanding to a new location, these same hubs don’t always seek to understand their immediate surroundings or respect and respond to unique geographic and demographic contexts, ensuring that their presence and activities benefit the people who currently live and work there.

In the case of BC Artscape, they took what they saw as a necessary, intentional and extensive community engagement approach in creating its Sun Wah hub. Its specific location in Vancouver’s Chinatown has directly informed its vision, operations, and actions. These actions range from small but meaningful acts such as building a bilingual website to more systematic inclusion of the local neighbourhood in their [governance](#), procurement policies, and [tenant selection criteria](#).

“[What We’ve Heard and How We’ve Responded](#)” publicly documents BC Artscape’s commitment to this process, and is worth sharing with similar community, cultural, and social innovation hubs who are perhaps more focused on their immediate members or tenants and less so on the broader community within which they are situated.

In their words...

“The heritage values and cultural landscape of Chinatown is reflected in our tenancing, programming and spaces. Language accessibility is supported by Chinese-speaking staff and translation.

We acknowledge the influx of capital we are bringing to the neighborhood and will share space, information, and resources with [people with] low-income and support the businesses in the community that are essential to [people with] low-income.

The diverse community will be involved in the governance and operations of the space through a community stewardship model that is rooted in the historical and changing cultural context of the Chinatown and DTES neighborhoods.”

- BC Artscape Sun Wah
website: [Who We Are](#)

Potential for Scale

Scaling out involves sharing BC Artscape’s practice and lessons learned with other place-based hubs who are originating or expanding in neighbourhoods with existing history, culture, and priority populations.

Scaling up could see this practice being required by funders, grantmakers, or impact investors as a condition for supporting a new or expanded place-based hub, as a way to mitigate negative consequences from what would (and should) otherwise be a net benefit to the community.

Scaling deep may help change the narrative when it comes to real and perceived fears of gentrification and disruptive change brought on by outsiders, even well-meaning community organizations. There is an

opportunity and responsibility to earn the neighbourhood’s trust and address the assumptions, typically borne from experience, that change will inevitably be accompanied by displacement of residents and businesses due to rising rents, and a resulting loss of the area’s history, character, and identity.

Also Check Out

When Impact Hub San Francisco moved back to the Mission neighbourhood as part of its expansion, it recognized the effects it would have on local residents and strove to establish a close and mutually beneficial relationship. With its neighbours, it co-created a [Community Benefits Agreement](#) that guides its actions and spells out how the surrounding community can expect to engage with and be supported by Impact Hub’s activities. Ideally, a CBA would also outline a recourse and appeals process to mediate and address any concerns or issues moving forward.

Entremise Laboratoire Transitoire

Located on Kanien’keha:ka (Mohawk) territory in Montréal, Québec

One of the biggest considerations—and, often hurdles—for a place-based hub is the building which it occupies. Traditionally, a hub’s choices are limited: smaller operations typically sign a commercial lease for a suitable space with a supportive landlord, while larger entities endeavour to raise enough money to purchase (or at least finance) their own land and building. These capital campaigns once relied solely on corporate and individual donations. With the growth of the social finance ecosystem, however, and the [Centre for Social Innovation’s \(CSI\) pioneering use of community bonds](#) to purchase their CSI Annex site, financing opportunities for hubs now include individual and institutional impact investors who are willing to make loans at

In their words...

« Entremise facilite le déploiement d'usages transitoires dans les sites vacants de Montréal. Les actions d'Entremise contribuent à rendre accessibles des espaces vacants délaissés en mitigeant les risques pour les propriétaires et les communautés environnantes, tout en accompagnant des groupes locaux variés dans la co-création d'usages transitoires mixtes à prix modique.

« Entremise permet à une plus grande variété d'acteurs d'agir collectivement sur les processus d'urbanisation par l'entretien, l'animation et l'éventuelle réhabilitation de sites vacants qui constituent des actifs essentiels pour les communautés montréalaises. »

"Entremise facilitates the deployment of interim use models in vacant Montréal sites. Entremise's actions help make vacant spaces accessible by mitigating risks to homeowners and surrounding communities, while supporting diverse local groups in the co-creation of low-cost, mixed interim uses.

Entremise allows a greater variety of actors to act collectively on urbanization processes through the maintenance, animation and eventual rehabilitation of vacant sites that are essential assets for Montreal communities."

- Entremise website: [Mission](#)

slightly below-market rates.

Municipal governments, unfortunately, have so far been hesitant to fund hubs through either capital grants or loans. But what if there was another way to acquire space that leveraged a community's existing and

underutilized assets? In Québec, Entremise has tested a new model with the Young Project, a pilot project with the City of Montréal and other community partners to turn vacant, city-owned properties in low-income neighbourhoods into "transitory laboratories." Transitional by design, these hubs are meant to perform the roles expected of other community or social innovation hubs, but with additional mandates: providing affordable space to those who need it; protecting and preserving neighbourhood heritage through adaptive reuse; and mitigating neglect and gentrification. As Entremise explores future endeavours beyond the Young Project, they are focusing on community needs in an attempt to mitigate any possible contributions to gentrification.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out could see this model being adopted by other municipalities, as the need for affordable community space and equitable urban regeneration is common in many Canadian cities.

In their words...

« Entremise est un organisme sans but lucratif voué à faciliter les usages temporaires et transitoires dans les bâtiments vacants. Les usages facilités par Entremise permettent d'optimiser les espaces vacants et de mitiger les risques pour leur propriétaire et les communautés environnantes, tout en procurant des espaces à prix modique pour les occupants.»

"Entremise is a non-profit organization dedicated to facilitating interim use in vacant buildings. The uses facilitated by Entremise optimize vacant spaces and mitigate risks for their owners and surrounding communities, while providing low-cost spaces for occupants."

Scaling up may result in new policies that require municipalities to explore partnerships with local community before selling public assets. Or, at the very least, comparing the costs of maintaining a vacant site versus the social and economic benefits of turning it over to community use.

Scaling deep could see a shift in the mindset of community and neighbourhood organizations, from one of scarcity—where acquiring affordable and accessible real estate is seen as an insurmountable obstacle—to one where opportunity and partnerships are more readily apparent. A tried-and-true toolkit from another jurisdiction provides guidance on logistical, legal, and other challenges.

Also Check Out

There are ways for municipalities to support the creation or expansion of place-based hubs other than providing capital funding or real estate assets. The City of Toronto played an instrumental role in the Centre for Social Innovation's [Community Bond program](#) by providing a loan guarantee, enabling the CSI to secure a larger mortgage from their bank at a lower interest rate and giving investors more confidence in the project.

New Dawn Enterprises

Located on Mi'kmaq territory in Sydney, Nova Scotia

Many place-based hubs bring together a variety of service providers (and occasionally government agencies) under one roof, acting as a one-stop resource for clients. Ideally, this is not only in the name of sharing costs and space, but rather to also facilitate stronger connections between different staffs, a better understanding of each organization's assets and gaps, and a closer integration of services and operations.

New Dawn has gone one step further, in the

In their words...

