

NEIGHBOURHOOD TRUST SHARED PLATFORM

Reflections on imperfect but essential strategies
for supporting resident-led and grassroots projects

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with Anne Gloger and
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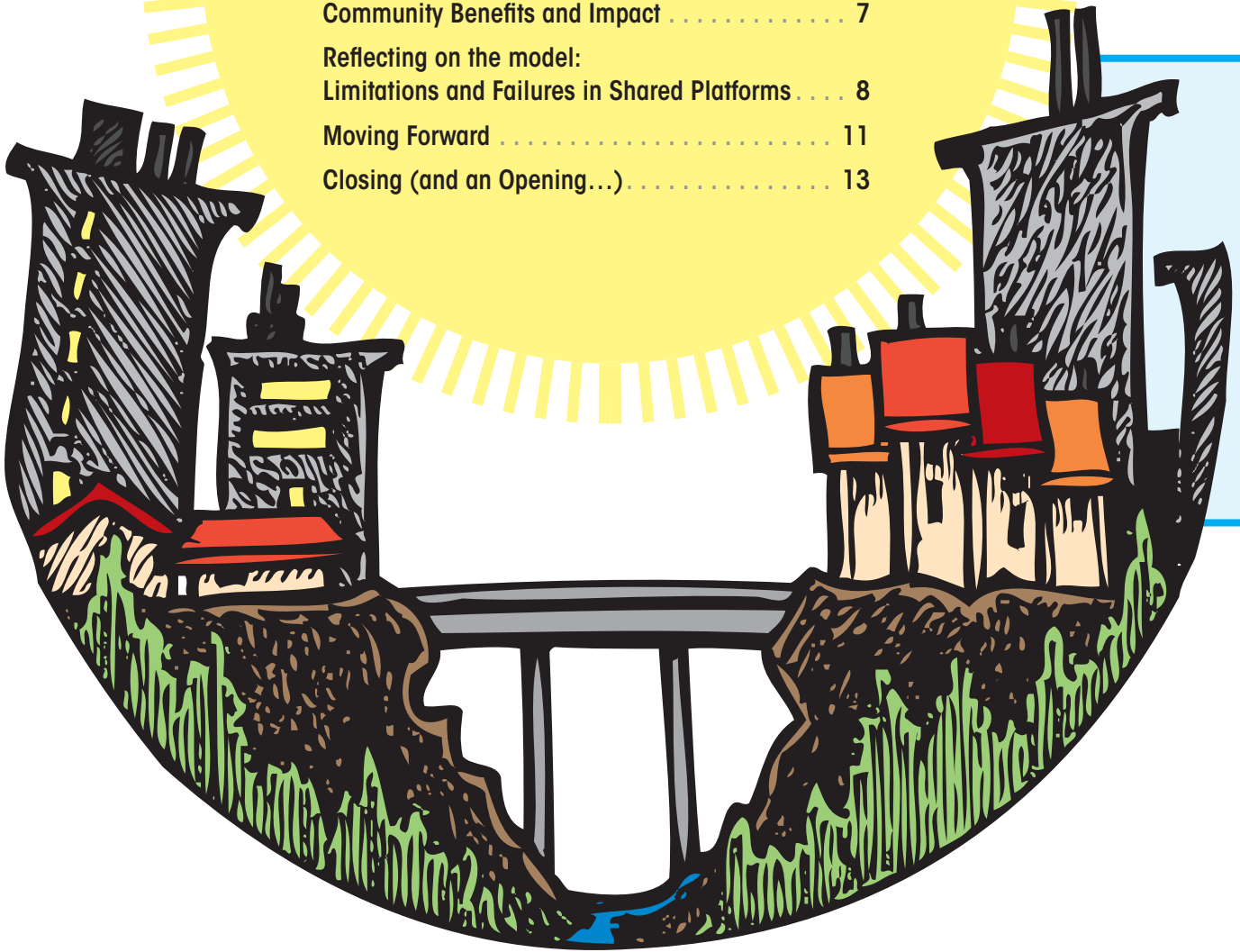
EAST SCARBOROUGH
STOREFRONT
a project of  Tides Canada
SHARED PLATFORM

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Lynn's Story	1
Introduction	2
Why A Shared Platform in KGO	5
Neighbourhood Trust: Core Components	6
Community Benefits and Impact	7
Reflecting on the model: Limitations and Failures in Shared Platforms	8
Moving Forward	11
Closing (and an Opening...)	13



Executive Summary

In the face of pervasive inequality, residents living in marginalized circumstances play essential roles from fighting for policy and systemic change, to meeting the urgent needs of their communities to building social inclusion and resilience. However, the reality is, funders and the not-for-profit/charitable sector have imperfect ways of supporting resident leadership and community-determined projects. As a result, various forms of shared platforms have increased over the past decade as an approach to incubating grassroots groups and connecting them with mentorship, training, tools, networks and funding to bring their projects to life.

