The Connected Community Approach:
A Theoretical Framework

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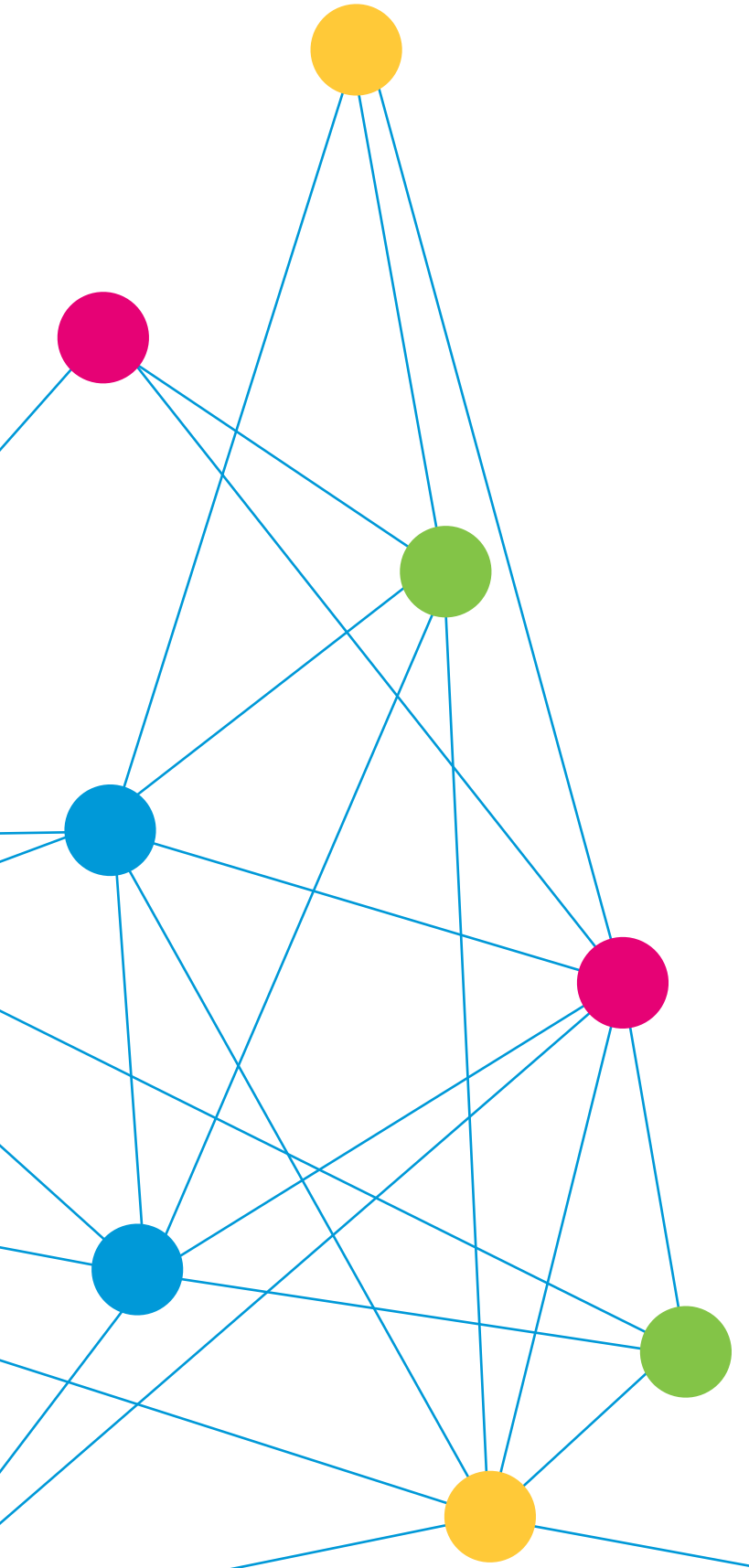

Abstract

This article introduces a new, connection- and network-centric approach to community development that strategically focuses on the role of a community backbone organization and builds on previous community development theories. This new approach to community development, called the *connected community approach*, was pioneered by the work of The East Scarborough Storefront, a local community based organization in a lower-income yet vibrant neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. The *connected community approach (CCA)* is a set of principles and practices for community development which posits that a community backbone organization can be a catalyst for community-based social and economic improvement by intentionally focusing on and strengthening connections and social networks between and among people and organizations.

Fundamental to CCA is the focus on the 'connectedness' of residents, organizations and cross-sector players, and the role that a community backbone organization can play in brokering social, transformative and strategic relationships in the local environment, in a diversity of sectors, and at different scales. The intention of this article is to contribute to the growing body of literature on 'connectedness' and place-based community development theory and praxis by introducing CCA, which selectively draws on the strengths of community development theories, such as asset-based community development, complexity theory, systems theory, and collective impact, to create a new and promising approach to the field of community development.

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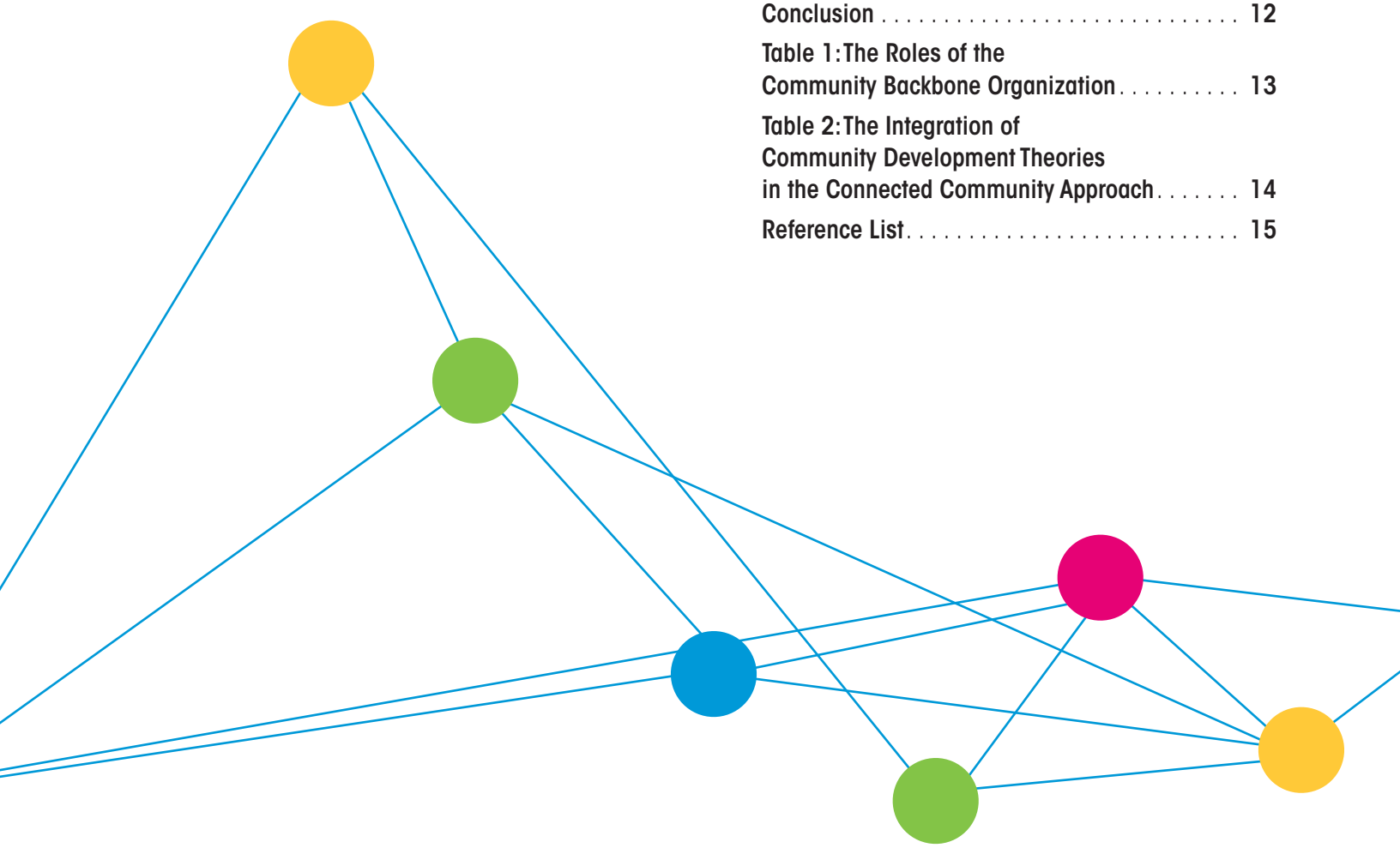