"New Dawn has been part of the Cape Breton landscape for forty-two years. Its mission—to engage the community to create a culture of self-reliance—is as relevant today as it was when the organization was founded back in 1976.

New Dawn Enterprises Limited is the oldest Community Development Corporation in Canada and is a Founding Member of the Canadian CED (Community Economic Development) Network."

spirit of self-reliance with which the hub was created, to start, own, and operate a number of revenue-generating businesses that directly provide much-needed services to the Cape Breton community. They started doing this well before the term "social enterprise" entered the lexicon; their home care division has been running for over 30 years. They also provide supportive housing and services for people with disabilities and mental illness, rent out commercial and residential space to small businesses and people in need of affordable housing, and operate a community kitchen and catering service that directly feeds their Meals on Wheels service. The profits from these social enterprises are reinvested back into the community, funding other aspects of New Dawn's operations that resemble traditional government-funded social services, such as immigration settlement and the transformation of a former convent and high school into a social innovation and arts-and-culture hub.

While there are countless innovation and entrepreneurship hubs that offer incubation, co-working space, networking, advisory, and other support resources to social enterprises, relatively few have started businesses that employ residents and serve the needs of their local community. The hubs that do so

In their words...

“New Dawn’s work today falls into two broad categories. New Dawn responds to current needs, developing community-based solutions to local challenges and opportunities: housing, at-home senior care and immigration settlement.”

- New Dawn: [The Story of 2017](#)

“This is the foundation upon which New Dawn is built. It attempts to demonstrate what can be accomplished when local people come together and utilize the best planning, business and organizational principles in responding to community needs. New Dawn is therefore both a business and a social development organization. From the beginning, New Dawn’s initiatives reflected that dual approach by providing much needed services in a business-like way. Early examples of this dual approach are: the establishment of dental clinics in Cape Breton, the Cape Breton School of Crafts, half-way houses and a variety of housing projects.”

- New Dawn website: [About](#)

typically generate revenue by renting out office or event space, providing consulting services, or charging membership fees. Others operate social enterprises for the primary purpose of providing skills training and gainful employment for the people they serve. There exists ample opportunity for more hubs to directly own and operate place-based, revenue-generating operations that can both employ and serve their local communities.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out would involve sharing New Dawn’s experiences and lessons learned with other hubs. Their expertise, along with that of like-minded hubs and service providers such as Southwestern Ontario’s [Goodwill Industries](#) and Ottawa’s [Causeway Work Centre](#), represents valuable knowledge for non-profit social enterprises but also for specific industries: food-and-beverage service; catering; thrift stores; landscaping services; and property management.

Scaling deep would mean reinforcing the current paradigm shift, in which increasing numbers of traditional nonprofit

organizations and charities are exploring if and how social enterprises may lessen their dependence on government grants and private philanthropy, while at the same time directly offering needed services to their clients and beneficiaries. This shift also has the power to change the mindset of staff from one of scarcity to one of self-sufficiency, while emphasizing and leveraging existing knowledge and assets.

Also Check Out

The worlds of social enterprise and community economic development are often separated by differences in history, language, and culture. In fact, they can be quite close in spirit and intention. While social enterprise is still a somewhat ambiguously defined term, one way to characterize it is as a way for nonprofits and charities to leverage and monetize assets, resources, or expertise to generate revenue that funds their operations. Community economic development, meanwhile, often explicitly focuses on generating revenue and wealth for people (as opposed to organizations), especially those in vulnerable populations or marginalized neighbourhoods.

Regardless of one's affiliation or preferred terminology, there is plenty to learn from both with respect to how enterprises or initiatives like, say, the [Binnens Project](#) can be created to serve a community need or generate a social benefit while providing employment and income to those who need it most.

Takeaways in Connecting and Supporting Community

Rather than superficial involvement in a community, real and meaningful inclusion means inviting local participation in the hub's governance, shared vision and purpose, day-to-day activities, staffing and resourcing,

and communications. A Community Benefits Agreement is one way to formalize and publicize a place-based hub's shared commitments.

The assets and resources required by a place-based hub occasionally do not need to be built or created from scratch. Aside from possibly reducing time and cost, adapting and reusing existing assets create other associated social and economic development advantages for communities who could benefit from them. Even the temporary occupation of a space that's privately or publicly owned has the potential to generate benefits for both parties, especially if such a "pop-up hub" demonstrates that the value of the building or land has increased by the hub's presence.



STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Synapcity

Located on **Algonquin territory** in Ottawa,
Ontario

In their words...

“We bring people together to share ideas, understand new perspectives and collaborate on initiatives to improve our city, without political agenda or bias.

We provide the knowledge and tools to help people understand our city and gain confidence to make positive change. We give people a sense of belonging and empowerment to co-create so that we can preserve and strengthen what makes Ottawa great.”

Government agencies and civil society organizations involved in civic engagement often focus on specific aspects of the political and democratic process: encouraging and educating youth or new citizens on the importance of voting, for example, or mobilizing direct action in response to an unpopular government policy. While incredibly

important for social and policy change, the emphasis on those actions can lead residents to think that the only way to be civically engaged is voting every four years, or reacting to something you don't like.

Synapcity approaches civic engagement differently. They begin with a narrative which asserts that a city is its people, and that many of those people are passionate about their community and want to make it better. In this context, with caring citizens coming together to create positive change, Synapcity offers education and training to help people understand how their municipal government works, learn more about existing issues, and to give them the confidence and courage to know that they can make a difference. Their flagship Civics Boot Camp program convened participants in Synapcity's home at [l'Atelier d'innovation sociale Mauril-Bélanger](#) at Université Saint-Paul.

In future iterations of the Civics Boot Camp, Synapcity is attempting a new delivery model: a 12-week university course into which their 6-week Civics Boot Camp is inserted enabling new connections among Université Saint-Paul students and residents seeking civic education.

Synapcity has realized that their expertise in civic literacy and engagement is valuable

even to government, who often struggle to engage and consult residents on all manner of plans, policies, and developments. While well-meaning public servants may be experts in their field (transportation engineering, say, or urban planning), they are often given civic engagement responsibilities beyond their respective skill-sets, leading occasionally to under-represented demographics or heated confrontations. Recognizing this, Synapcity has leveraged their third-party, issue-agnostic status, as well as their credibility and networks in the community (particularly with newcomers and low-income neighbourhoods), and hosted engagement sessions brokering relationships between residents and city agencies, departments and councillors.

Potential for Scale

Scaling up would bring this model of civic literacy and engagement to cities and communities across Canada. Outside of high schools and specialized, occasional contexts—voting in elections, say—there are very few opportunities for citizens to learn about the inner workings of their municipal government and their community’s most pressing civic issues and how they might play a role in them.

Scaling deep could transform how the public understands their role and capacity in the collective problem-solving, decision-making, and governance of their city, and, in turn, how government rethinks civic engagement through a collaborative rather than consultative lens. This cultural shift could reduce feelings of cynicism and pessimism from citizens who don’t believe they have a voice in local matters, as well as increase, for city staff and politicians, the quality and usefulness of citizen feedback and contributions.

