

Introducing the Connected Community Approach: Social Innovation With and In Community

By: Anne Gloger¹

¹Strategy Director, Catalysts' Circle

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Abstract

The Connected Community Approach (CCA), a framework created ‘by the community for the community’ in Scarborough, Ontario, seeks to shift the paradigm from communities being vulnerable recipients of systems-level interventions to being active partners in addressing the issues of our time. CCA draws on social innovation, deep equity, and community development theory and practice to build cross-sector coalitions in the context of geographic communities. The Connected Community Approach introduces three innovations to cross-sector, place-based collaborations: 1) the concept of a community-based facilitator (aka a *community backbone organization*), 2) processes to support organizations, institutions, and businesses to center community in their own strategies and action planning and 3) 10 keys that can be used both at the local and at the systems level, to help unlock the potential of a connected community. The focus of CCA is on strengthening a community’s social fabric, which is seen as the foundation of healthier and more equitable communities. The Connected Community Approach has a 25-year history of nurturing social fabric to create impact across domains and issue areas.

Introduction

Social fabric is *the web of interactions and connections that binds us all together as a society*.ⁱ In this article, we introduce an approach that focuses on strong social fabric at the local level as the foundation for the kinds of transformational change we so desperately need to move towards a healthier and more equitable society.

Originating in one marginalized community in Scarborough, Ontario, the Connected Community Approach (CCA) is both a theoretical and practical framework that looks at geographic communities as the focal point for change. Rather than seeing communities that have been marginalized as a collection of “vulnerable” individuals waiting for professional intervention, CCA seeks to shift the paradigm so that communities and the people who live and work there are key agents of change in charting new paths forward.ⁱⁱ

The purpose of CCA is to foster the conditions that make up the kinds of enabling environments essential for cross-sector, community-centered strategies to take root and grow. As a framework, CCA puts “people and process before product,”ⁱⁱⁱ focusing their efforts on cultivating:

“...an inhospitable system will trump a good program, every time all the time...”

Patrick McCarthy,
Anne E Casey Foundation 2014

- a sense of belonging and agency
- meaningful opportunities to learn across cultures and difference
- seamless access to the kinds of services and support people need to thrive
- entry points to meaningful civic participation
- trust among neighbors and between residents, organizations, and institutions
- respect for and stewardship of the land

CCA is fundamentally an innovative lens on community development practice: a practice that looks at geographic communities as the focal point for change. CCA sees communities as ecosystems made up of people, organizations, businesses, institutions, and government bodies within or connected to a shared physical environment. CCA strategies, therefore, go beyond a resident-to-resident approach to community building to focus on the health of the ecosystem, the whole ecosystem, which means that for CCA practitioners, much of their energy also goes into helping local organizations and institutions:

“What does “place based” mean? It means where we are at home”

Frances Westley

- Actively remove barriers to opportunity
- Engage in concerted, collective, and intentional processes to develop anti-racist strategies, plans, and actions
- Put mechanisms in place for residents and professionals to design solutions together
- Prioritize building the capacities of their staff to collaborate effectively across mandates and scales
- Ensure strategies, programs, research, and funding intended to benefit the community are grounded in the local context.^{iv}

CCA integrates multiple ways of knowing and being in community with research and practices from various fields, including community development, resilience, deep equity, place-making, and social innovation, among others,^v and introduces three innovations.

3 innovations introduced in the Connected Community Approach:

A local facilitator or network weaver
10 keys to unlocking the potential of a connected community
Processes to support organizations, institutions and businesses to centre community in their strategies and action planning

The first is a community-based facilitator (sometimes called a local network weaver, community backbone organization, or integrator). This role can be seen as similar in function to a backbone organization (collective impact)^{vi} or quarterback (purpose-built communities); its focus, though, is facilitating processes that nurture the *conditions* that make it possible for people across sectors and scales to

effectively work together towards a more equitable and healthy community. The people in this role prioritize the connective tissue in a community and between a community and the systems that affect it^{vii}.

The Role of a Community Backbone Organization

Grounding local process in equitable and people-centred practices

Convening meaningful dialogue

Co-creating strategies

Facilitating communication and knowledge exchange

Connecting systems level strategies in ways that fuel community plans and actions

Building capacity of people, organizations and institutions to work better together



The local facilitator or *community* backbone role was originally created by the community for the community and is exemplified in the East Scarborough Storefront, which has, over the last two decades, facilitated collaborations grounded in place with a variety of social innovators, architects, researchers, philanthropists, urban planners, anchor institutions, social sector organizations and, of course, grassroots groups. The impact of these place-based, cross-sector coalitions can be seen across disciplines and domains, including place-making (community-led design), workforce development, climate adaptation and mitigation, food systems, and youth development, among others.^{viii}