Introduction

Many previous community development theorists and practitioners have called attention to the role of connections and 'connectedness' in improving individual and community outcomes (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Burt, 2005; Cornwell, 2009; Lin, 2001; Sampson, 2012; Sampson, et al., 1997). In this article, the term 'connectedness' refers to an entity–a person or an organization–having a large number of relatively strong social network connections. 'Connectedness' is recognized as an important component of wellbeing of both individuals and communities. For example, RSA[1] researcher David Morris recently spent five years studying community connectedness in the United Kingdom and found, based on a survey of 2,840 people, that the variable most consistently associated with having higher subjective wellbeing was 'feeling part of a community'" (RAS, 2015, p. 7-8). Likewise, when it comes to at-risk members of a community (such as recent immigrants, seniors, and single mothers), it is 'social isolation' that has a significant negative impact on their wellbeing (RAS, 2015, p. 52).

Furthermore, there exists a large body of research that points to the value of connectedness for multiple consequential outcomes, ranging from employment (Granovetter, 1973), to health (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Holt-Lunstad & Birmingham, 2008), to instrumental support (Desmond, 2012; Small, 2010) to social cohesion at the neighbourhood level (Sampson, 2012; Sampson et al. 1997). Network organizing is also emerging as an approach to community development (Traynor & Andors, 2005). This is a trend that has been documented in several case studies on neighbourhood-driven systems change (Chaskin & Karlstrom, 2012). There is also a growth of interest in finding better ways to make connections (Chaskin & Karlstrom, 2012; Martinez *et al.,* 2013; FSG, 2014). More and more, researchers are recognizing the power of intentional connectedness in neighbourhood organizing. For example, Southern (2005) has called this concept building 'collaborative capital', describing it as a transformative process that requires a shift in individual and collective beliefs and assumptions and new patterns of action and supportive structures.

Consequently, scholars and practitioners interested in community development have placed great emphasis on the importance of social relationships for building secure, happy, and healthy communities (Auspos and Cabaj, 2014). While many previous theories and papers acknowledge the importance of 'connectedness' among residents, few works have attempted to synthesize 'connectedness' with other community development theories, and to provide a practical framework for community development that focuses on the practitioner's perspective in understanding how to combine resident connectedness with 'connectedness' among practitioners and other cross-sector players.

This article aims to address this theoretical challenge and discussion gap by introducing the *connected community approach (CCA),* which selectively builds on the literature on connectedness and other community development theories in order to create a promising approach to community development that can result in real benefits for community members, and the community as a whole. CCA focuses on the 'connectedness' of residents, organizations and cross-sector players, as well as on the role that a community backbone organization can play in brokering social, transformative and strategic relationships in the local environment.

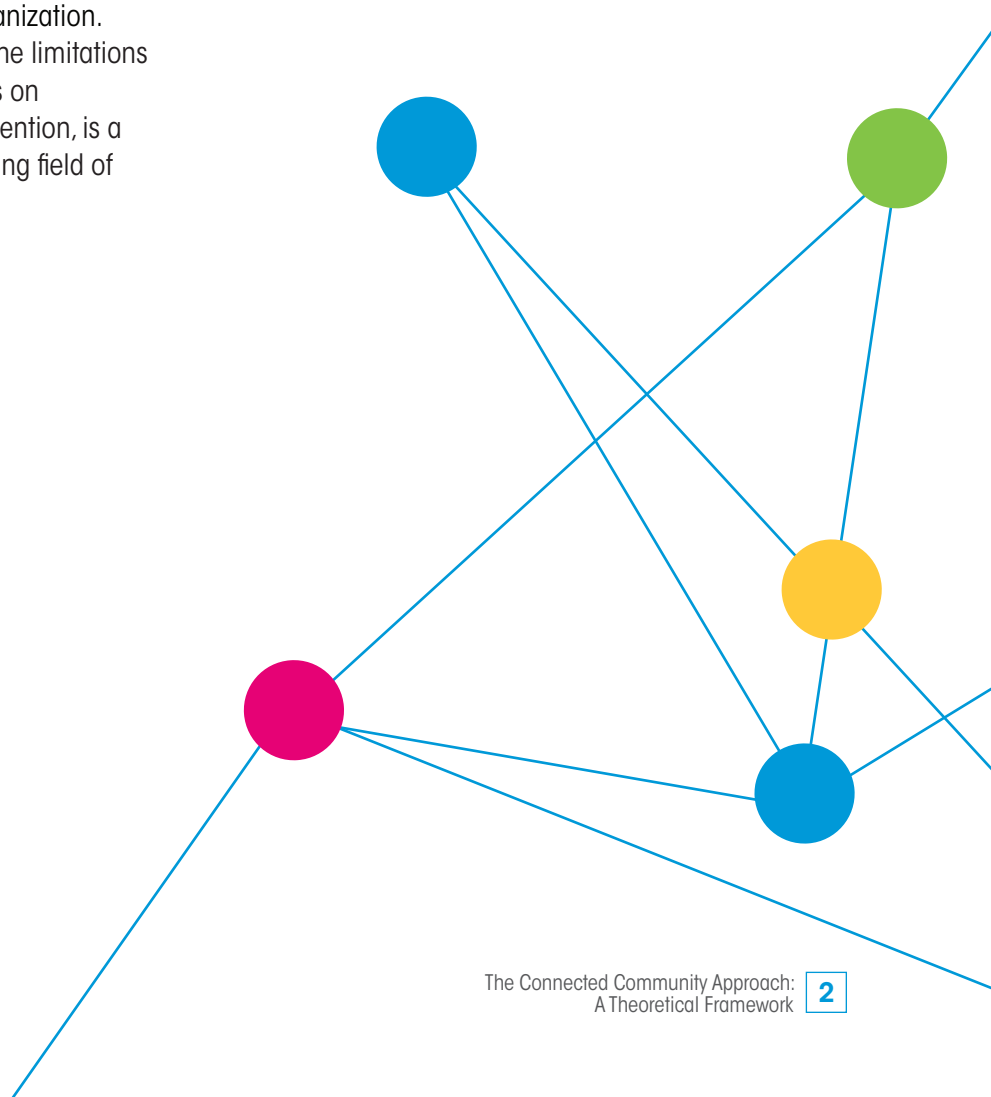
In this way, CCA strategically combines complementary frameworks from previous community development theories such as asset-based community development, complexity theory, systems theory, and collective impact (discussed in more detail below). CCA grounds insights from the above community development theories in the context of neighbourhoods, which remain a critical focus for place-based interventions. By focusing on the principles and practices of CCA and their relationship to previous community development theories, this article demonstrates that social relationships among multiple players (such as residents, social services' organizations, architects, urban planners, academics, governments and businesses, etc.) at the grassroots level can be strategically leveraged for community-based change.

1. RSA is the 'Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce'–an organization in the United Kingdom that undertakes cutting-edge research and develops innovative new projects for the public benefit. For more information, please visit thersa.org

Using on-the-ground experience, this change happens both horizontally (strengthening the neighbourhood ecosystem) and vertically (connecting the neighbourhood ecosystem to broader political and economic systems).