Also Check Out

Elements of Synapcity’s approach of “participatory citymaking” can be found in various programs and initiatives, some of

In their words...

“When we embrace and celebrate our diversity, we have the power to connect, collaborate and improve our city for everyone. True engagement exists when all perspectives are shared and heard, and common goals are realized.

We know that solving our city’s problems and overcoming our city’s challenges brings our city closer to reaching its full potential.

When our city moves closer to reaching its full potential, our city’s people move closer to reaching their own. The two are inseparable. That’s because our city—any city—is its people.”

- Synapcity website: [For Organizations](#) and [How We Work](#)

which are led by government and others by civil society. Examples of “participatory budgeting,” where a certain amount of a government’s budget is allocated for ideas proposed and voted on by residents, have been implemented by the previous [Ontario government](#), as well as large cities like [Vancouver](#), [Toronto](#), and [Montreal](#), and smaller municipalities like [Victoria](#), [Halifax](#), and [London](#).

BetaCity YEG

Located on Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakoda, Tsuu T’ina, Dene territory in Edmonton, Alberta

Many community-led grassroots organizations exist to advocate to and hold local government to account. Some actively partner with government to deliver programs and events, in which case a grant-funding

In their words...

“BetaCityYEG is the city and region’s citizen-led digital engagement group with a mandate to connect citizens with opportunities to learn about, provide feedback for, and participate in projects that improve our community with technology.

BetaCityYEG is not officially affiliated with the City of Edmonton, but employees of the city, as well as the province and nonprofits, present issues their organizations are grappling with to the group for discussion.”

relationship is typical. But it is quite rare to find a group of residents who regularly come together for the express purpose of contributing ideas and sweat equity towards solving their city’s challenges. By that same token, outside of traditional public consultations or town hall sessions, there are few opportunities for city staff to interact with the residents they serve. Those staffers’ experience with public feedback is typically just negative reaction to plans and programs designed internally and behind closed doors, further perpetuating a reluctance to seek and invite outside collaboration.

BetaCity YEG was one of the earliest proponents of the civic tech movement in Canada, adopting the “brigade” model started by Code for America. Uniquely interpreting the very concept of a place-based hub, civic tech communities like BetaCity have sprouted [all across Canada](#), and all now organize regular meetups. BetaCity YEG meets once a month at [Startup Edmonton’s community hub](#). It creates a safe, non-hierarchical and welcoming environment for tech-savvy (techies), tech-curious (tinkerers) and non-

techie residents to come together, along with city staff and other community stakeholders, to share ideas, challenges, and opportunities, learn about sector-specific assets and gaps, and ultimately co-create prototypes and projects for public good. BetaCity YEG’s latest collaboration: after data showed a large gap between the number of people who qualify for social/poverty reduction programs and those who are actually enrolled in them, the hub created a user-friendly digital guide to help Edmontonians find and apply for benefits for which they are eligible.

As with many civic initiatives, there is a higher order of value beyond the tangible projects and services that are co-created. One tremendous benefit of public servants collaborating with the civic tech community, even (or perhaps especially) informally and unofficially, is that it emphasizes the message that the best ideas sometimes come from outside city hall, and that digital products and services are better when designed with (not just for) the people they serve.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out is already well underway, with civic tech groups actively convening from Vancouver to Fredericton. But not all groups have had the same level of success—some have flourished and grown while others have struggled and stagnated. Code for Canada, therefore, is supporting this scaling in part by co-creating an open-source [toolkit for community organizers](#) as well as a [playbook for municipal employees](#).

Scaling up is reflected in governments who are incorporating civic tech’s ethos, principles, and collaborative spirit. They are bringing this into official departments, teams, or units mandated to reach across and outside institutional silos to co-design and co-create simpler, better, and more equitable digital services for residents. Recent examples

In their words...

“The You Can Benefit navigator is a rarity of digital infrastructure; it’s an open source tool created in collaboration between civic hackers, government and the non-profit sector. For those involved, it’s also a lesson in how quickly and easily civic solutions can be built when government acts as an enabler of civic tech.

‘It’s important for the mayor to notice that civic tech is a thing, and can support it, but not help too much,’ said Jared Rewarts, a software engineer with the City of Edmonton, and a member of Beta City YEG.

‘You don’t need to turn this into a capital funded project; the meat and potatoes of this is believing in your citizens.’”

- [Code for Canada blog post](#)

include the [Canadian Digital Service](#), [Ontario Digital Service](#), and Civic Innovation offices in [Toronto](#) and [Calgary](#).

Scaling deep relates to the culture shift described above, and can also be seen in the variety of ways governments at all levels encourage and enable citizens to contribute ideas and solutions with public benefit. Making [open data more freely available](#), hosting [hackathons](#) and challenges, and [actively collaborating](#) with [civic hackers](#), are just some of the possibilities.

Also Check Out

Some municipal challenges are beyond the scope, capacity, and resources of a volunteer-based civic tech community, and are more likely (and appropriately) tackled by a commercial entity. However, many municipalities’ procurement processes are stuck in a pre-digital era, with lengthy

requirements and Requests for Proposals running hundreds of printed pages, sometimes making bidding inaccessible to small tech startups. In collaboration with Barrie, London, and the MaRS Discovery District, the City of Guelph is leading a project on [procurement innovation](#) to prototype and test new ways of challenging their local innovation and tech community to come up with solutions to civic issues.

Young London

Located on Haudenosaunee, Wyandot, and Anishinaabe territory in London, Ontario

In their words...

“We are an organization by youth, for youth that strives to ensure young people have decision-making power in public processes. We believe young people’s priorities, perspectives and experiences matter just as much as anyone else’s.”

Getting youth engaged in the political process has long been a goal of school boards, election agencies, civil society organizations, and issue-based advocacy campaigns. These efforts tend to focus on activities correlated to the number of youth they reach, ranging from teaching the basics of our democratic institutions to more hands-on programs that encourage students to create change through a variety of projects or campaigns. For proponents of experiential education (or “learning by doing”), there is no better way to understand our democratic processes than to actively participate in it.

Young London, formerly the London Youth Advisory Council, is certainly in this camp. While many experiential programs select participants through an application process, Young London mirrors its local government by holding actual elections, where youth aged

15 to 25 run campaigns in their local ward in order to win a seat on Council. Once elected, they are supported throughout their one-year term by Young London staff who provide mentorship and guidance for the projects and campaigns on the issues they campaigned on. Operating out of [Innovation Works](#) as a member of the Pillar Nonprofit Network, and with its 15 councillors accountable to their ward constituents, Young London creates a strong place-based context for their work.