In 2009, The East Scarborough Storefront, its partners and local residents launched the Neighbourhood Trust in response to emerging needs both at the community level, but also in the broader social services sector. It was clear that residents were facing barriers to accessing funding because they were not part of a charitable organization, and that funders had few avenues to invest directly in community-led projects. In developing the Neighbourhood Trust, the Storefront set out to explore how a shared platform model could be more effectively used as a tool for building community power, supporting community-self determination and accelerating investments in resident-led projects.

Between 2010-2015, the Neighbourhood Trust supported 21 diverse and dynamic resident-led projects with hands-on mentorship and backend administrative support, enabling \$136,000 in charitable funding to go directly to resident leaders in one community. Key outcomes and benefits of the Neighbourhood Trust included:

- Increased numbers of local projects run by residents with 21 resident-led projects supported and 8 projects continuing to operate independently after their involvement with Neighbourhood Trust
- Increased numbers of social/ educational activities available to local residents with more than 1000 adults, children and youth participating in resident run projects
- Increased financial investments in grassroots resident-led projects with 14 different funders investing a total of \$136,000 in local resident led community improvement projects
- Increased local investments in resident leaders by matching local funding sources (churches, service clubs, businesses, etc) with Neighbourhood Trust projects and connecting resident leaders to people who had power to remove barriers in their communities (politicians, landlords, executive directors of social service agencies etc)
- Increased capacity among residents: 10 resident leaders gaining formal certification relevant to their project and all participants accessing some kind of formalized training in key areas including child welfare, dynamics of local leadership and partnership development

However, the story of the Neighbourhood Trust is not a romanticized take on supporting resident organizing. It was a model that showed great promise but also faced challenges of perpetuating power imbalances and not being able to level inherent inequalities within social services, regulatory and funding systems. A lack of stable funding, and the inability to dedicate the needed attention to each group without core staff, meant that in 2015, the difficult decision to close the Neighbourhood Trust had to be made.

This report was developed to capture key components of the Neighbourhood Trust that contributed to its successes in supporting resident leadership and to identify the limitations and failures found within this model and outside its control. It includes recommendations for a future iteration of the Neighbourhood Trust and other community development focussed shared platforms.

The intention with this report is to help (re)ignite a conversation and to invite others to share their learnings in this challenging work, so that it becomes possible to overcome the inherent obstacles in supporting grassroots and resident-led initiatives within a social services regulatory and funding structure. There is an opportunity to learn from these successes and challenges; so funders, organizations and local communities can collectively create supportive conditions for residents to lead.

Lynn's Story

As an adult, Lynn watched the children in her neighbourhood go to school hungry in the morning, and it reminded her of her own childhood. She saw parents struggling to make their grocery budget stretch farther and farther. It made her angry that there didn't seem to be any way to make a difference.

"I can't wait for the social workers to do something. Those kids can't wait."

When she first met staff at Neighbourhood Trust, she had drive, passion and commitment but was looking for help understanding just what would be required of her if she simply wanted to feed children. The first challenge was to find other residents to help her.

"I don't need help. Just tell me what I need to do, and I'll get it done."

Lynn had spent large portions of her life doing things by herself, and the idea of sharing her plan with other people was a difficult one for her to take on board. She got stuck there for a while.

"I don't need other people, and if that's a deal breaker, I'm done."

Then one morning, a week or so later, she showed up with an entourage.

"This is Jo. She can cook, but she's not a people person. This is Linda. She used to work in an office. And this is Tammy. She just wants to help with something. We need some space to work."

They showed up every day for weeks, struggled through meal planning and public health rules, negotiating for space in the social housing high-rise, and finally it was time to document the process and apply for funds. And Lynn got stuck again.

"I'm not doing it. If you need it written down, you can write it yourself. Isn't that what they pay you for?"

There was no convincing her. We cajoled, she pushed back, and then she told us flat out no.

At this point, we questioned whether she was losing her momentum and searched for ways to reignite her passion for her project.

She disappeared for two weeks - no visits, no phone calls.



Then out of the blue one afternoon, she called.

"We need to talk."

She came into my office with her head down. I thought she was going to quit.

"I can't read. And I can't write, well, at least, not much."

This was the tipping point, the moment she had been building to — the moment when, in her experience, it all came to a screeching halt. Only this time it didn't.