This article begins by introducing CCA and providing a number of definitions that are critical to the conceptualization and understanding of CCA. Following is a discussion of the fundamental principles and practices of CCA. In order to understand how CCA works in practice, the next section of the article discusses CCA history and the work undertaken by The East Scarborough Storefront in a lower-income yet vibrant neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. The approach proposed here has emerged from 15 years of community development, as practiced and theorized by community development practitioners working for The East Scarborough Storefront and the involvement of the local residents of the Kingston Galloway/Orton Park neighbourhood. Following is a discussion on how CCA is a strategic synthesis of asset-based community development, system theory, complexity theory, and collective impact, which introduced the concept and importance of a backbone organization. The article concludes by outlining some of the limitations of CCA, and arguing that CCA, which focuses on 'connectedness' as a key place-based intervention, is a promising practice in the evolving and growing field of community development.

By focusing on the principles and practices of CCA and their relationship to previous community development theories, this article demonstrates that social relationships among multiple players at the grassroots level can be strategically leveraged for community-based change.



The Connected Community Approach

The connected community approach (CCA) is a set of principles and practices for community development. CCA posits that by intentionally focusing on and strengthening social connections and networks between and among people and organizations, these networks can be a catalyst to foment community-based social and economic development. The main objective of CCA is to promote and support a 'connected community', which David Morris defines as a community "in which people are embedded within local networks of social support; in which social isolation is reduced, and people experience greater wellbeing and other benefits from the better understanding, mobilisation and growth of 'community capital' in their neighbourhoods" (RSA, 2015, p. 7). CCA builds on this definition of a 'connected community' by moving beyond *just* neighborhood residents and also focuses on incorporating a diversity of internal and external community players (such as planners, politicians, businessman) as crucial actors of influence at the neighborhood scale. As part of a 'connected community', the objective is also to promote *cross-sector collaboration* where "planners, designers, politicians, regulators, facilitators and marketers step out of their professional comfort zones, mix with each other, let their assumptions be challenged, (and)are prepared to defend those assumptions with evidence and invite the public to genuinely share in the learning and decision making" (Robinson, Year?, page 242).

According to CCA, a *community backbone organization* is the primary instrument for building and supporting social connections and networks, and in this way, promoting a connected community and cross-sector collaboration. . A 'community backbone organization' is an organization located *within* a neighbourhood space that provides an anchoring point for creating and supporting social connections and networks between people, and across different sectors (person to person, organization to organization, etc.) and scales (i.e. local, municipal, regional, etc.). In CCA, the role of a community backbone organization is to leverage local assets, skills, aspirations, talents and resources from a wide range of actors so that they can effectively organize for action. While in this article we only speak of a single community backbone organization as an integral part of CCA, this is a simplifying assumption: there could be many community backbone organizations in a neighbourhood working in concert, focussing on different and/or complimentary domains.

A community backbone organization typically operates within what we call '*neighborhood spaces'*. For the purpose of this article, we define 'neighbourhood spaces' as areas that are contiguous in geographic space, that also share similar organizational, demographic, and/or economic characteristics. Importantly, a community backbone organization works to improve the livability for people situated within the neighbourhood space of which it is part. However, a community backbone organization can also reach out to people, organizations and institutions beyond their neighbourhood space for the purposes of forming helpful relationships, connections, and networks. While CCA was developed as a construct to work in neighbourhood spaces, CCA principles and practices are transferable to other community contexts (i.e., communities of interest or culture) and different scales (i.e. community, municipal, regional, national, etc.).

It is important to note that the connected community approach is not a service delivery intervention, but rather a way of understanding *how* to work in a community using a community development lens. Essentially, this means that CCA is not issue-specific; CCA focuses on *how* communities can be strategic in making changes to local systems, and making the changes that the neighbourhood residents and community members identify as relevant in their specific context.

The focus of CCA is therefore on changing and strengthening the local systems: the way residents and community members interact, and the way that they access programs and services or spend their time, energy and money; it includes the ways in which organizations conduct outreach, institutions engage community members, and businesses hire. CCA focuses on all these things simultaneously. Thus, CCA focuses on changing the community itself, which is quite different, yet complementary to social services that seek to offer support, programs and knowledge to residents and community members.

Through this focus on local systems and neighbourhood spaces, CCA seeks to effect and support the following outcomes: (1) Residents becoming key players in community building, and through this, increasing civic participation; (2) Increasing collaboration both within social sectors and across sectors; (3) Increasing the quantity and quality of collective place-based interventions; (4) Decreasing duplication of services and other locally based interventions and programs; (5) Promoting more effective use of funds at the neighbourhood level; (5) Increasing the number and quality of social and economic opportunities available to neighbourhood residents and community members; and, (6) Increasing opportunities for locally based community organizations and governmental agencies to innovate, iterate and learn what works best in a given neighbourhood context.

CCA Foundational Principles and Practices

In order to explain CCA, it is important to first highlight that CCA is a complex interconnection of principles and practices that builds from previous community development theories. As a community development theory and practice, CCA focuses on relationship-based processes that involve different actors, sectors and scales. For this reason, CCA is often difficult to understand and does not lend itself to simplification. Consequently, the promotion of this community development approach necessitates an audience willing to invest in understanding the foundational principles of CCA and their implications for community development practice.

The objective of CCA is *not* to exclude or seek to replace neighbourhood projects, programs or other community development approaches, but rather to build on them, and amplify their impact by applying the following foundational principles:

1. In the pursuit of thriving, just and equitable communities, CCA celebrates the uniqueness of each community by recognizing that each community needs to develop their own priorities, and act on their own initiatives, using their community's collective strengths and aspirations in unique and exciting ways.
2. No community improvement activity acts in isolation; good community development builds on what has gone before and takes place within the current local, regional, national and global context. Place-based interventions operate within larger systems, are influenced by them and in turn have the opportunity to affect influence on them.
3. Effective community work can be meaningful to a large number of people in a given community when it offers a sense of belonging, a sense of accomplishment, is inclusive and recognizes the worth, dignity and contribution of everyone.
4. The focus of CCA is on the connections between and among local players and a diversity of internal and external actors, encouraging collaboration as a normative way of organizing, and at all times drawing on shared information
5. Local residents must be key players in building strong communities and neighbourhoods because they hold a great deal of the wisdom and social connections necessary for neighbourhood success.
6. Organizations, businesses and institutions located in a community receive benefits from and have responsibilities for that community.
7. Inclusive and meaningful community-based processes must focus on neighbourhood assets, build on community strengths and take a solutions-based approach; for this reason, CCA focuses on what a community can build on, rather than what is wrong or lacking.
8. Learning is understood as a constant in CCA and learning comes from a wide range of sources, people, and experiences.

As previously discussed, fundamental to CCA is the concept *and work* of a community backbone organization. The work of a community backbone organization is to discover the strengths and aspirations of each person, organization, funder, and institution in and connected to

their specific neighbourhood. The community backbone organization then uses specific processes to facilitate, communicate and create spaces and opportunities for those strengths and aspirations to be united towards common goals. Thus, the role of a community backbone organization within CCA is to amplify the work of local change makers, organizations, institutions, funders and policy makers by engaging in three fundamental community-based practices: convening, facilitating and sharing knowledge.

By providing creative spaces for shared learning and inspiration, a community backbone organization *convenes* people and organizations with similar or mutually reinforcing ideas, talents and resources to align their goals and strategies. A community backbone organization may convene people in groups based on a shared identity (i.e. residents, students, community outreach workers), but more often, a community backbone organization will convene people based on what they are trying to accomplish. Part of the community backbone organization's convening role is also connecting people and organizations from inside the community with people and organizations influencing broader local, regional or global systems.

The main objectives of the community backbone organization's *facilitating* role is to support diverse groups to uncover and build on common grounds, to help people and groups understand the power dynamics inherent in their community, and to negotiate and manage these power dynamics in respectful and productive ways. This is done through providing network leadership and by identifying and strategically connecting community momentum to new opportunities. Through CCA, a community backbone organization guides local residents, community members and a diversity of external actors through processes that turn their ideas and inspiration into action and neighbourhood results.