This expertise in enabling and empowering youth leaders has animated contexts adjacent to politics and local government: Young London also facilitates the placement of young people on the boards of non-profit organizations relevant to their interests. While the position is a non-voting one, youth board members are provided with board governance training, gain first-hand insight into how decisions are made at the highest levels of an organization, and are given the opportunity to shape strategic direction. Similarly, Young London also partners with London Community Foundation, placing youth on review panels when assessing youth-focused grant applications. Young London continues to actively expand opportunities for youth, lowering barriers to civic engagement and supporting community action.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out is a relatively simple way to get more youth involved in the political process and engaged as civic changemakers. London is not the only city with a hands-on civic engagement program for youth, but because many of these programs are located in schools (such as [Youth Ottawa's DILA](#)), participants are limited to their own age group and neighbourhood. There is a tremendous opportunity for other cities to create Youth Councils that bring together young people from different neighbourhoods, share perspectives and experiences, and take collaborative action on the issues that matter

In their words...

"The [Young London] council has 15 members, representing each of the 14 wards of London, with a 15th representing Western students specifically. During their one year term, youth councillors have weekly conversations on a variety of issues, from carding, to education, to transit, and more.

Youth councillors do the majority of their work between meetings: attending community events, holding focus groups, interviewing local community leaders, and facilitating community development projects.

Councillors get to explore different projects and issues depending on their interests and the interests of their colleagues on council. Alumni have done everything from lead a community project to renovate the White Oaks basketball court, to start a support group for youth of colour to talk about experiences of racism, to advocate for a discounted high school bus pass."

- Young London website: [The Council](#)

to them.

Scaling up could see these Youth Councils be officially incorporated into all municipal governments, where their input is sought by city councils just as it is from other citizen advisory committees. Mentorship opportunities between the youth and city councillors could also easily be built in to the program.

Scaling deep has the potential to counter the narrative that youth are politically disengaged and apathetic. Politicians, residents and the

media will see that, given the challenge of running their own election campaigns and advocating for issues they care about, young people (including those who are not yet of legal voting age) will rise to the occasion.

Also Check Out

The Samara Centre for Democracy published a [report](#) on Youth Councils showing them to be one way of engaging young people in civic participation and the political process, and outlining what should be considered when exploring the creation of one in your community. Apathy is Boring, another non-partisan organization with a vision of actively engaged youth, created this [guide for municipalities](#) to better understand youth and how best to engage with them.

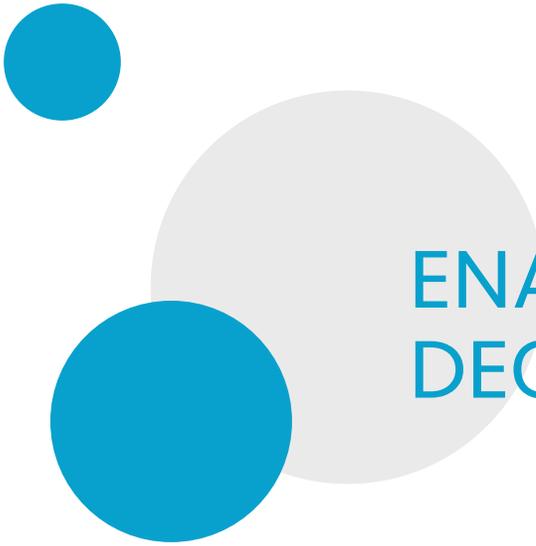
Takeaways in Strengthening Relationships with Municipal Government

Whether you're engaging high school students, newcomers to Canada, or a low income neighbourhood, the best way to increase civic literacy is by doing so with peers and neighbours. In-person programs,

workshops, courses, and events with an intentional focus on reducing anxiety, pressure, and other hidden exclusionary barriers to civic participation are likely more valuable, memorable, and effective.

Similarly, rather than only framing civic engagement in a negative and reactionary lens (e.g. "Stop the ____" or "Save our ____") or appealing to residents' sense of civic duty (e.g. "so many are fighting for the right to vote...don't waste yours!"), it is helpful to positively complement and support efforts to strengthen the relationship between government and its citizens. By appealing to residents' passion for their community, their desire to contribute and collaborate, and a sense of belonging, a greater range of benefits for all is able to emerge.

Just as removing exclusionary barriers and bridging silos helps develop a collaborative environment, there is great value in "learning by doing," whether that's holding mock elections to increase voter turnout or using participatory budgeting to demonstrate the value of property taxes. Action learning in a group setting, despite taking additional effort and reaching a smaller audience, leads to greater impact.



ENABLING COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

Office de consultation publique de Montréal

**Located on Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk)
territory in Montréal, Québec**

Municipalities and government agencies seek and rely on public input on all manner of civic initiatives, from minor by-law variances to large-scale infrastructure projects. Often, a motion to city council is based on data and information that was collected, analyzed, and prepared by city staff, who would have organized public consultation opportunities for residents to provide feedback in person and/or through email, phone, or online. Sometimes, councillors and elected officials will choose to hold their own public consultation or town hall sessions to hear from residents directly. There are good intentions behind these engagement mechanisms, but because they are typically organized by someone with an expertise in a different field, the format, process, and general tone of the proceedings can leave residents frustrated and disappointed. As well, such engagement opportunities are rarely designed and delivered in a way that is accessible to demographic groups who may not be aware of or understand civic matters. This can result in the sense that

such consultations are merely perfunctory or nominal efforts—checking off a box—rather than authentic attempts at public engagement.

In Montréal, there exists a third option. The independent, neutral Office de consultation publique de Montréal (OCPM) was created in 2002 through legislation to connect representative and participatory democracy. With a mandate written into the city's charter, and under the leadership of independent commissioners appointed by a two-thirds majority of city council, the OCPM acts as a centre of excellence and keeper of best practices on matters related to civic participation and resident-informed decision-making. It has always been dedicated to operating transparently and providing unbiased and objective recommendations to council and in the 17 years of its existence has adapted to societal shifts, advances in technology, and different communication mediums.

The OCPM's intentional focus on inclusion, accessibility, creative approaches to consensus-building, and the removal of barriers to equitable participation is a quality sorely needed in municipal governments (and arguably in other sectors as well). The legitimacy of decisions made by elected

In their words...

“L’Office de consultation publique de Montréal est un organisme indépendant qui réalise les mandats de consultation publique qui lui sont confiés par le conseil municipal ou le comité exécutif de la Ville de Montréal. Ces mandats portent surtout sur des projets qui relèvent des compétences municipales en urbanisme et en aménagement du territoire, mais ils peuvent aussi s’étendre à tout projet soumis par le comité exécutif ou le conseil municipal. L’Office a aussi le mandat de proposer des règles afin d’assurer la mise en place de mécanismes de consultation crédibles, transparents et efficaces.”

“The Office de consultation publique de Montréal is an independent organization whose mission is to carry out public consultation mandates entrusted to it by the Ville de Montréal city council or executive committee. The mandates primarily involve urban and land-use planning projects under municipal jurisdiction, but may include any project submitted by the executive committee or city council. The Office also has the mandate to propose rules to structure public consultation in Montréal to ensure implementation of credible, transparent and effective consultation mechanisms.”

officials is based on the understanding that they are faithfully representing their constituents’ interests, including an expectation that residents’ input will actually have some effect on the outcome of those decisions. While it is clearly not possible to make everybody happy, it is possible to make participants feel welcome, valued, and heard in a process that communicates the rationale for political decisions back to the community. Having a neutral third party oversee and lead

that process is beneficial on all counts and to all parties.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out could see other cities adopt this model and create their own version of OCPM, either at the level of a local or regional municipality. The OCPM’s model, their expertise and lessons learned, are also valuable for non-governmental entities, including civil society and community organizations who have a mandate to include and engage residents (see Synapcity above), as well as small firms and freelance facilitators who often perform these functions on behalf of private sector clients such as real estate developers.