We worked in icons, pictographs, whatever it took to get her plan out of her head and onto paper. We got really good at metaphors and imagery and talking in pictures.

And Lynn did something unexpected. She approached the son of a friend, a grade twelve student, and worked out a deal with him that he would help her with her reading and would proofread her written work.

Over time, she learned to talk about herself and her goals in ways that made people listen with respect. She developed confidence and connected with allies.

For three years, Lynn ran a breakfast club that served 56 children every school day. Funding for this endeavour came from five different funders, including United Way Toronto, and West Hill Highland Creek Lion's Club.

Janet Fitzsimmons
Manager of Resident Leadership Strategies
East Scarborough Storefront

Introduction

In the face of pervasive inequality, residents living in marginalized circumstances play essential roles from fighting for policy and systemic change, to meeting the urgent needs of their communities. Lynn's story is an example. Her work was one of the 21 resident-led projects supported by the East Scarborough Storefront(The Storefront) through the Neighbourhood Trust, a shared platform that worked with residents to build their capacity, access funding, and run local change projects in the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park community of Toronto between 2010-2015.



About East Scarborough and The Storefront

East Scarborough is one of the most diverse communities in the country. Almost 30% of the people living in East Scarborough live below the poverty line¹. East Scarborough is home to the highest concentration of social housing in Ontario and to the largest Indigenous community in Toronto outside of the downtown. East Scarborough is geographically located on the fringes of Toronto and is plagued by lack of economic opportunities and poor transit².

The East Scarborough Storefront opened its doors in 2001 and acts as a Community Backbone Organization³. This means that instead of providing programs and services directly, The Storefront focuses on helping networks of residents, social service organizations, academic institutions, businesses, planners and architects work together to engage in meaningful discussions, run programs, organize events, share learning and participate in a wide range of activities effectively and collectively⁴. Through The Storefront:

- Residents can find the services they need because The Storefront operates a service hub where 35 organizations bring social services like legal advice, youth groups and settlement services to the neighbourhood
- Residents are connected with local employment and economic opportunities through The Storefront's Community Wealth Strategy
- Residents are supported by The Storefront to run their own events and volunteer in ways that improve community knowledge and collective action
- The Storefront nurtures innovation, bringing the best of institutions like University of Toronto Scarborough and professions like architecture and integrating them in the myriad activities designed to increase resident voice, knowledge and opportunity in East Scarborough.⁵

In 2009, The Storefront, its partners and local residents launched the Neighbourhood Trust in response to emerging needs both at the community level, but also in the broader social services sector⁶. It was clear that residents were facing barriers to accessing funding designed for them because they were not part of a charitable organization, and that funders had few avenues to invest directly in community-led projects. In developing the Neighbourhood Trust, the Storefront set out to explore how the shared platform model could be more effectively used as a tool for building community power, supporting community-self determination and accelerating investments in resident-led projects.

1 <https://thestorefront.org/fast-facts/>

2 *ibid*

3 <https://thestorefront.org/theory-of-change/>

4 <https://thestorefront.org/why/about-east-scarboroughkgo/>

5 <https://thestorefront.org/social-supports/#COMMAP>

6 <https://thestorefront.org/project/neighbourhood-trust/>

Emergence of Shared Platforms

There is recognition among local residents, funders and organizations, and well documented in research, that effective community change happens with residents taking ownership and leading efforts to improve their communities⁷. However, few funders will invest in community members and resident-led groups directly and there are not a lot of places for residents to go for supports to launch their projects or turn to during the natural ups and downs of project implementation. The reality is, funders and the not-for-profit/charitable sector have imperfect ways of supporting resident leadership and community-determined projects. As a result, shared platforms have increased over the past decade as an approach to incubating grassroots groups and connecting them with mentorship, training, tools, networks and funding to bring their projects to life⁸.

As an emerging field, the role of a “shared platform” and especially a shared platform supporting grassroots non-professional, unincorporated groups in a community development context, is poorly understood and even more poorly resourced⁹. All shared platforms, whether they use existing infrastructure or are purpose built, provide governance, legal and fiduciary oversight to their projects¹⁰. A smaller subset of shared platforms are also designed to help build the capacity of individual leaders to develop and run their projects. An even smaller subset of shared platforms are designed to strengthen the fabric of a community by nurturing and investing in the capacity of local leaders. It is the bridging of community organizing principles with shared platform structures that Neighbourhood Trust wrestled with.