The last fundamental community-based practice undertaken by a community backbone organization is *sharing* knowledge, data, information and stories. This is done to foster the emergence of a *shared* community narrative, and a baseline understanding of what is and has been done before in the community and of the social context of which it is a part. This process results in a better understanding of individual, group and organizational aspirations, and ensures that each individual or group has access to people, opportunities and resources that may help them accomplish their goals.

The East Scarborough Storefront: CBO in Practice

CCA emerged from 15 years of on-the-ground community development experience as practiced by The East Scarborough Storefront (The Storefront) (Mann 2012). The Storefront is a community development organization, which was formed in 1999 to fill-in gaps in social-service provision in the Kingston Galloway/ Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood, an inner-suburb east of downtown Toronto that houses many lower-income and visible minority residents, and recent immigrants. The Storefront successfully addressed this community challenge by building and maintaining collaborative relationships with other agencies where "each partner in the relationship brings skills, expertise and assets to the partnership" (Mann 2012, p. 33). Leveraging the power of collaboration, the Storefront plays a key role in forming and managing relationships with over 40 partner agencies with the aim of providing needed social services (such as legal advice, mental health counseling, and cooking classes) in the KGO neighbourhood (The Storefront, 2016).

Importantly, The Storefront describes itself as a *community backbone organization* (Mann 2012). As part of their institutional mandate, The Storefront focuses on promoting and supporting dynamic relationships and connections within the Kingston Galloway-Orton Park neighbourhood with the premise that these relationships and connections are important for community development and resident mobilization (The Storefront, 2015). In this way, The Storefront plays an important `community backbone' role in bringing together residents, non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, community groups and service agencies in order to help identify community needs and assets and provide the institutional space for the inclusive development of place-based solutions, community initiatives, and institutional partnerships.

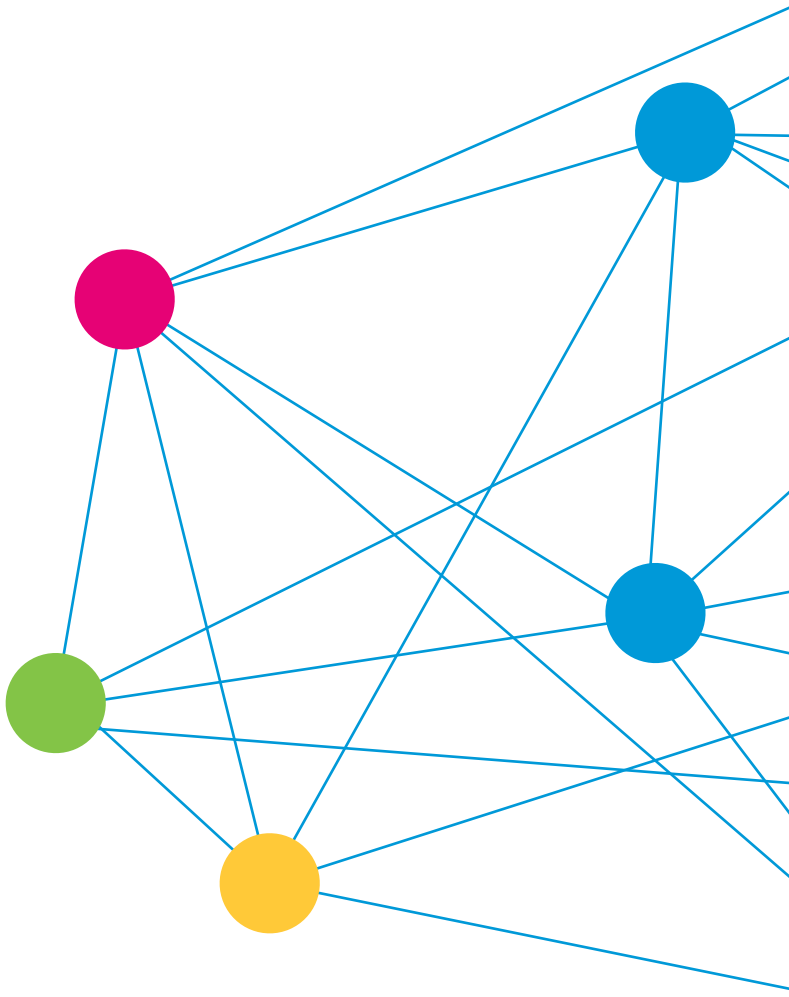
Furthermore, The Storefront provides backbone support for the KGO neighbourhood to foment change in *five key areas*, known as community impact strategies: (1) Active, healthy lifestyles (Community Building Through Play); (2) Social cohesion (Neighbours helping Neighbours); (3) Economic wellbeing (Community Wealth); (4) Environmental stewardship (Green Places and Spaces); and, (5) Knowledge and education (Community Knowledge)(The Storefront, 2016). These community impact strategies emerged from CCA work undertaken by The Storefront over many years, and provide a useful way of focusing community development work into different domain priorities. However, as previously articulated, CCA in and of itself is *not* issue specific; each neighbourhood and each community backbone organization will undergo processes to determine its own community impact strategies and domain priorities.

> The Storefront [as a community backbone organization] is at once a source of community transformation, a product of capacities that were already emerging locally, and a key thread in the web of networks and resources that constitute the community's social infrastructure.
> (Cowen and Parlette, 2011, p. 31).

The examination of CCA as practiced by The East Scarborough Storefront is useful because it represents a success story in terms of developing and implementing place-based community development initiatives in marginalized neighbourhoods (see Table 3 for more information). For example, the success of CCA can be illustrated in the establishment and growth of the Kingston Galloway-Orton Park–University of Toronto Scarborough Partnership that was achieved through the supportive role that The Storefront played, and continuous to play as a backbone organization, in maintaining community and institutional relationships. Beginning as an informal partnership in 2004, this university-community partnership resulted in the development and implementation of over sixteen different initiatives, such as the 'Let's Talk Science – UTSC Student Science Club' and 'KGO Kicks Soccer Club' for local youth; 'Understand Your Environment', 'Edible History', and 'Telling Our Stories' - free courses for local residents; and many more collaborative research projects and local initiatives (UTSC/Storefront, 2014, p. 4-7).

An independent evaluation of The Storefront-University of Toronto partnership found that The Storefront, as a community backbone organization, plays a meaningful role in mitigating power dynamics between large institutions and smaller community-based organizations (University of Toronto Scarborough/East Scarborough Storefront, 2014). Evaluators identified that a key success factor in ensuring that the collaboration was created based on shared power and reciprocal learning was having dedicated staff to broker and manage relationships between grassroots community players and a large institution (University of Toronto Scarborough/East Scarborough Storefront, 2014).

It is important to note that The Storefront's CCA work does not describe the extent or limits of CCA, but rather it represents a paradigmatic example of CCA, and therefore, serves to show what CCA can look like, but not what it must look like.



CCA and Other Community Development Theories

Asset-Based Community Development

CCA uses asset-based community development (ABCD) as a foundation for understanding how communities and local residents should be approached in community development programs and projects. Moving away from a focus on community deficiencies and solutions provided by outside professionals[2], ABCD emphasizes the role that neighbourhood assets and internal capacity building can play in addressing community challenges (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 1996). When designing community development approaches, program and projects; importance is placed on building upon community assets, which are defined by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), as the "gifts of individuals, citizens associations, and local institutions" (p. 7). Furthermore, ABCD suggests that interventions should not simply be imposed from the outside, but also that in order to effect local systems change, practitioners should work with local residents and the community at large, fostering 'connectedness' as their work unfolds. CCA's approach to building social networks may be said to derive from the general lessons of ABCD, in that local areas are already thick with social relationships, organizations, and institutions that can be leveraged to increase local community capital. Recent work from the Royal Society of the Arts, calling for increased emphasis on building connected communities in service delivery and program implementation, has drawn virtually the same lesson from ABCD literature (RSA 2015).