Scaling up would involve a deeper and longer role in the city’s decision-making process, something that has been identified by OCPM itself. Currently, OCPM is given a mandate by Council to conduct public consultations on specific projects, but their responsibility ends when they report their findings, analysis and recommendations to council. If elected officials make a decision that differs from the recommendations, or if the project is delayed or changed in a material way, there is no feedback mechanism for residents who participated in the process. This could result in erosion of the trust and confidence that OCPM has painstakingly built up over the last 17 years.

Scaling deep may introduce a shift in resident expectations regarding their rights and responsibilities when it comes to major developments and changes in their community. Certain privileged, influential groups are currently well-positioned to advocate for their interests and either hold their elected representatives to account or lobby for change. There are a great many groups, however, including newcomers, students and young people, and marginalized or disengaged demographics, who experience

a barriers to access in matters that affect their built environment or quality of life. A shift in both groups towards understanding their rights as residents, and facilitating access would help improve relations and reduce friction between government and residents, as well as residents of different neighbourhoods.

Also Check Out

Governments of different levels, as well as related agencies, boards, and commissions have recognized the importance of having a neutral third party conduct independent and unbiased public consultations on their behalf. MASS LBP, a private firm based in Toronto, has amassed [expertise](#) in the particular mechanism variously known as a citizen reference panel, citizen jury, or citizen

In their words...

“Depuis 15 ans, le mandat de l’OPCM a toujours été de réunir les conditions favorables pour que tous les citoyens et citoyennes puissent contribuer aux décisions qui les concernent. Mettre l’intelligence collective au service du développement de la ville par la participation sans exclusion est un volet important de l’engagement de l’OPCM.”

- [L’intelligence collective s’exprime chez nous depuis 15 ans](#)

“For 15 years, the mandate of the OPCM has always been to establish favourable conditions to allow all citizens to contribute to decisions that concern them. Putting collective intelligence at the service of city development through participation without exclusion is an important facet of the OPCM’s commitment.”

- [Collective intelligence has found expression in our halls for 15 years](#)

assembly. No matter the name, the concept is the same: A panel of eligible, volunteer citizens are chosen at random so as to produce a statistically representative sample of the population at large. They are given a deep dive into the matter at hand from experts, which can range from regional transportation plans to national pharmacare. Supported by trained facilitators, the panel’s discussions and deliberations are informed by facts and evidence and results in a more nuanced, discerning, and useful recommendations to government.

Vivo for Healthier Generations

Located on Tsuu t’ina Nation, Siksika Nation (Blackfoot), and Stoney (Nakoda) territory in Calgary, Alberta

At first glance, Vivo (formerly Cardel Place) in northwest Calgary is just another community recreation centre, albeit one that is modern, large (195,000 square feet), and built to LEED Gold standards. It offers all the programs and services you would expect—soccer, swimming, skating—as well as a pre-school and summer camps. But Vivo is quite a bit more than your usual municipal rec centre; it’s an independent, charitable non-profit that also houses the Northern Hills Community Association, a local founding partner, and the Country Hills branch of the Calgary Public Library. Representatives of its surrounding community associations sit on its Board of Directors. Not content to merely operate a sports and fitness facility, Vivo has a broader mandate to help improve public health, community development, and overall quality of life in their neighbourhood and city.

Vivo also has a dedicated research and innovation team. Adopting tools and methodologies from social innovation labs, it tests, measures, and scales prototypes and small-scale upstream interventions in collaboration with various public and

private sector partners. Vivo helps ensure their decision-making is shaped by resident input, by focusing on co-design with families, children, and youth through the lens of the social determinants of health, and in a place-based context. Vivo has helped to measure the impact of the [public library's new Early Childhood Centres](#), guided the design of new playgrounds for the [parks department](#), and supported a [homebuilder](#) in engaging its customers on what a livable community means to them. Their ultimate goal is to engage residents in co-designing and co-creating a community that promotes a sense of belonging and makes it easy to make healthy decisions.

Just as most municipalities have organized their departments inside City Hall, the different elements that shape the social determinants of health are likewise separated in disconnected silos. Urban planning and zoning have an enormous impact on the kinds of built environments that children will grow up in—their ability to walk to school, say, or their proximity to neighbourhood parks, but an entirely different department proposes and plans safe cycling infrastructure and transit routes. Early childhood education and social services are in other areas, and public health is often an arms-length unit entirely separate from the city. Even if these departments engage residents to inform their work, regardless of how well they do that job, there is still some formality and distance between government staffers and the people they serve. A community rec centre, however, has an entirely different “vibe”: friendlier, more accessible, and there’s a greater likelihood of running into neighbours or staff who know your name. Such trust in and familiarity with a place-based neighbourhood hub is a powerful asset that can be leveraged to great effect.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out could see more private, non-profit, or public community and recreation

In their words...

“At Vivo we’re on a mission to raise healthier generations in Calgary and beyond. We want Canadians of all ages to achieve their optimal health wherever they choose to live, work and play. We’re extending our reach beyond the walls to the broader community locally, nationally and internationally by charting a course to make bold shifts - shifts in policy, values, attitudes and behaviours about healthy living.

With the support of new programs and exciting future spaces created with and for the community, their success stories will be proof of our mission in action. They’ll serve as powerful motivation for others, in Calgary and across the nation, to make their own changes for life. Together we can shift and reshape our communities into vibrant places where Raising Healthier Generations is a natural way of living for all.”

centres follow Vivo’s example, embedding upstream public health initiatives into their programming and operations, adding layers of civic engagement, testing and prototyping solutions, and measuring and evaluating impact to better inform decisions that affect residents’ health and well-being. There is a lot of potential for recreational centres to expand their mandates beyond recreation. One place to start would be with city-owned rec centres, swimming pools, and hockey arenas that are staples of Canadian communities big and small. The staff who work in those facilities are not usually thought of as “bureaucrats” and don’t carry the same baggage associated with that term. But they are city employees and public servants, and there is no reason they can’t work with their colleagues in other departments to achieve a common goal of

In their words...

“Vivo is helping organizations across Calgary pioneer civic-driven solutions that raise healthier, more connected generations with our unique take on community development, research and innovation. We are equipped with the staff, volunteers, technique, perspective, and enthusiasm needed to create personalized research and innovation projects and solutions that support our partners work to foster healthier, happier and more connected communities.

Sparking meaningful change in the lives of all Canadians is no small feat. It requires an inquisitive nature, an entrepreneurial attitude, the ability to convene and collaborate, and the capacity to deliver. Along the way we have developed four Innovation Superpowers: Measurement & Evaluation, Knowledge Translation, Co-Creation, and Multi-Sector Collaboration.