About this Report

Between 2010-2015, the Neighbourhood Trust supported 21 diverse and dynamic resident-led projects with hands-on mentorship and backend administrative support, enabling \$136,000 in charitable funding to go directly to resident leaders¹¹. But the story of the Neighbourhood Trust is not a romanticized take on supporting resident organizing. It was a model that showed great promise but also faced challenges of perpetuating power imbalances and not being able to level inherent inequalities within social services, regulatory and funding systems. A lack of stable funding, and the inability to dedicate the needed attention to each group without core staff, meant that in 2015, the difficult decision to close the Neighbourhood Trust had to be made. Anecdotally and intuitively, Storefront staff, residents, partners and funders knew that, despite its challenges, this shared platform brought good things to the neighbourhood. As it wound down in 2015, those involved reflected on what worked, what didn't and what they would do differently. Using survey data, individual interviews and personal experiences, the team assessed Neighbourhood Trust as a model, and also their own successes and failures within that model. This report captured key insights from this reflection and evaluation process.

This report is aimed at funders and organizations who are incubating grassroots groups or acting as a shared platform. It offers candid insights based on the messiness of trying to support resident leadership when the structures available within the sector perpetuate inequality and instability. This report was developed to help (re)ignite a conversation and to invite others to share their learnings in this challenging work, so that it becomes possible to overcome the inherent obstacles in supporting grassroots and resident-led initiatives within a social services regulatory and funding structure. There is an opportunity to learn from these successes and challenges; so funders, organizations and local communities can collectively create supportive conditions for residents to lead.

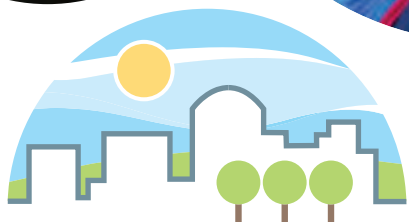
7 This is not to say that governments and non-profit organizations should download responsibility onto residents, but rather recognizes that residents are taking action in their communities and in fact, playing these roles improves both individual and collective well-being.

8 See Moving from Trustee to TRUSTing Collaborations, Skinner, Novak, Romaldi and Ilkiw, 2012

9 See Grounded Qualitative Research on Shared Platforms in the GTA, Dart, 2016

10 See Shared Platform Guidebook, ONN

11 <https://thestorefront.org/project/neighbourhood-trust/>



Action for Neighbourhood Change



Why a Shared Platform in KGO

In the mid-2000s, there was a surge of support for youth and resident- leadership in the city of Toronto. During this time, The Storefront began working closely with the United Way in Toronto (UWGTA) to roll out Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) in Kingston Galloway/Orton Park (KGO). Through ANC, a new stream of funds was designed to put funding in the hands of residents to create local change. At the same time, the Youth Challenge Fund, an initiative of the provincial government, administered through the United Way, was also launched to support youth-led action projects in neighbourhoods across Toronto. While funding was available to support resident-led and youth-led projects, grants could only be released to registered charities. Throughout the city, organizations were voicing their concerns that there was not enough capacity in the social services sector to support the volume of initiatives being seeded by these funding opportunities. The Storefront and other community organizations were finding themselves having to turn down numerous youth leaders looking for “trustees”¹².

By 2009, supports for youth and resident leadership were being discussed with new momentum and there was consensus with residents, social services and funder partners, that there must be a better way to support these projects other than “trusteeships”. Emerging were models that combined the administrative and financial oversight that funders were looking for in a “trusteeship” model, with intentional leadership and capacity building opportunities for residents and grassroots groups. The Storefront launched the Neighbourhood Trust in 2010 as a direct response to local residents in KGO, who wanted to access funding to support their projects, but were not able to on their own. The time was right for the development of the Neighbourhood Trust because of a convergence of:

- **Momentum among residents to make tangible contributions to their local KGO community’s well-being;**
- **Renewed interest among funders in resourcing resident-led initiatives, and;**
- **The Storefront’s increased understanding of the opportunities, challenges and pitfalls of using ‘trusteeships’ in a community development context.**

¹² “Trustees” and “trusteeship” is language used in Ontario to describe arrangements in which a funder provides funding to a charity in order with the expectation that the charity will administer the dollars for an unincorporated project. It has historically been a means by which public and/or charitable dollars have been directed to an unincorporated initiative.

Neighbourhood Trust: Core Components

The Neighbourhood Trust was designed to support resident leaders with a commitment to running their own community-based projects, programs or events but had little or no experience with the formal not-for-profit/charitable sector. For most of the project leaders, writing was a struggle. And very few expressed interest in learning how to navigate the not-for-profit sector.