Investing in 'social capital' and 'connectedness' represents a particular strength of The Storefront and the real community-development benefits that CCA delivers. For example, in their study of the work of The Storefront, Roche and Roberts (2007) identify why this focus on connectedness and community-based assets is so important in CCA strategy development:

> The benefits of many relationships may not be explicitly apparent or defined in… pragmatic ways. Instead the practical benefits of these relationships may emerge over time, be situational in nature, or shift over time. More pointedly, the strong commitment to form such relationships–ones that have less apparent benefits or may be less 'goal-driven' in nature–helps to create an environment where the groundwork for future working alliances has already been laid. (p. 12)

Thus, using a CCA approach, the community backbone organization avoids being directive in its approach, rather, like in ABCD, it builds relationship capital to better understand the strengths and aspirations of not just residents but organizations and institutions. In CCA, the community backbone organization asks what it can do to support processes that build on collective strengths and relationships, in order to create strategies that will help to obtain goals commonly held among various actors in the community. In this way, CCA moves beyond short-term strategic partnerships that may be the norm in many social sector initiatives such as partnerships that focus on one-off funding opportunities or advocacy campaigns (Roche & Roberts, 2007, p. 12).

Systems Theory

In CCA, both the community backbone organization and the neighbourhood spaces are viewed as 'open systems': influenced by and influencing the other systems in which they are situated. This understanding of 'systems' is borrowed from the systems theory, sometimes referred to as the general systems theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy, 1956). The core theoretical concept of systems theory is the idea of systems as "complex[es] of interacting elements" (Mele *et al.*, 2010, p. 127). These 'systems' are constituted by their elements (i.e. the parts that make up the whole), the links between the parts (including processes and interrelations), and their boundaries (i.e. the limits that determine what is inside and out) (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2011, p. 16). Crucially, systems theory acknowledges that "the behavior of a single autonomous element is different from its behavior when the element interacts with other elements" (Mele *et al.,* 2010, p. 127). For this reason, the study of any phenomenon that utilizes a systems theory approach will involve an analysis of the system's various parts, and most importantly, interrelations

2. ABCD emerged in response to the shortcomings of the traditional path to community development that promoted negative images of "needy and problematic and deficient neighbourhoods populated by needy and problematic and deficient people" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996, p. 23). Within this traditional deficiency-based perspective, community development meant providing social services by outside professionals (ibid). In contrast, ABCD represents a major shift in community development theory and praxis (Green & Haines, 2008, p.7) because it builds on a different philosophy of development (Wu & Pearce, 2014, p. 439) where the focus is community assets and building internal capacity.

(or 'connections'), creating a foundation for theorizing the emergent pattern of interrelations itself[3].

Building on this understanding, CCA focuses on not just the links between organizations and within the neighbourhood, but also between and among residents, organizations, and institutions within the neighbourhood and *connected* to the neighbourhood. It is the work of the community backbone organization to create and support these 'connections' and the interrelationships between different actors, within different sectors, and at different scales. Examples of this can be found in the work of The Storefront, which does not necessarily build new connections with the sole purpose of improving specific outcomes, but instead, the connections, synergies and emergent opportunities fomented by The Storefront become folded into *ongoing* goals, producing both expected and unexpected positive outcomes. Connections and relationships, which help information flow within and across neighbourhood boundaries, are vital to community change efforts but they are often unexpected benefits of community-based systems change efforts rather than being intentionally created (Chaskin & Karlstrom, 2012). CCA, through the work of the community backbone organization, seeks to intentionally create them through an asset-based lens–looking for the strengths and opportunities inherent in the various actors and systems–and in this way, uniting the theoretical constructs of ABCD and systems theories.

Complexity Theory

CCA profits from also incorporating insights from complexity theory, which emphasizes *unpredictable* emergence of relationships and outcomes without regard for (indeed, even in spite of) the intentions of agents (or the community backbone organization) in the system (Westley et al., 2006, p. 21). Like the general systems theory, complexity theory describes emergent properties that arise from patterns of relations among elements (Westley *et al.,* 2006). However, unlike systems theory, complexity theory does not typically consider systems that arrive at a natural state of being (or static equilibrium), but rather, allows for systems not just to be open, but to be constantly changing (Manson, 2001)[4]. For this reason, complexity theorists have typically eschewed focusing on predicting and controlling specific situations; instead, they take a broader view in order to obtain a more general understanding of system dynamics (Anderson, et al., 1999; Law, 1999; Manson, 2001).

CCA incorporates this 'complexity' perspective by cultivating connections broadly, rather than for specific purposes; thereby ensuring those connections do not dissolve when some specific purpose has been achieved. This approach is derived from the lessons accrued by more than a decade of on-the ground work in the KGO neighbourhood, where social networks that were developed for specific community development goals become networks held in 'abeyance,' that can be re-activated and re-deployed for new purposes. As described above, the community backbone organization is particularly key as a site for continuity in social relations, and for that reason, it is important that it be a stable *physical* location in a neighbourhood space, in order to provide community backbone workers with the opportunity to continue to work towards the cultivation and maintenance of local collective efficacy. This continuous work to cultivate 'connectedness' means that new local movements and initiatives can emerge suddenly rather than gradually, by capitalizing on longstanding local social network resources. Therefore, CCA posits that many processes of community change may be highly non-linear, with slow starts, but accelerating rates of change.

3. Furthermore, community development scholars and practitioners have also been interested in studying 'open systems', or systems that interact in relation to some extra-system environment. In community development research, open systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) was developed to analyze the "relationships between the organizations and the environment in which they are involved" (Mele et al., 2010, p. 127). Open systems theory states that a neighbourhood organization receives "various inputs from the environment" (i.e. information, money, energy) that will be transformed by the organization into various outputs (including actions that will make the organization viable and help achieve its target objectives) (Chavis et al., 1993, p. 44).

4. Complexity theory is an increasingly popular body of theoretical and methodological tools, designed for understanding highly dynamic systems (Anderson et al., 1999; Gatrell, 2005; Skorvetz, 2002). Complexity theory allows for highly non-linear patterns of relations between elements, where small changes can have large consequences for individuals and the system of relations (Gatrell, 2005). This has obvious resonance with community development theories, which stress that minor interventions can have large impacts over time (Westley et al., 2006, p. 19).

For this reason, CCA expects emergent and highly-effective local social movements "where momentum meets opportunity" (Elliott-Ngugi & Gloger, 2014, p.5). Drawing on complexity theory, working *in emergence* requires the community backbone organization to understand the neighbourhood and its component parts and the links between those parts (the system), the assets and aspirations of the various actors, and the opportunities available through larger systems and players outside of the community and unites them using CCA foundational principles and practices. Complexity theory's focus on ever-changing relations is also helpful for community development work, because it invites scepticism that communities, or members of communities, have 'essential' properties or dispositions, which can only be momentarily disturbed before returning to their 'normal' state. Rather, complexity theory encourages practitioners to continue making large and small interventions, because each intervention could lead to dramatic, positive, and continuously improving change.

This should not suggest that CCA abandons strategy to emergence. On the contrary, CCA focuses on developing intentional processes that facilitate co-created strategy development among the various actors and scales while simultaneously supporting residents to be at the forefront of, or otherwise integrally connected to, strategy work. Throughout this work, residents and practitioners engage in constant reflexive practice to fine tune and adjust strategies to emergent realities, rather than adhering to strategies that are no longer applicable to new challenges. Also, as opportunities emerge, the community backbone organization facilitates processes and creates strategies founded on the strengths of the players involved. Once the strategies and actions are in place, the community backbone organization helps the players to adjust course over time based on new information, evaluation, and most importantly, reflection. Involving key players in reflexive processes, in order to update strategy, is fundamental to the success of CCA. As one community player commented when participating in research study of a community backbone organization:

> There's a lot of reflection that goes on and a lot of going back to, so, what were some of the original ideas about this? What were the founders thinking when they set it out this way? Yeah, and is it still relevant? Or how much do we have to change it to keep it real and alive? It's a lot of work…but at the same time… everybody feels that they're part of the answer, you know, and they take ownership. (Roche & Roberts 2007, p. 29)

In conjunction with ABCD, theories of complex systems also suggest the possibility that the pattern of relations itself may constitute an asset for community change. Consequently, the community backbone organization serves an important role in CCA by assessing, creating and strengthening the patterns of relationships existing within and beyond the neighbourhood space. This corresponds with the perspectives from social capital research, which similarly argue that an individual's position in a network of social relationships can provide that individual with more or less access to information, support, resources, and social status (Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001).