We’re doing research in a whole new way by putting people at the centre. The Research and Innovation team co-creates, implements, measures and scales local solutions to everyday health challenges people face in their communities. And we’re not stopping there. With the help of our neighbours, community leaders, developers, and city-wide partners, Vivo has established a living lab for healthier generations that extends far beyond our walls. The result? A movement that ignites a curiosity for learning, courage to explore, and strong community connections built through play.”

- Vivo’s website: [Work With Us](#) and [Research & Innovation](#)

healthy, active, and complete communities.
Scaling deep can change our collective

understanding of what community rec centre can be, and what a healthy and active community truly means. No longer just places to exercise or take one’s kids to swimming lessons, such centres can be gathering places designed for connection and social interaction, for growing and accessing affordable healthy food, and for generating ideas and co-creating solutions with neighbours to challenges that affect their community. Similarly, the very idea of healthy and active living can expand beyond playgrounds and sports to incorporate walkability, access to transit and fresh food, opportunities for intergenerational connection to reduce loneliness and isolation, and local community economic development. These upstream interventions prevent costly and complex health issues down the line.

Also Check Out

For almost 20 years, the East Scarborough Storefront has been an integral place-based hub serving the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park neighbourhood in Toronto. But it was the strength of their relationships with cross-sector stakeholders, from local residents and social service organizations to academic researchers and policymakers, that led them to realize their approach to community development could benefit others outside of East Scarborough. They’ve since spun out a [separate entity](#) focused on what they have coined the “[Connected Community Approach](#)” in order to share their knowledge and increase its adoption by other communities without interfering or conflicting with the Storefront’s mission. Part of the Connected Community Approach outlines how “community backbone organizations” such as the Storefront (or other place-based hubs) can help ensure that the lived experience of residents, particularly those from marginalized populations or low-income neighbourhoods, are connected to and are able to influence larger stakeholders who are active at the research, policy, and systems level.

Winnipeg Boldness Project

Located on the territory of Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene peoples and homeland of the Métis Nation in Winnipeg, Manitoba

Winnipeg's Point Douglas neighbourhood, known as the North End by locals, is one of many communities across Canada facing social and economic disadvantages. One particular metric of early childhood development stands out in this community, which is that only about half of its children reach kindergarten age at a point where they are ready to learn. In other cities, the area may be designated a "priority neighbourhood" by local government, and provided with extra resources to improve its socio-economic outcomes. This often means the creation of new social services and programs supported by (but reliant on) new funding, led by staff from government, non-profits, or schools who have the community's best interests at heart, yet still operating within a framework in which outside experts are routinely deployed.

The Winnipeg Boldness Project takes a different approach. It chose to start with a strengths-based perspective, which is the belief that the necessary knowledge and wisdom for health and well-being already exists within a neighbourhood's families, parents, and community leaders. It made a strong commitment to involve local residents through participatory engagement, including them in the project's governance through advisory bodies called [Guide Groups](#), where residents are represented alongside Indigenous Elders, non-profit leaders, and academic researchers. Similarly, local residents have been given a meaningful degree of ownership and control over the project's research, typically the role of academics. In a way, the project made its work more "difficult" but it prioritized community-driven solutions and embraced the complexity of multi-

In their words...

"The Winnipeg Boldness Project is using social innovation tools to research and develop ideas, in order to improve outcomes for young children in the Point Douglas community area in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Put simply, social innovation is the act of developing new ideas to solve complex social issues, such as poverty, homelessness, and racism. In the case of The Winnipeg Boldness Project, we're using tools and processes from the practice of social innovation to develop community-driven solutions to help children in Point Douglas succeed and thrive."

stakeholder governance. This complexity is best illustrated in their [Accountability Framework](#), co-developed over two years with the community.

The other notable departure from the status quo is the intentional structure of the Winnipeg Boldness Project, alluded to even in the organization's name. It is a project with a time limit, providing urgency to the process. It gives common purpose to partners' different organizational mandates, and highlights the importance of [documenting and disseminating their work](#) in order to shape public policy and inform evidence-based decision-making. Because of its timeline, the project's overarching goal is to scale, provoking policy change resulting in a shift in oppressive paradigms.

Potential for Scale

Scaling out represents equal parts opportunity and caution. The "what" as well as the "how" of the Winnipeg Boldness Project is ripe for replication across other communities, something identified as a worthy and ideal outcome from the project's staff and

In their words...

“In the case of The Winnipeg Boldness Project, people regularly ask us how we make strategic decisions, as well as how we choose which prototypes to work on. The truth is there is no one decision maker in our project, but rather an accountability framework that is comprised of several layers of strategic thinkers that help to keep us on track, make recommendations, and ensure that our work is being completed in a way that works for the community.

This accountability framework includes groups that are made of people from all walks of life, which ensures diversity in opinions and allows issues to be examined through a variety of lenses. We believe that the breadth of our partnerships is one of the best things about the project, as it brings people together to work on social issues that affect all of us in different ways.

In a society where systems and frameworks are generally designed with a top down approach, where officials and delegates commonly have the final say in policy and decision-making, our parents feel that it is positive to see a framework where the community's voice and ideas remain the most important factors in creating change for the community. They would like to see this model applied across all systems, in order to create a city that allows families and communities to make decisions for themselves, rather than having “experts” make decisions for them.”

- Winnipeg Boldness Project's
Accountability Framework

participants. However, special attention should be paid to how the Project tailored

its vision, strategy, and activities to the hyper-local, place-based context of their neighbourhood. What worked for Point Douglas may not exactly work in another community context, but the way in which they co-designed the process to find out what works, and the Accountability Framework by which they make collective decisions, can and should be scaled widely.

Scaling deep could influence how government policymakers, as well as social service and civil society leaders, pursue community development initiatives in an effort to address place-based social inequalities and improve socio-economic outcomes for low-income neighbourhoods. Rather than defaulting to the simple, straightforward, and known approach of directing funding towards nonprofits, there could be a “new normal” where time-limited, strengths-based, community-driven collaborations are the standard expectation from funders, elected officials, and residents themselves.

Also Check Out

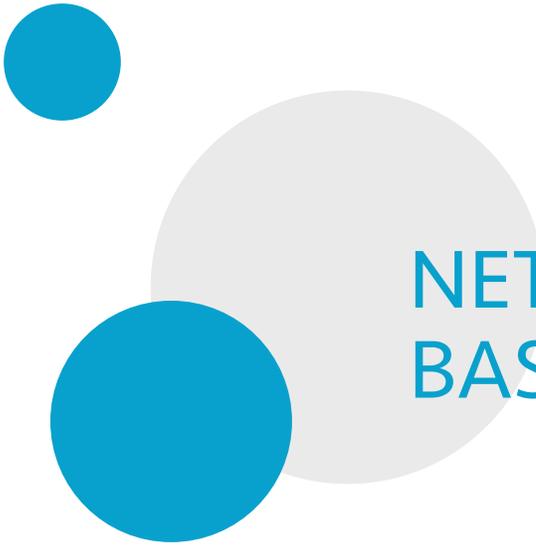
The Winnipeg Boldness Project's strengths-based approach is also commonly known as asset-based community development (ABCD). One of the biggest champions of ABCD in Canada is the [Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement](#), who hosts a [Community of Practice](#), learning events and conferences, as well as online resources such as [A Basic Guide to ABCD Community Organizing](#) and [case studies](#) for municipalities.