Through the Neighbourhood Trust, resident leaders were able to access one-on-one coaching, attend learning opportunities to develop their skills, share knowledge and resources with each other, access backend financial and administrative supports and be part of a charitable organization (through Tides Canada) in compliance with CRA guidelines. Neighbourhood Trust consisted of four key elements, each working in different ways to increase access to support for resident-led projects:



Governance and oversight

(enabled resident-led projects to access funding)



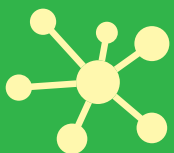
Shared administrative systems

(plugged grassroots projects into existing organizational backend infrastructure)



Capacity building

(provided training and support for project implementation)



Network development

(connected residents to broader networks)

Governance and oversight

A significant barrier to accessing funding is that few funders are able to support unincorporated groups directly. By joining the Neighbourhood Trust, resident leaders became part of Tides Canada, a charitable organization, with the governance structures in place that many funders required.

Shared Administrative Systems

By joining the Neighbourhood Trust, resident leaders were able to access administrative systems including human resources, financial, as well as meeting, organizing and programming space (if required) in The Storefront's service hub. This meant that they didn't need to learn about, and spend energy on creating all new systems or spend unnecessary time on building their administrative capacity; which, of course meant they could spend more time on the project they set out to run.

Capacity Building

To help support leadership development and project implementation, the Neighbourhood Trust created opportunities for residents to develop and practice skills necessary to run community projects; through one-on-one coaching, formal workshops and learning opportunities and through ongoing support during project implementation. This meant that residents were not alone during the natural ups and downs inherent in running a project.

Network Development

The Neighbourhood Trust helped build connections between project leaders and people in the community who held power to remove barriers to residents ability to support each other in an organized way, including connecting them with landlords, local politicians, executive directors of local agencies etc.






By simultaneously and intentionally building out shared administrative systems, capacity building and network development strategies, the Neighbourhood Trust created local infrastructure that connected groups to the backend supports they needed as well as leadership development opportunities that could help accelerate their projects reach. The Storefront's long-standing relationships with different community stakeholders helped ensure that resident leaders were able to engage with power structures that could create barriers to local projects succeeding.

Community Benefits and Impact

In its five years of operation, Neighbourhood Trust supported 21 resident-led initiatives, and facilitated the allocation of \$136,000 in charitable funding directly to resident leaders. With the appropriate resources and supports in place, residents created projects that demonstrably improved the neighbourhood.

The benefits to residents leaders included: increased confidence, increased skills, decreased barriers to civic participation, increased numbers of programs in the community, and increased resident agency and ownership for what happens in their community.

Key Outcomes Achieved through the Neighbourhood Trust

Outcome	Measures/Insights
 <p>Increased numbers of local projects run by local residents</p>	<p>21 resident-led projects were resourced and supported</p> <p>8 projects continued to operate independently after their involvement with Neighbourhood Trust</p>
 <p>Increased numbers of social/ educational activities available to local residents</p>	<p>More than 1000 local residents, adults, children and youth participated in resident run projects</p> <p>Survey results indicate that residents and supporters thought that Neighbourhood Trust brought positive organizational and individual resident benefit to the community</p>
 <p>Increased number of financial resources reached the grassroots</p>	<p>14 funders connected with and funded resident led projects</p> <p>\$136,000 were provided by funders and donors to local resident led community improvement projects</p> <p>Survey results indicated that the funders believe that Neighbourhood Trust was a vehicle that met their goals to connect meaningfully with resident leaders and their projects</p>
 <p>Increased capacity among residents</p>	<p>10 resident leaders gained certifications relevant to their project</p> <p>Through formalized training, residents articulated and demonstrated increased capacity in 10 key areas including child welfare, dynamics of local leadership and partnership development</p>
 <p>Increased local investments in resident leaders</p>	<p>One of Neighbourhood Trust's great successes was the matching of local funding sources (churches, service clubs, businesses, etc) with Neighbourhood Trust projects and connecting resident leaders to people who had power to remove barriers in their communities (politicians, landlords, executive directors of social service agencies etc)</p>

For The Storefront, positive, long-term relationships with all those involved in Neighbourhood Trust was a major focus and a key success. Despite some difficult times and difficult decisions, The Storefront has ongoing positive relationships with all the resident leaders (though some have moved away), all the funders and donors and supporting organizations. As a result of Neighbourhood Trust, resident-led projects became part of the fabric of the neighbourhood, integrated into work being done by organizations, faith communities and resident associations. Multiple new relationships developed between and among the resident leaders- relationships that led to reciprocal learning, sharing and support, and that transcended and continue to transcend Neighbourhood Trust and The Storefront.

"It helps because next time someone says, 'Hey, wouldn't it be great to do a community barbeque?' you have people you can draw on who are already skilled."