Collective Impact

Working in complexity creates practical challenges for community development practitioners. CCA is designed to unite concepts found in complexity and systems theories and community development approaches such as ABCD with a practical community development framework. It does this, in part, by drawing on concepts found in collective impact.

CCA takes its emphasis on and conceptualization of the community backbone organization from the collective impact literature. In collective impact[5], connectedness among players is critical to affect meaningful change. This connectedness is fostered through the intentional efforts of a separate 'backbone' organization, which acts as a facilitator and coordinator using the principles of adaptive leadership to create supporting infrastructure for collaboration. In collective impact, a backbone organization links sectoral players together in order to

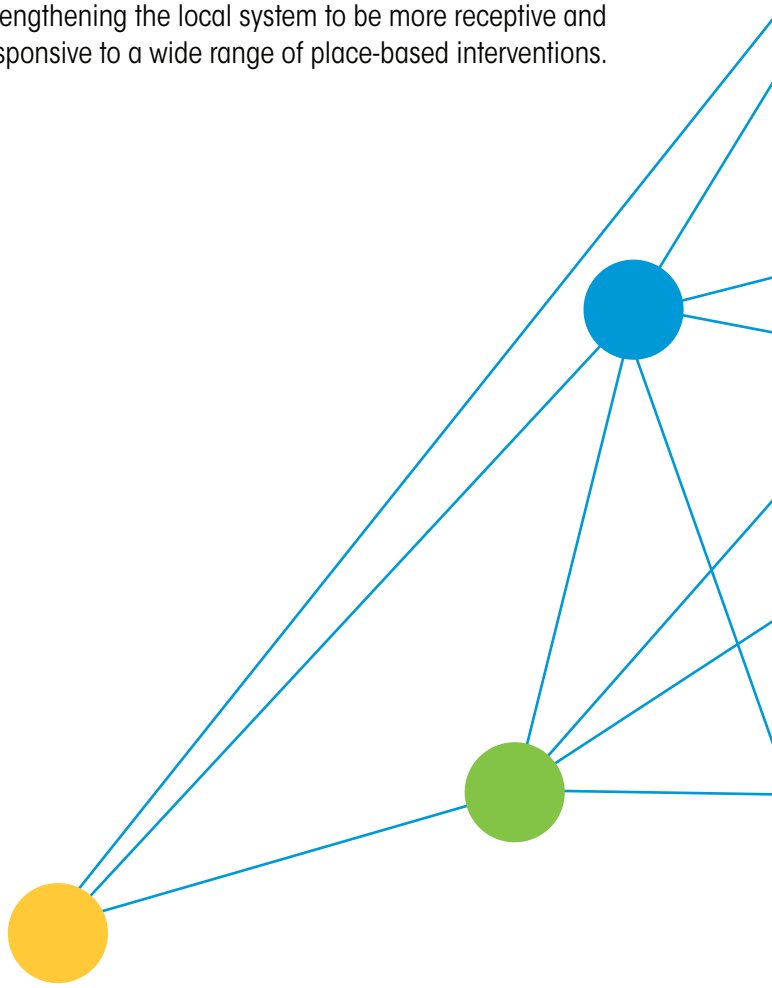
5. The concept of collective impact (CI) refers to "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 36). CI initiatives are said to create five key conditions that will align the work of participating groups and organizations: (1) the development of a common agenda, (2) the use of shared measurement systems, (3) the identification and nurturing of mutually reinforcing activities, (4) the fostering of continuous communication, and (5) the support of a backbone organization (Kania& Kramer, 2011, p. 39).

coordinate resources and efforts, and guides vision and strategy, supports aligned activities, establishes shared measurement practices, builds public will, advances policy, and mobilizes funding (p.40).[6]

In CCA, a *community* backbone organization performs similar functions as a "backbone organization would as part of collective impact (FSG, 2012); however, there is a significant shift in focus (see Table 1 for more information). Unlike most collective impact strategies, which aim to improve outcomes related to a specific issue (Scearce, 2011; Easterling, 2012), CCA seeks to strengthen the connective fabric of the community, improving the potential for multiple interventions across domains to increase their effectiveness and sustainability.

The success of CCA, as implemented by The Storefront, arises in part from the selective application of the lessons learned from collective impact. For instance, collective impact calls attention to a set of mechanisms that integrate projects, create synergies, increase effectiveness, spark innovation, strengthen influence, and catalyze broader action and developing scale (Scearce, 2011; Easterling, 2012; Scearce, et al., 2009). The integration, innovation and effectiveness of the neighbourhood projects that use CCA can be seen in the evolution of the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park neighbourhood over time (see Table 3 for more information). Also similar to collective impact, CCA sees community change through a complexity lens, which puts an emphasis on community organizing both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal alignment can be considered as supporting resident leadership and civic engagement while at the same time linking and integrating across programs, organizations, systems, sectors and other domains of activity that lie within a nested system to maximize opportunities for change and to leverage results (Auspos&Cabaj, 2014, p. 33). On the other hand, vertical alignment is working at multiple levels; for example, strengthening individuals and families and grassroots organizing, transforming neighbourhoods, improving regional markets, systems or policies and making social structures more equitable and supportive (Auspos & Cabaj, 2014, p. 33).

Thus, while CCA draws extensively on collective impact and, especially in the role of the backbone organization, where collective impact focuses on one specific, population based measurable outcome, CCA uses the lessons from ABCD, system theory and complexity theory, to focus instead on *the processes, linkages and connectedness* across domains and players, over time, strengthening the local system to be more receptive and responsive to a wide range of place-based interventions.



6. The popularization of collective impact and backbone organizations in recent years represents a significant shift in thinking about how collaborative work can affect social change. The concept emerged out of the realization that large-scale social change requires broad cross-sectoral coordination and that not one single organization can achieve the impact needed. Collective impact is still relatively new, but promising results in specific domains such as homelessness and literacy have been documented, and there has been a great deal of uptake, with dozens of new initiatives launched in just a few years (Haleybrown et al., 2012). However, academics, such as Harwood (2015), caution that the approach needs to focus on the inclusion and leadership of local actors, and specifically residents, in order for it to reach its full potential as a successful methodology. Collective impact is a much more structured approach than previous collaboration frameworks, and therefore, what it offers is new tools, parameters, boundaries and measurement opportunities, thus far, undefined or untapped in collaborative efforts to affect social change.