Takeaways in Enabling Collective Decision-Making

When it comes to public consultations, feelings of tension, cynicism, and mistrust can be commonplace. After all, the matters at hand are often “close to home” in a figurative and literal sense. Residents' sense of belonging and place are intrinsically tied to

their environments, whether these be a street, neighbourhood, park, commuting route, or beloved landmark in the city. In this context, who conducts the consultation process is just as important as how it unfolds. While that entity may not necessarily be a legislated body like the OCPM, their success underscores the value of having an organization that is perceived by all stakeholders to be neutral (without a vested interest in an outcome) and independent (free from the influence of lobbyists and politicians alike). That credibility and legitimacy undoubtedly takes years of consistently acting with integrity, transparency, and respect for residents. As the complexity and severity of social

challenges increases, the response needed from place-based hubs expands to include both acute interventions to alleviate immediate suffering and longer-term systems-level solutions. For instance, food banks cannot hope to solve hunger and food insecurity without also addressing the systemic issues that contribute to their clients' precarious situations. Every organization may not be able to create a research and innovation team like Vivo has, but there are always ample opportunities to leverage close relationships with the people an organization serves, ensuring their lived experiences help shape public policy and inform systems change.



NETWORKS OF PLACE-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

In their words...

“The Social R&D Community is a network of practitioners dedicated to growing the craft of research and development, on the frontline, to generate new knowledge and innovations that transform lives.”

Connectivity Network: Social R&D

“Connectivity networks” are those whose primary mission is to exchange information and resources. These networks are often little more than a simple website or email list. Many rely on tele- or videoconference calls to stay in touch; if geography permits, regular meetings are possible, but otherwise the network may gather only once a year for a traditional conference. The Social R&D initiative (first catalyzed and led by SiG, and now hosted within the McConnell Foundation) understood the importance of in-person gatherings to bring people and organizations around a common question and purpose. This is an important first step towards establishing the trust and understanding required for the reciprocal sharing of time, energy, knowledge,

In their words...

“On September 11, 2018, a roundtable with practitioners, service providers and funders was held to discuss the next phase of Social R&D ecosystem development in Canada. This roundtable was structured to uncover options for dramatically increasing the capacity for R&D across the sector. A number of ideas were discussed, however, based on the last few years of ecosystem development, the following have significant potential:

- 1) Establish a coalition of apex organizations committed to this next phase of Social R&D ecosystem development.
- 2) Retool existing innovation supports so that they’re inclusive of R&D; weaving these supports together into a Social R&D capacity building catalogue.
- 3) Establish micro-R&D ecosystems around targeted social missions.”

- Social R&D Champions Roundtable:
Building the Next Phase

In their words...

“Green Economy Canada (formerly Sustainability CoLab) works with community organizations to launch, grow, and promote Green Economy Hubs across Canada. Green Economy Hubs support local networks of businesses to set and achieve sustainability targets – bringing together, empowering, and celebrating businesses as they achieve their goals.

We build capacity in community organizations to launch and grow Green Economy Hubs by providing training and resources, tailored support, amplified impact, and a supportive community of practice.

We leverage the collective impact of Green Economy Hubs to mobilize network-wide funding, engage in policy discussions, and share stories of success to demonstrate that a more sustainable economy is possible.”

and resources—the basic building blocks of collaboration.

Over the course of three years, the team behind Social R&D convened and hosted four in-person, multi-day, facilitated gatherings of 25 to 50 practitioners and leaders from different sectors across Canada. More intimate than a typical conference, and with more intentionality and time for connections and relationship-building than a typical strategy retreat, the gatherings were instrumental in bringing the necessary stakeholders together to create the beginnings of a network—especially when supplemented with rigorous documentation of its [learnings and outcomes](#).

In their words...

“Within our own network, something has also changed: our belief that a network of voluntary leaders can shift the trajectory toward a more sustainable economy is now more fact than theory. Emission reduction targets have been set by businesses in every one of the Green Economy Hubs across the province: 56 GHG, 6 waste, and 4 water targets. Collectively, Green Economy Leaders have committed to reducing 102,874 tonnes of GHGs and have already reduced 59,105 tonnes – the equivalent of taking 12,656 cars off the road for one year.

As we continue to connect, support, and celebrate the growth of Green Economy Hubs, we are realizing the power of the larger, collective movement in our network. It now includes multiple hotels, health service providers, educational institutions, and faith-based organizations, to name a few clusters, who can both take pride in their local community leadership and draw on the ideas from others leading within their sector across the province. With over 250 Green Economy Leaders committed to and already acting on sustainability, it’s clear – a green economy is not only possible, it’s underway.”

- 2017/18 Annual Report

Alignment Network: Green Economy Canada

“Alignment networks” seek to create and share ideas, goals, and strategies to coordinate their activities and actions. In a culturally diverse and geographically vast

country like Canada, alignment networks have the difficult task of working towards national objectives while allowing for a certain level of local customization. Green Economy Canada recognized that it could not achieve its vision of “an economy where environmental sustainability, human well-being, and business success are synonymous” without tangible (and often voluntary) actions by local businesses when it comes to investing in energy efficiency and reducing waste, water usage, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The crux of Green Economy Canada’s theory of change is that businesses need to set environmental goals and targets, just like they do for financial and business objectives. Rather than imposing a set of one-size-fits-all targets for the huge variety of businesses across the country, they have determined that businesses will respond best to place-based contexts, working both in collaboration and competition with their peers. Their strategy, then, rests on the creation of a network of local Green Economy hubs—supported by the network with [training, mentorship, and other resources](#)—which in turn will work with local businesses to set (and work towards) sustainability targets that makes sense in their context. The more hubs in their network, the stronger their collective voice, impact, and momentum to influence policy change and demonstrate results.

Advocacy Network: Ontario Nonprofit Network

“Advocacy networks” work together and take collective action towards specific outputs that support better, more sustainable, and healthier communities. For networks like the ONN that were forged by a group of like-minded entities advocating for (or against) a specific policy objective, it may be difficult to sustain the collaborative momentum once a political climate has changed. Few

In their words...

“We are the independent network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen Ontario’s nonprofit sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.

We work to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to governments, funders, and other stakeholders.

The network began in 2007 as a mobilization of sector leaders concerned about proposed changes to the Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act (Bill 65). Incorporated as a nonprofit in 2014, ONN was developed as an incubated project of the award-winning Centre for Social Innovation.”

successfully make the transition from a mobilization campaign to an ongoing organization that continues to serve its members’ evolving needs.