– Janet Fitzsimmons
 Manager of Resident Leadership
 at The East Scarborough Storefront

Reflecting on the model: Limitations and Failures in Shared Platforms

While shared platforms, including the Neighbourhood Trust, help address some of the challenges and barriers facing resident-led groups, it is not a perfect approach nor does it have the support of the social sector which has few and fragmented systems designed to support grassroots leadership. Based on the experience of Neighbourhood Trust, there are some key learnings and tensions organizations operating shared platforms and funders looking to invest in community-based projects (but are relying on shared platforms to do so) need to grapple with¹³.

These include:



¹³ The experiences of unincorporated groups and key considerations for them in joining a shared platforms is an important and under-documented area in the resources developed to date about Shared Platforms.

Adaptability & Structure alignment:

The Neighbourhood Trust was not a one-size fits all shared platform, and tried to meet each resident group where they were at. For example, in the same year, the Neighbourhood Trust supported a very successful project in which the leadership had virtually no capacity to deal with written documents, while simultaneously supporting a project that was quickly gaining the capacity to set up as their own organization. This ability to align its structure to the needs of a project was one of the great strengths of Neighbourhood Trust. It adapted how it worked with residents based on the types of supports needed and the goals of the resident leaders.

Overall, this adaptability was a strength. However, there were also limitations to what the Neighbourhood Trust was able to offer as it was designed to support grassroots projects that required under \$15,000 per year to reach their goals. Two Neighbourhood Trust projects became so successful that, within a year, they had resources well beyond the established limit. Neighbourhood Trust was unequipped to support larger projects that were on their way to becoming organizations in their own right, and yet there were and are few structures in place for emergent projects/organizations with revenues of \$15,000 to \$100,000 annually. The Storefront worked with Tides Canada and their initiative The Base (an initiative designed to build the capacity of emerging leaders and their projects) in an effort to ameliorate this challenge. The Base was able to provide project leaders with governance and capacity building support, but was not designed to work within a community context. Thus, these projects still had the structural support they required to interface with the non-profit sector, but no longer had the community based mentorship and access to supports available to their smaller grassroots counterparts.

Misalignments & Managing Expectations

At times, managing resident expectation was a challenge. At its core, Neighbourhood Trust was designed to support resident leadership. Residents were encouraged and supported to lead whatever initiative they were passionate about, which led to some fabulous and diverse projects being implemented in the neighbourhood. However, the core focus on building resident capacity was not always consistent with resident expectation or opinion of what Storefront's role should be. For example, in one instance, the resident leaders were fine with holding responsibility for the project itself, in fact, they didn't feel that they needed any sort of capacity building, help or oversight. Residents suggested that The Storefront's only role should be to secure and flow money to the project. While in another, a project was attracting fewer

and fewer participants and the question often arose as to why the Storefront wasn't dedicating staff time and resources to ensuring the success of the project. In this case residents felt Storefront staff should have made a greater investment in individual projects, and not focus solely on the capacity of the residents to lead them. It was clear that there was a misalignment between the intention of the Neighbourhood Trust and the expectations of resident leaders.

Balancing control and autonomy

In order to foster meaningful relationships, The Storefront staff tended to err on the side of autonomy for the projects versus exerting control. Residents were provided with learning opportunities relevant to their projects and required to provide documentation when it was legally required, but for the most part residents made their own decisions. This approach was successful in that residents knew what they needed to know for compliance, health and safety regulations and there were no major incidents during the life of Neighbourhood Trust. However, the balancing of control and autonomy made for some very uncomfortable relationships.

Power & Gatekeeping

When an organization operates a shared platform, it creates a legal relationship between that organization and the resident leaders on the platform. This creates power dynamics where the resident becomes accountable to the organization. In this dynamic, the organization ends up increasing its power over residents rather than shifting power to them. What was discovered over time was that, though Neighbourhood Trust was explicitly designed to shift power away from formalized organizations and into the hands of local residents, the new legal relationship that The Storefront had with residents actually gave them more power over them than before. The stated intent then, and the behaviour of Neighbourhood Trust staff were at odds with each other and the residents were confused and unhappy with that.

In the Neighbourhood Trust model, The Storefront supported residents to organize their ideas for projects, but it was The Storefront staff who actually held the funding relationships and wrote the funding proposals. Since The Storefront relied on those same funding relationships for its own survival, the staff and Storefront leadership felt strongly about holding onto those funding relationships, which further increased The Storefront's power.

One of the founding principles of Neighbourhood Trust was that grassroots groups should be able to provide community-based leadership without learning to navigate the very complex and not always logical non-profit/charitable sectors.