Limitations of CCA

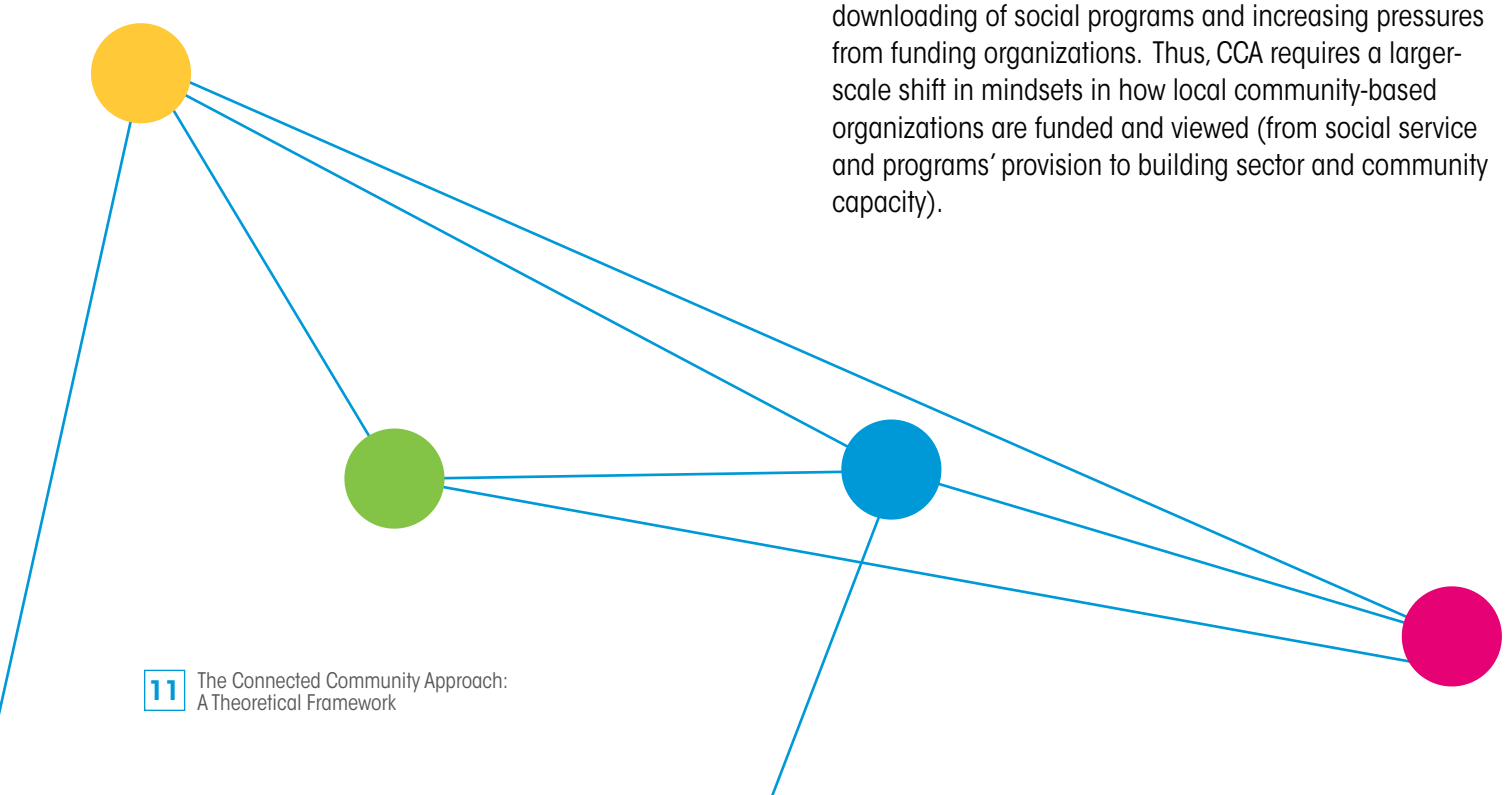
To date, CCA has not been widely adopted. Though indicators of its promise can be seen in the success of The East Scarborough Storefront, future practitioners of CCA should be mindful of its limitations.

The chief limitation of CCA is that it is a primarily structural approach to community development. That is, it posits that community development can be enriched by building more and stronger collaborative network connections. CCA does not, therefore, try to create change by changing the values or beliefs of organizations or individuals. This means that CCA interventions into community development could still fail, where these values or beliefs are not conducive to community development.

A second significant limitation of CCA is that heretofore, evaluation has been primarily *qualitative* in nature. As outlined in the RSA (2015) report, "network effects are difficult to measure and define accurately without further longitudinal social network analysis" (RSA, 2015, 61). This poses a number of problems in a context of austerity where funding for community-based organizations is often tied to particular objectives and/or proven results. However, CCA as a set of community development principles and practices is being launched at a time of rapidly developing tools for network analysis and quantifying the benefits of network structures within neighbourhood spaces which holds potential for future evaluative processes.

CCA is further limited in that it does not provide any 1:1 theory about which collaborative network structures promote which community outcomes. For example, CCA provides little guidance on answering questions such as: when is it advantageous to pursue maximally dense networks? When is it better to promote connections solely between key players? This is complicated by the fact that "the effects of social networks and the results of intervening to strengthen them are locally specific, unpredictable and non-linear" (RSA, 2015, p. 7). While CCA does not posit that maximally connected networks are always good, it leaves the question of which kind of network structure suits what kind of situation open to interpretation. What kinds of social network structure one should be trying to create–and therefore how one should measure 'success' in creating that structure–must therefore be assessed on a case-by-case basis using carefully articulated theory and sound evidence.

The final limitation, which constitutes a central part of CCA, is the important role that a community backbone organization plays in creating and supporting connected communities. CCA requires a high-functioning local community based organization that ideally has a well-established and trusting relations with local residents, is respected by other community and external organizations and institutions, and has the funding necessary to undertake a convening and facilitating role. While The East Scarborough Storefront was purposely formed for this facilitating role, many community-based organizations have been forced to narrow their mandates to specific projects and services' provision due to governmental downloading of social programs and increasing pressures from funding organizations. Thus, CCA requires a larger-scale shift in mindsets in how local community-based organizations are funded and viewed (from social service and programs' provision to building sector and community capacity).



Conclusion

Focusing on the dynamic interplay of relationships and connections within a community, CCA has evolved with the premise that these relationships and connections are important not only for individuals, but for organizations, institutions, and communities. This premise is supported by academic research that emphasizes the role of social relationships in effectively promoting "network norms, and social trust that facilitate co-ordinating and co-operation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p.65-78) and contribute to the "informal social control, cohesion and trust" needed to create "collective efficacy" within the community (Sampson *et al.,* 1997). Individual and community wellbeing in marginalized neighbourhoods relies on both a connected community (Browning & Dietz, 2004; Sampson, 2012; Sampson *et al.,* 1997), and community competence, which refers to the capacity of the place where people live (and the people in it) to provide instrumental support in producing those goods that arise from the community (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 10).

CCA aims to create new social connections, new patterns of community action and the supportive organizational infrastructure, at a neighbourhood level, to promote place-based community development. The insights from complexity theory, reviewed above, suggest that loose connections, fluid relationships, flexible structures and multiple points of intersection with other groups may be more productive for neighbourhood based systems change efforts than very tight couplings and narrowly focused alignment strategies, which are common in place-based interventions (Auspos & Cabaj, 2014, p. 40). CCA therefore focuses on both residents and organizations, their assets and aspirations as central to place-based strategies, combining ABCD with complexity theory to produce social resources in which fluid and dynamic social relationships are key. CCA then uses collective impact methodologies to help diverse players co-create strategies that increase knowledge, opportunities, and wellbeing in the community (see Table 1 and Table 2 on pages 13 and 14 for more information).

To paraphrase Marilyn Struthers in her 2012 article *Of Starlings and Social Change*, if change is a constant in sector work, and innovative improvement to community wellbeing is its product, then building relationships across difference is the method (p. 275). Many previous theorists and practitioners have called attention to the role of connections in improving individual and community outcomes (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Burt, 2005; Cornwell, 2009; Lin, 2001; Sampson, 2012; Sampson, et al., 1997). The unique contribution of CCA is that it selectively builds on this literature and other community development theories in order to create real benefits for community members, and the community as a whole. It does this through creating systematic and supportive relations between organizations, constantly creating and renewing a fluid set of social connections between organizations and individuals, as knitted together through the activity of the community backbone organization. The emergence of CCA calls attention to the importance of practice for developing theory, because the persons who practice CCA (i.e. community development workers) are themselves embedded in particular social positions. This means that certain facts with wide-ranging theoretical and practical implications may be most obvious to them, when compared to individuals in different positions in the system of social relations. Therefore, this article, primarily written by practitioners, offers insights that may be beneficial to the wider field of community development and research.

