THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY APPROACH

How to unlock the potential of a community to find local solutions to complex social issues.

Cities are made up of communities. It is at the community scale that people interact, where ideas are born and where there is a real opportunity to create meaningful change. But people in communities can also be disconnected from each other and even more disconnected from the systems that affect their lives.

The key to understanding communities is understanding how people are connected. When information, ideas, relationships, supports and resources are understood and shared across the players in a community, talents and assets can be combined and mobilized in multiple ways. When people and organizations work together in different ways over time, they begin to foster a sense of shared identity and belonging. A shared narrative begins to develop, new ideas are sparked, and with good facilitation, multiple players from multiple sectors can all play a role in continuous community improvement.

And that's the purpose of the Connected Community Approach.

CENTRE for CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

a project of **Tides Canada** SHARED PLATFORM

The Connected Community Approach (CCA) is a set of principles and practices that support the authentic and meaningful connection of people who want to make a positive impact in their community. By using the Connected Community Approach, an individual, organization or group, can help weave together the community building efforts of institutions and funders, grassroots groups and social service organizations, strengthening social capital, social fabric and ultimately, the resilience of their community.

Fundamental to CCA is the belief that innovation and solutions to entrenched social problems are generated through collective problem solving and rooted in local context. Working to foster connected communities may seem obvious, but it is, in fact a paradigm shift from the way we, in North American society invest in community interventions; most interventions designed to strengthen community are often top down, isolated, and programmatic in nature.

CCA has tremendous potential to unlock the power of community building across multiple domains including (but in no way limited to): community resilience, poverty reduction, equity and inclusion and place-making.

CCA posits that there are 10 keys that when implemented together, with authenticity and intentionality, can foster the paradigm shift required to unlock the potential of connected communities.

10 KEYS TO UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

1 Build on Everyone's Strengths
Instead of looking at what is wrong with a community and what needs fixing, ask the question, what is right with the community that can be built on; who is doing great work that could be strengthened and connected for greater impact?

2 Facilitate Collaborative Processes
Collaborations don't just happen, they require expert facilitation to ensure a deep collective understanding, shared purpose and mutually reinforcing processes.

3 Create Connected Communities from the Inside Out
Healthy, nurturing organizations and groups are fundamental to a connected community. Investing in the wellbeing of the people doing the work will ultimately mean greater impact.

4 Learn Together
Learning feedback loops are what strengthen a community over time; intentional learning can help everyone (grassroots groups, institutions, organizations, funders etc.) learn how the community works, the impact of specific interventions, and what people care about so that synergies can be found and decisions can be grounded in learning. In this way, initiatives and ideas build on each other over time.
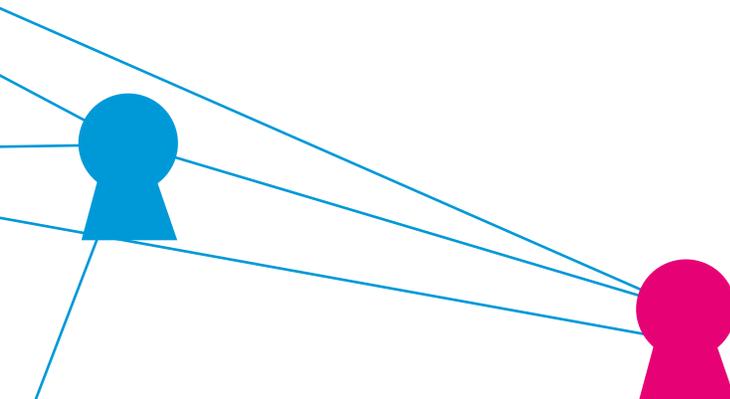
5 Embrace the Messiness
Ideas, priorities, aspirations and enthusiasm in a community emerge in different places at different times which are impossible to predict. Facilitating processes in this kind of complexity requires a specific skill set that sees emergence as a strength and creates the nimbleness required to identify and build on local momentum.
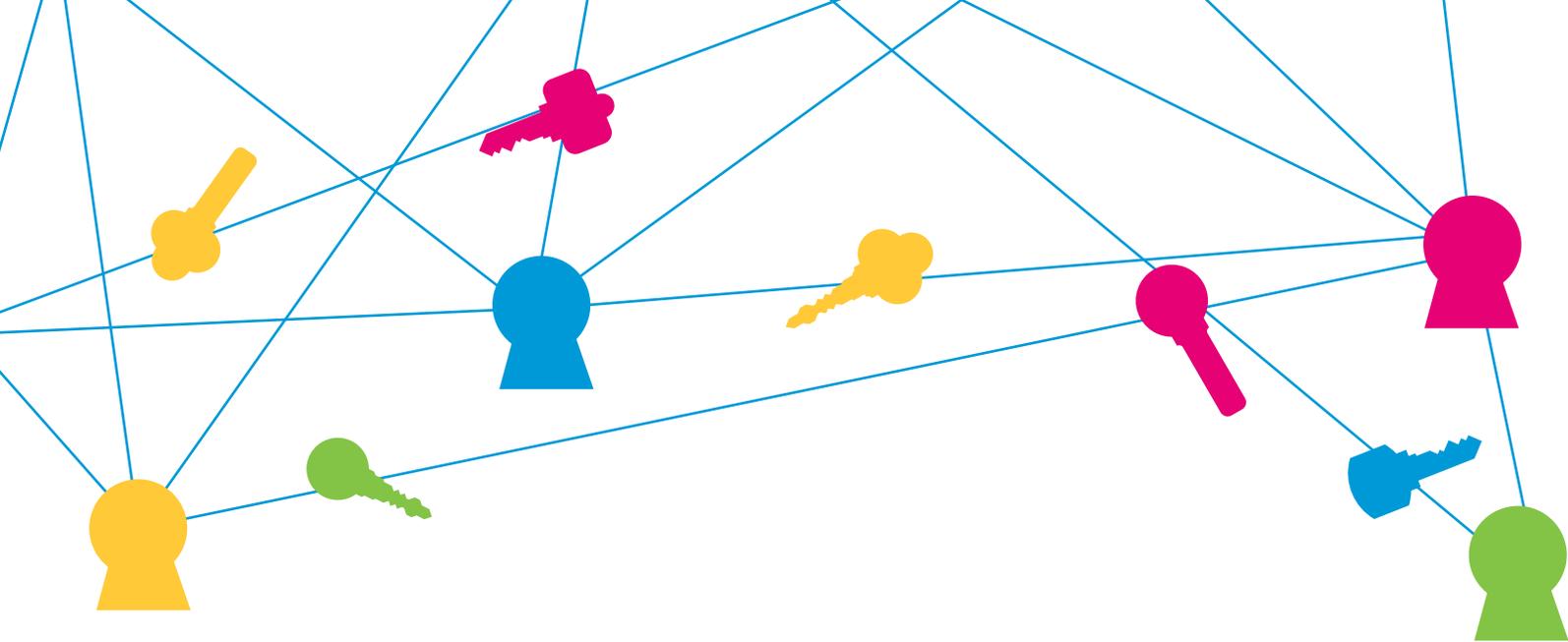
6 Prioritize Equity and Power Sharing
Power is a complex dynamic in all communities. In order to foster strong social fabric it is critical the decision making power rests in numerous places throughout the community, and especially with grassroots groups that dedicate themselves to the wellbeing of their community. The kinds of power structures and dynamics that people are used to often have to be disrupted to achieve this.