Unfortunately, being the ones who understood the sector put The Storefront in a gatekeeper role. Staff were in the position of trying to explain the non-profit sector (with all its complexities and contradictions) to residents, and at the same time, explain the reality of grassroots projects to funders. A significant amount of time and capacity building efforts were, by necessity spent on helping residents understand rules that The Storefront had no control over and that the residents disagreed with. Rules that came from Revenue Canada, health and safety legislation or that were associated with specific funding contracts, were beyond the control of The Storefront to change. However, many of the residents didn't understand that The Storefront wasn't just making up arbitrary rules to try to control them. By trying to shield residents from the complexities and challenges of working in the not-for-profit sector, the Neighbourhood Trust/Storefront also became the voice of the sector to the residents. When things didn't make sense, or funding was denied, they looked to The Storefront to fix it because they saw The Storefront as representing the sector and therefore, holding the power. The valuable and hard won trust of residents began to erode when Storefront staff found themselves being thrust into this role. Key learnings included that frank conversations about power are critical at all stages of project development and implementation.

Organizational Capacity: This is not an “off the side of the desk” activity

Allocating appropriate resources and staff time to all aspects of Neighbourhood Trust, was a core intention from its inception. However, securing funding for the Neighbourhood Trust was a problem throughout its five-year history. It became apparent very quickly that, even with a small number of resident-led projects, running a local shared platform was an enormously staff-intensive undertaking. What became apparent quickly was that the part time resourcing that The Storefront had secured was insufficient for the full-time initiative they had undertaken. It was therefore necessary for The Storefront to combine the Neighbourhood Trust role with other activities to ensure The Storefront could hire a full-time staff to run Neighbourhood Trust. The job was extremely sophisticated and required an unusual combination of skills. Over the life of Neighbourhood Trust, it had four staff, none of whom were able take on the role in its entirety, which meant that the Manager of Resident Leadership was putting tremendous amounts of energy into all aspects of Neighbourhood Trust. The high turnover meant that the staff never became proficient in the work and trust between the staff responsible and the resident leaders was never properly established and remained with the Manager throughout the project.

In addition, The Storefront had grossly underestimated the need for one-on-one mentorship and support. Becoming a resident leader is much more than the nuts and bolts of running a project: it fundamentally changes your relationship with other residents and with the organizations in the community. This is difficult emotional terrain, and The Storefront learned a lot about helping people to understand, adapt to and be strengthened by these changing roles. Working these and other issues through with residents required deep analysis and a great deal of time.

Working in a Precarious Sector

Ultimately, shared platforms cannot protect residents from the precariousness of funding in the charitable sector. Funding streams designed to support residents developing and implementing their own projects, programs and events provide a great opportunity for residents to use their talents, skills and passion to benefit their own community. However, this type of funding is typically available on a one-time basis. Once the initial funding has ended, residents begin to search for various and different sources of funding. While some dollars specifically earmarked for resident-led projects to continued to flow (United Way Resident Action Grants being the prime example), Neighbourhood Trust existed in a context of non-profit organizations competing for fewer and fewer available dollars coupled with more demanding requirements for program evaluation and impact analysis. Residents were understandably frustrated. Some felt The Storefront was not trying hard enough, some needed more regular and accessible reports, many wanted better financial reporting and all wanted more support than The Storefront was able to provide.

Many projects reached a level of success that meant they were operating for their fourth and fifth year with growing attendance and wait lists. The resident leaders were desperate for sustainable funds that just were not available, which made the staff role even more challenging. Investment in resident organizing has powerful potential; but without ongoing, collaborative and sustainable funding, for residents, it felt like opening the door to shared power and control and then slamming it shut again.

Moving Forward

What is clear is that the Neighbourhood Trust had demonstrable impact on the community and on the funding sector in Toronto. Funders continue to approach The Storefront/Tides to “trustee” neighbourhood-based projects. In fact, at the time of writing, The Storefront continues to support six resident-led projects in one way or another. And 100 percent of the resident leaders, funders and local organizations surveyed said that: The Storefront, as Community Backbone Organization, should continue running a shared platform for resident-led projects.

And yet, deciding how to move forward is far from clear. The ability for grassroots groups and resident leaders to learn together, access tools and funds to run locally based projects has clear and positive impact on the leaders themselves and the community as a whole. There continues to be structural barriers to resident leadership that makes a resident-focused shared platform very valuable. The Neighbourhood Trust is a good model and example of what is possible in terms of local infrastructure that opens up access to funding and leadership supports for residents. But based on the the experiences of the Neighbourhood Trust, its partners and resident leaders, it is only worth doing with the resources and opportunity to do it well.