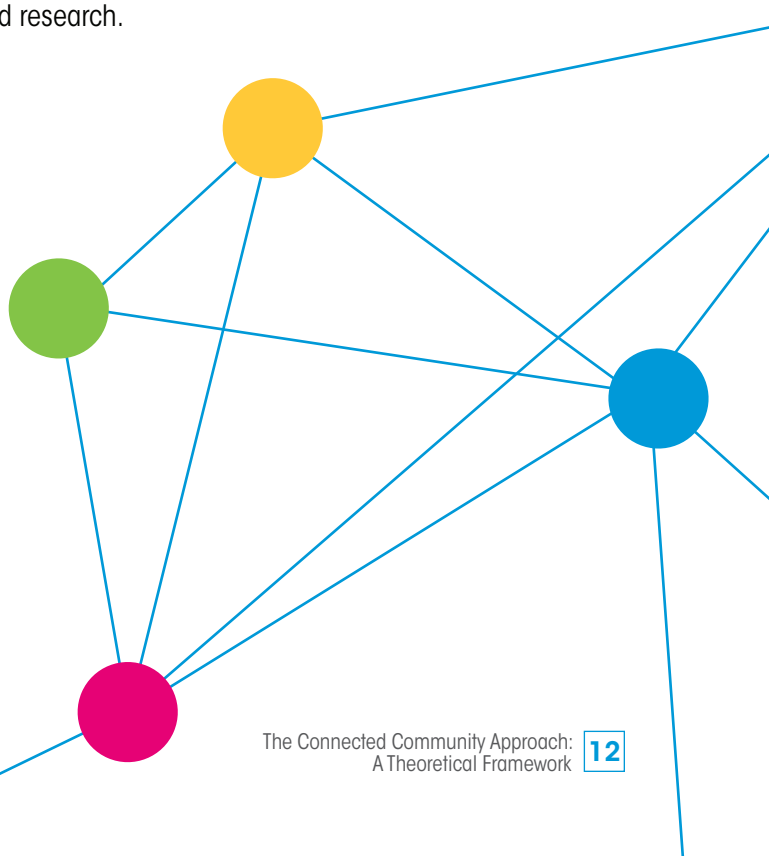


Table 1
The Roles of the Community Backbone Organization

Roles	Actions
1. Guide Vision and Strategy	• Help collaborative tables, of institutions, governments, architects, businesses and social organizations etc. and develop values based relationships • Help collaborative tables, articulate visions, and their possible implications on the residents • Connect people and groups too each other…find the alignment and synergies between visions and strategies
2. Support Aligned Activities	• Host platforms for resident organizing activities • Provide infrastructure for shared service delivery • Provide or facilitate the use of space • Connect residents to institutions, businesses etc. in ways that manage the inherent power imbalances • Provide on the ground logistical support
3. Establish Shared Measurement Practices	• Explore and embed meaningful evaluation tools in the neighbourhood projects; • Commission and connect research to neighbourhood based issues • Facilitate and encourage reflective practice as an integral part of strategy development and evaluation
4. Build Public Will	• Build trust across the neighbourhood • Ensure that residents are helping to shape each initiative as it emerges • Communicate effectively • Ensure that any concerns or questions arising in the neighbourhood about specific initiatives are brought to the attention of those leading it
5. Advance policy	• Build relationships with local politicians • Provide infrastructure to pilot policy initiatives • Provide politicians and policy makers with data and information about what is happening at a neighbourhood level
6. Mobilize funding	• Provide shared platform supports for neighbourhood-based initiatives (resident led and/or collaborative) • Build relationships with funders and donors and leverage those relationships to support neighbourhood wide strategies

Table 2

The Integration of Community Development Theories in The Connected Community Approach

Community Development Theories	Integration into The Connected Community Approach
Asset-based Community Development	• Asset and aspiration (rather than needs) focused • Assumes that residents are key players in place-based social change efforts • Assumes capacity within the neighbourhood • Supports a neighbour to neighbour approach • Strong associational/civic life a desired outcome
Systems, Complexity and Network Theories	• Sees the neighbourhood as a system (or ecosystem) • Assumes non-linear relationships between activity and outcome • Focuses on capitalizing on synergies and emergence • Values both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes
Collective Impact	• Focuses on connecting both horizontally and vertically • Develops strategies that galvanize the work, resources and passions of players across multiple sectors • Uses and adapts the role of the Backbone Organization • Aligns projects, goals and measurement frameworks

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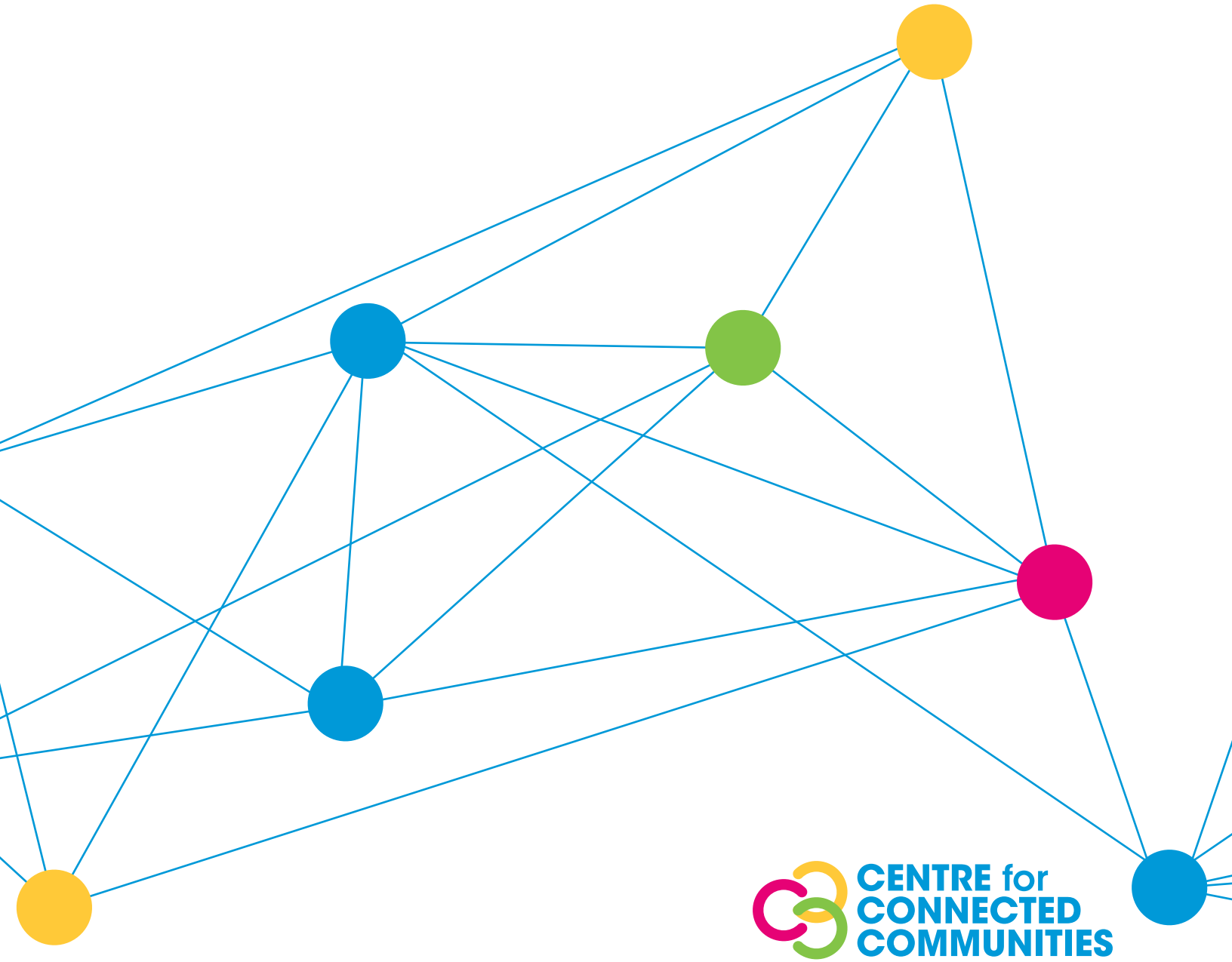

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