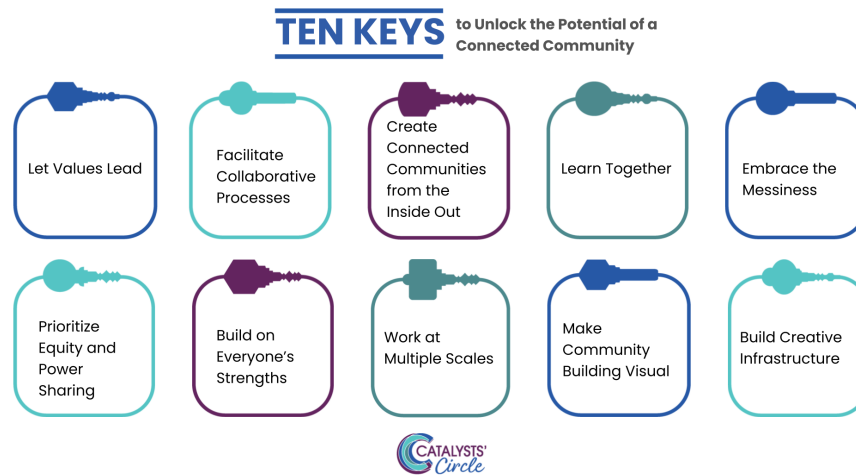
The second innovation that CCA introduces is a framework for the kinds of actions that people, organizations, and institutions can take to “unlock the potential of their own connected communities.” We conceptualize this methodology as 10 keys^{ix}. Each key has

“Neighbourhoods’ complex environments affect outcomes across a range of domains through multiple sets of interactions and in ways that are not well understood or documented”

Auspos and Cabaj - Complexity and Community Change

philosophical underpinnings, theoretical support, and a series of tools and mechanisms that can help people navigate the complexities of community work and connect what’s happening on the ground to what is happening at scale.

The CCA 10 keys offer a way of organizing and thinking about strategies for ‘how’ to engage with and in the community: they take learnings from a variety of sources and make them actionable in a community development context.



One critical advantage of the Connected Community Approach is that it creates the foundation upon which other social innovation frameworks can thrive. For example, Collective Impact. Both the Connected Community Approach and Collective Impact are innovations designed to grapple with the complexity of systems change, and both recognize that it takes cross-discipline/multiple-scale approaches to affect the kinds of change that we so desperately need. The major differences, however, lie in the overall purpose and focus of each approach.^x

	Collective Impact	Connected Community Approach
Purpose	Solve complex issues	Create conditions for local solutions to take root and grow
Focus	Well defined problem	A community ecosystem that grows stronger over time
Emphasis	Convening towards a common agenda	Supporting multiple agendas that evolve, intersect and change over time
Outcome	Moving the needle on a specific population level issue	Strong social fabric within a geographic context

With its purpose and focus on a strong social fabric, the Connected Community Approach has extraordinary potential to be a *precondition* to Collective Impact and other social innovation strategies, making it both/and rather than an either/or paradigm. This both/and approach heeds the call for innovations to be "...aligned and calibrated in the context of community - the civic culture - in which it is taking place"^{xi} and addresses increasing concern that those conditions are often lacking.^{xii}

While the impacts of both problems and solutions are most often felt in the places where people live and work, CCA is not about downloading responsibility for systems change onto communities.

“Most communities I work with across the country (both large and small) sorely lack conditions that make up a healthy enabling environment, the very same conditions essential to help move a community through different stages of community life.”

Richard Harwood

Instead, the framework is designed to be used in two ways: at the local and systems level. CCA, when applied at the systems level, enables organizations, institutions, businesses, and governments to center geographic communities as the focal point for their transformative change strategies, thereby strengthening local social fabric even as they realize their own mandates and goals.

Community-Centred Strategies Add Value By



CCA sees the place as the focal point for meaningful systemic change. For more than two decades, the East Scarborough Storefront has used CCA to nurture local social fabric, helping the local ecosystem to grow stronger over time; it has done so across domains and issue areas through challenging times (including episodes of local violence and of course the COVID 19 pandemic) and in the face of a funding environment that favors short term, individual outcomes over nurturing the *conditions* necessary to make long term, collective, transformational change possible.

As the approach gets adopted and adapted across communities and contexts, more evidence and momentum are emerging. Work is currently underway to design a CCA index, allowing communities to assess the strength of their own social fabric so that investments and strategies can become more specific and targeted over time.

At its core, CCA enables a both/and paradigm: it straddles worldviews and offers a way of integrating on-the-ground truth and knowledge with systems-level thinking, strategy and investment, and grassroots cultures with institutional norms. If adopted broadly, CCA has enormous potential for creating enabling and hospitable environments at the local level and, simultaneously, supporting governments, institutions, businesses, and foundations to live into their values of equity and inclusion, ensuring that their programs, products, or services are meaningful to people too often on the margins: “If you affect relationships at the local level, you are working towards global change.”^{xiii}

ⁱ Global Networks Post COVID 19, IGI publishing 2023

ⁱⁱ [The Connected Community Approach, Citizens and Formal Institutions working Together Towards, Community Centred Resilience](#), Blake Poland et al, Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2021

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thestorefront.org>

^{iv} Introducing the Connected Community Approach, Catalysts Circle 2024

^v [The Philosophy and Thinking behind the Connected Community Approach](#), Catalysts Circle 2023

^{vi} Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change, Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver, 2017, Tamarack Institute

^{vii} [Community Backbone Theory of Change](#), Centre for Connected Communities 2018

^{viii} www.thestorefront.org/projects and <https://thestorefront.org/our-impact/>

^{ix} [CCA 10 keys: how to unlock the potential of communities to unlock solutions to complex problems](#), Centre for Connected Communities, 2020

^x Both/And Reflections on Collective Impact and the Connected Community Approach, Anne Gloger 2023

^{xi} Bringing Soul to the Work of Collective Impact, Michael McAfee, Stanford Social Innovation 2015

^{xii} Centering Equity in Collective Impact, John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer & Jennifer Splansky Juster, Stanford Social Innovation, 2022

^{xiii} Enterprise in the Classroom, Frances Westley 2012