7 Let Values Lead
When organizations or groups are trying to engage in activities that foster a connected community, their work is built on a foundation of values which involves a shared understanding and an articulated commitment to an overarching theory of change, and the principles that guide the work. In this way, a group of people or organization can authentically strengthen the work of others and not inadvertently slip into old paradigms and power roles.

8 Work at Multiple Scales
Facilitating a connected community means not only working to build strong local social fabric, but also connecting community led initiatives to larger systems, and movements to larger change efforts. Connecting community building to city building, to global change efforts supports scale that is truly grounded in community.

9 Make Community Building Visual
Communication is foundational to the Connected Community Approach. Communicating across languages, across literacy levels, and across values and priorities is a difficult task: using graphic design and photographs to illustrate ideas, concepts and intent accelerates shared understanding and momentum.

10 Build Creative Infrastructure
A connected community requires intentional structures to ensure that the community really does strengthen over time. Creative infrastructure includes: buildings, places and structures; communication media; structured events, groups and opportunities to engage and influence the systems that make up a community.

The Connected Community Approach offers an opportunity to bring together the best of planning, design, academic theory, municipal, provincial and federal strategy, social service interventions, faith community aspirations, corporate social responsibility and ground them in the authentic goals, aspirations and realities of grassroots groups and people who have traditionally been at the margins.

Unlocking the potential of a connected community requires skill sets not often found in our community-based interventions. Using a Connected Community Approach to unlock the potential of communities requires investment: investment in capacity building, social infrastructure, but most of all in the facilitative role required to continually weave together the social fabric that communities need to effectively find local solutions to complex social problems.

Early research into the pioneering work of the East Scarborough Storefront and Community Capital work in the United Kingdom indicate that the investment is time, money and effort well spent.
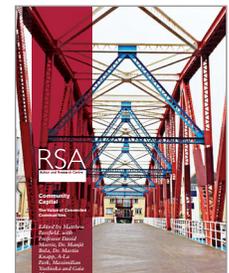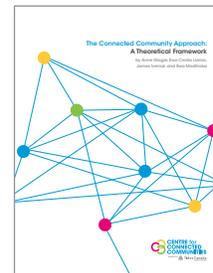
Given the complex issues before us and, given what we know about the importance of community as the focal point of change… can we afford not to invest in connected communities?

References

The Connected Community Approach:
What it is and Why it Matters

The Connected Community Approach:
A Theoretical Framework

Community Capital:
The Value of Connected Communities

The Centre for Connected Communities staff team holds expertise in "by the community for the community" solutions to local and systemic issues.

We are a diverse and dynamic group and we love our work.

4218 Lawrence Ave, Unit 200 | Scarborough, ON M1E 4X9
647-347-1693 | connectedcommunities.ca

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