Moving forward, a new iteration of the Neighbourhood Trust would require:

- **Stable funding for the shared platform**
- **Ongoing efforts to dismantle inequitable power relationships within the platform and across the sector**
- **Enhancements to the resident leadership model**
- **Continued high engagement, relationship-driven approaches**

Stable Funding

To ensure the residents have a consistent place to grow their ideas, The Storefront would not (re)establish a shared platform and create the expectation in community that this support exists without stable funding. This is an obvious learning, and an essential one to name. Leadership development, capacity building and increasing access to funding for resident-led groups all necessitates dedicated time to build relationships, provide the needed one-on-one support, facilitate training opportunities and ensure administrative processes are in place. When working in a grassroots community development framework, there are many costs associated with mentorship and capacity building that can, at times, be resourced through one-time project funding, but for the most part remain an under-resourced part of the organization’s work. This ‘off the side of your desk’ approach to shifting power and bridging systems is weak at best and can actually be destructive to the fragile relationship between people living in marginalized communities and the social sector that is trying to support them.

Dismantling inequitable power relationships

If the funding were in place, the significant hurdle to overcome would be power dynamics. This is not just an issue for The Storefront but for any organization running a shared platform in a community development context. Supporting resident led projects in a community development context requires discussions about power dynamics among residents, organizations committed to community development and their funders. Honest and upfront conversations about power are needed, but so is sector transformation.

To build the next iteration would necessitate continued efforts to dismantle power inequities wherever possible. This would include making discussions about power a core part of curriculum for Neighbourhood Trust participants, staff and supporters. And core to the shared platform would be ongoing efforts to develop and experiment with ways to deal with the very difficult power dynamics that inevitably ensue. This would include frank discussion with resident leaders and funders so that everyone is aware from the outset of the potential pitfalls and a mutually supportive relationship in managing power dynamics can be developed.

Enhancements to the model

To create a resident leadership model that is responsive to resident needs and adaptable to project growth, the next iteration would:

- Build a graduated structure to intentionally support various types of projects at various stages in their growth/life cycle. This would include capacity building at each stage with a focus on resident learning and capacity building opportunities with one-time or short-term projects being a way to test new skills. Efforts to help sustain resident-led projects over the long-term would depend on if they had a committed funder.
- Include a formalized intake interview that clearly articulated what Storefront role was and was not in regard to their project, in order to manage expectations and increase transparency about the limitations placed on the shared platform and how that impacts resident-led projects
- Develop policies and tools so that residents on the Neighbourhood Trust platform could build their fundraising capacity and thus be responsible for their own fundraising, thus removing the shared platform as the gatekeeper in these relationships by becoming more of a broker
- Develop clear exit strategies for projects, that includes working with other organizations to figure out next steps for projects that were growing and helping shorter term projects celebrate successes and end the project well

Privileging Relationships

Any future iterations of the Neighbourhood Trust would continue to put relationships at the forefront of its priorities. The growth of relationships and the maintenance of trust with resident leaders through rocky times was due to the dedication and belief of staff and residents in the value of the work and the capacity of residents to lead.



Closing (and an Opening...)

So where are things now? There continues to be recognition that resident leadership matters and that there is renewed interest among funders in Toronto to strengthen local neighbourhoods through the leadership of its residents. However, there continues to be few avenues available for residents to access funding to bring their projects to life. The context residents, grassroots groups, organizations committed to supporting community-driven projects, and funders find themselves in mirrors the conditions that brought the Neighbourhood Trust to life back in 2010. Funders and the City of Toronto are again exploring how to invest in community-based projects and resident leadership, and looking for ways to do this important work. And some shared platforms that emerged close to ten years ago have continued to operate with little attention or dedicated resources while others like the Neighbourhood Trust wound down. In these moments where intentions come up against structural limitations (ie. funders want to fund residents/communities directly, but cannot seem to), it can be community members, residents, and young people that lose out. Reflecting on the successes, failures and challenges both within the model and beyond the control of the Neighbourhood Trust has been a generative process that offers important insights for how to build on what has worked and not repeat the same cycles. Within these learnings are clear guideposts for (re)designing shared platforms to strengthen the fabric of a community, promote community self-determination and increase equity in funding. While not a panacea, shared platforms that intentionally focus on relationships, building community power and are properly resourced have an essential role to play in these times.





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SHARED PLATFORM

The Storefront facilitates collaboration, builds community and supports people to learn and create together, to live healthy lives, to find meaningful work, to play and thrive.

Our work is focused on the Kingston Galloway Orton Park Community.

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