



ARTICLE | THIS IS COMMUNITY INNOVATION

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Community Innovation is simply: **change, for good, with and within a community.** How we shepherd and achieve positive change is a decidedly more complex task, and at the Tamarack Institute we hope to equip changemakers at all levels to engage in and support Community Innovation.

WITH AND WITHIN COMMUNITY

The first [‘blue box’](#) recycling boxes were used in a recycling pilot in Kitchener, ON and spread internationally. The first [Vital Signs](#) report was initiated in 2001 by the Toronto Foundation and has become a program that has engaged more than 85 communities in Canada and the world. Along the way these innovations were started, fostered, spread, and grown through the participation of people at all levels in our communities, and are fantastic examples of the potential scale of Community Innovation. But Community Innovation doesn’t need to be so grand or wide-reaching. It can be a new way of working with residents to affect change, a new way of thinking about poverty, or a new way of organizing and collecting information about your community. Many of the innovations we take for granted today ([Women’s Institutes](#) and [La Leche Ligue](#) among them) were not started with grand visions of changing the world, but instead by working to effect change in community.

This is the heart of Community Innovation. Community Innovation is: **Change, for good, with and within a community.** In other words, Community Innovation is a community-championed change with benefits that are meaningful to the community. What makes Community Innovation different from other forms of Social Innovation is the focus on community – placing community members as both the champions and as the arbiters of change. As a counterpoint, consider Lucky Iron Fish - a fantastic Canadian Social Innovation that has the potential to reduce iron deficiency around the world, but importantly it is **not** a change that was championed by community. Whether that is “good” or “bad” is not the focus of this discussion. The distinction between Social Innovation and Community Innovation is important because Community Innovation processes draw upon important assets that are unique to space and place – assets which create the opportunity for different ways of working.

SOME OF COMMUNITY INNOVATION'S UNIQUE ASSETS

Unlike other forms of Social Innovation, the work of driving Community Innovation allows us to draw upon all the assets of the community in the process. These assets are often seen as afterthoughts or as 'nice-to-haves,' but they are core to the work of Community Innovation.

Local knowledge and context

The development sector is filled with examples of seemingly brilliant approaches that failed to understand and work with local knowledge and context (the [PlayPump](#) is a personal favourite, and the author [Vandana Shiva](#) has written extensively about the ways that the international development movement has willfully ignored and devalued local knowledge). Community Innovation approaches can instead draw upon local knowledge and context to create change that works with a community.

Bounded scale and specificity

Our biggest social challenges often feel intractably large, making it difficult for individuals and organizations to engage. Community Innovation operates within bounded scale and specificity which can make it easier for us to start, generate possible approaches, and enact change. Take a few minutes to reflect on the questions below to get a sense of how bounded scale can enable action.

Explore how scale impacts the ways in which we view and act upon opportunities by reflecting on the following questions:

How might I act to end poverty worldwide?

How might I act to end poverty in my country?

How might I act to end poverty in my city?

How might I act to end poverty in my neighbourhood?

Connection to outcomes

Another asset for Community Innovators is a strong and direct connection to the outcomes of change. Unlike other forms of innovation that must make a special effort to measure outcomes or tell a story of change, in the context of Community Innovation change is all around us. This doesn't eliminate the need for measurement, but it does provide Community Innovators with multiple potential informal feedback mechanisms that go beyond the limitations of measurement, helping us to iterate and improve with better information. It is more difficult for us to escape the reality of our impact – the changes in our community are in our own physical space, rather than a page on a report.

Space and place for exploration

At Tamarack we see communities as 'living labs' – places that provide opportunity for exploration and experimentation. Rather than needing to create formal structures for prototyping change, communities and their members can more spontaneously prototype change. Neighbourhood bake sales, community groups, and events are all examples of ways that local communities prototype change and learn what works and doesn't in their context. Community affords many informal resources and tools that facilitate prototyping, primarily community members themselves.

Community members

The foundation of Community Innovation is community members themselves. People, with their assets, strengths, motivations, and informal networks are a vital component of affecting change. People are a difficult asset to measure, but anyone who has seen how communities come together to help a family recover from tragedy or to advocate for change, understands just how great the strengths of people within community are. In addition to formal employees or volunteers, Community Innovation is driven by ordinary residents.



NEITHER THE BEGINNING NOR THE END

Doubtless, there are many more assets that communities have available to affect change. Because these assets are uniquely place-based, there are no prescriptive methods for affecting Community Change. After all, the practice of Community Innovation has been around long before we had the words to describe it and will continue long after. We do not presume to know all the answers.

Instead, by advancing the practice of Community Innovation at the Tamarack Institute, we hope

to support the work of community change leaders at all levels. We hope to help Community Innovators draw upon the work that precedes us, broader theories and models for Social Innovation, and other approaches for social change to support your work. We aspire to both learn from you and to inspire others to affect change.

In the coming months we will dive deeper into the practice of Community Innovation – understanding how it has been done effectively, exploring tools and resources to guide your practice, and sharing stories of contemporary Community Innovation. We look forward to being a part of your journey towards positive community change.

ABOUT GALEN MACLUSKY

Galen is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute’s Community Innovation Idea Area. He is passionate about working with community organizations to help build and scale new ideas that deepen their impact. An experienced design, innovation, and co-creation consultant, at the core of his work are approaches that help organizations engage with those who are impacted by their services and test new programs and services with minimal investment.



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