ONN has continued to work with the network to identify common issues and opportunities for nonprofits. For example, ONN has leveraged its connections to a large provincial network of nonprofits and charities to tap into an issue area and identify a gap that is not only common to nonprofit organizations, but to employees who work for those organizations. It assembled [task forces of sector leaders](#) who, over the course of three years, researched the need for a sector-wide pension plan independent of other entities, reviewed options that were available, and developed recommendations for a solution that would benefit its diverse membership

(as well as nonprofits who were not ONN members). The current stage of its actions as an advocacy network is to help its members adopt this pension plan for their employees as part of their efforts to build a decent work movement across the sector. This is part of an

In their words...

“As part of our efforts to champion a decent work movement in the nonprofit sector, we have been working since 2015 to develop a sector-wide pension plan for Ontario nonprofits. This work has included setting up task forces of sector leaders who examined options, explored possibilities for new options, and ultimately tried to find a pension plan good enough to recommend to the sector.

This plan helps to strengthen the sector. By offering this pension, the sector will attract and retain more high-calibre professional staff with the skills and knowledge to deliver huge public benefit to the people of Ontario for years to come.

This pension plan is an example of what we can accomplish when we work together. This plan adds to the list of services ONN has brought to the sector, extending our commitment to providing programs and services created by the sector, for the sector, through the only sector-wide network in Ontario.”

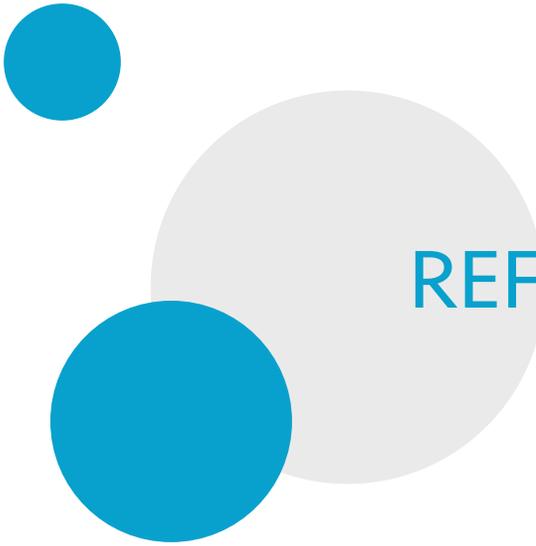
- [ONN-Recommended Pension Plan - An Overview](#)

overall focus on Ontario’s nonprofit sector to increase the profile and impact of nonprofits in communities across the province

Takeaways from Networks of Place-Based Organizations

One of the first steps towards a national network of place-based hubs may be to simply connect them across different sectors and geographies to build trust and exchange knowledge. Building off the success of the [100in1Day model](#), Evergreen, through [Future Cities Canada](#), could act as the backbone of an alignment network and focus its efforts, resources, and expertise to either supporting the sustainability and growth of existing hubs, and/or catalyze their creation in communities who currently lack one. While tangible resources such as funding and program evaluation support are important and valuable benefits, other less obvious supports should not be discounted. The legitimacy of affiliation with Future Cities Canada and its founding partners could make a material difference to a potential grantmaker, donor, or impact investor.

If sufficient trust has been built by Future Cities Canada in connecting and aligning members of a network of place-based hubs, there may be opportunities to collaborate on larger-scale program and projects—not unlike the creation of Future Cities Canada itself—through the complementary strengths and assets of its four founding partners. Members of a production network could find common ground around a challenge or need that affects most or all hubs in Future Cities Canada’s network, and endeavour to co-create a solution in the same way that the Ontario Nonprofit Network’s members came together to research and develop a pension plan tailored to their sector.



REFLECTIONS

The concept of social enterprise has become more mainstream in recent years, with an associated ecosystem consisting of post-secondary specializations, conferences, incubators, and the like. But for many in the non-profit and charitable sector, where the vast majority of hubs operate, there remains a persistent aversion to adopting business principles to generate revenue and profit. Those who want to support and scale social enterprise practices would do well to question this aversion and embrace the full spectrum of social purpose businesses, from coops and for-profit B Corps to charities who operate social enterprises and community economic development initiatives.

While the power of storytelling is well understood in the private sector and increasingly in the social purpose and non-

profit world, there is less recognition of just how much power decreases when a community loses control over telling its own story. For an already marginalized neighbourhood, constant negative media coverage and an identity shaped by stereotypes results in a stigma that is hard to escape. This narrative can be unintentionally perpetuated by well-meaning social service or public agencies trying to help, but the story changes when starting with an asset- or strengths-based approach to community development. Rather than a helpless population needing to be served and saved by external entities, place-based hubs are uniquely positioned to amplify the community's message that all the ideas, solutions, and collaborative spirit necessary for solving complex societal challenges already exist within that community.



NEXT STEPS: THE CIVIC COMMONS CATALYST

Recognizing the need for initiatives that support and accelerate the work of community hubs, Future Cities Canada launched The Civic Commons Catalyst in 2019. The program has three core purposes:

- Collaborate to support and scale placemaking initiatives and programs that increase resident influence in their cities.
- Prototype and test participatory models that increase resident control over city building.
- Increase vocabulary, tools and connection amongst and within members of the civic commons.

Alongside this research, the Civic Commons Catalyst includes a webinar series showcasing the true value proposition of community hubs and a social innovation lab focused on community hub resourcing. The public webinar series is a first step in connecting

community hubs across sectors and geographies, so they may find collaborative solutions. The Civic Commons Lab supports six nationwide partners collaborating, researching and prototyping solutions to address the underinvestment and instability that challenge community hubs as they attempt to make important contributions to flourishing communities. The final result of the Lab will be released on the Future Cities Canada website in June 2020.

[LISTEN](#) to our previous webinars and [REGISTER](#) for upcoming events.

[KEEP IN TOUCH](#) to follow the progress and final output of the Civic Commons Catalyst expected in June 2020.

*Be sure to “Opt In” at the bottom of the form to avoid having to fill it out again.

About Future Cities Canada

Future Cities Canada is a collaborative platform that harnesses the momentum for change already in progress in cities. It brings together people, ideas, platforms and innovations from across sectors to address two of the most pressing issues of our time: inequality and climate change and their consequential challenges facing cities. Drawing on the expertise of its founding organizations and together with a diverse and growing network of partners, Future Cities Canada's unique collaborative infrastructure will accelerate innovation to build regenerative, inclusive cities of the future. For Future Cities Canada to achieve its vision of equitable, regenerative and prosperous cities for all, it focuses on specific areas in which there is a desire to see positive change around the liveability of cities and the quality of life of their residents.

About Evergreen

Evergreen is a non-profit organization dedicated to making cities flourish. Cities that are low carbon, inclusive to all and sustainable at their core. Cities to live, move, work, play, learn and thrive in. Since 1991, we've been facilitating change. Working with other city builders to convene, collaborate and catalyze ideas into action. Our teams connect with many stakeholders to lead with a mindset focused on solutions. We collaborate to develop innovative ideas and catalyze change by testing solutions, developing prototypes and scaling projects. Through our award-winning suite of programs, we have actively engaged Canadians in creating and sustaining healthy urban environments in our schools, our public spaces, in housing and transit systems, and communities themselves.