

The Philosophy and thinking behind the Connected Community Approach



In reading this document, you are engaging in a journey to understand the role of the Connected Community Approach in the context of oppressive systems. The Connected Community Approach (CCA) has been developed iteratively over time through direct practice, reflection, learning and integrating over more than two decades of the on-the-ground work of the East Scarborough Storefront. It continues to iterate and evolve over time. CCA is intended to be adopted and adapted in ways that make sense to the specific context.

CCA embodies the courage, humility and authenticity of many people who practiced the approach in a variety of contexts. You are the next step in CCA's evolution and building more equitable communities.

This document is the philosophical underpinnings of CCA; it helps us to better understand why and how we see CCA and place-based systems change contributing to the creation of a more equitable society.

The impetus for creating this document was backed by the momentum of a broader anti-black racism and decolonization movement and the opportunity to bounce forward from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in communities. The collective reflections of many people, communities and perspectives that have contributed to the evolved thinking presented here.

Our goal is equity.

What equity looks like and feels like is unique and nuanced at different scales. As professionals in this space, working towards equity we as individuals can expect to sit with the discomfort and vulnerability that comes with continually questioning who we are, what we know, the power we possess and what we have, so that the work we undertake fosters the spaces, environments and communities where equity-deserving people can thrive, belong and feel safer.

As an organization equity looks and feels like pushing the boundaries to move away from a white-centered, colonial, hegemonic status quo and engaging in constant reflection, asking ourselves:

- what does an anti-racist approach feel like for Black People;
- what does a decolonized approach feel like for Indigenous People;
- what does an inclusive approach feel like for people of different faiths, genders; and other identities at the intersections?

A CCA TENSION

Our aspiration to work towards decolonization and liberation are based in cooperation and partnership often with people in institutions and systems that are colonial and participate in perpetuating systemic inequalities.

In our work as individuals and organizations, we are continually finding new ways to dismantle systems of oppression and injustice and re-imagine, co-design and co-create new systems. We're so glad you are with us on this exciting and important journey.

CCA the LAND and Right Relations

In many Indigenous creation stories, Turtle Island is the name of the lands we call North and Central America today: the land upon which we live. This land is foundational to our existence. Without the land, the water, the air and the sun, human society cannot survive.

Indigenous people have, for generations, walked this land and celebrated their identities and histories; long before the arrival of settlers, Indigenous people knew what it meant to be part of a connected community through their spirituality, relationship to nature and respect for each other. Indigenous people were and are the knowledge keepers that nurtured the land so that it can nurture us.

Connected communities are about bringing people together, about co-creating solutions to the problems we all share. At the root of connected communities is the worth and dignity of all people. We acknowledge that we are nurturing this principle in the context of a country with a dark and violent past. We have actively and intentionally sought to eradicate Indigenous cultures and torn people away from their own lands and families to further goals rooted in a dangerous paradigm of white supremacy. Stolen and occupied lands, slavery, indentured servitude and racism are things rarely spoken of and yet they are part of Canada's founding story.



We believe land acknowledgements are meant to remind us of the history of this land, our relationship to the land and natural world and to push us to educate ourselves so we can rebuild relationships with Indigenous People authentically. We are nascent in this process.

To help us on this journey we have identified reflection questions and commitments to move us towards meaningful action:

- How have we educated ourselves on the colonial history of this land and systemic inequities facing Indigenous People?
- How have we as individuals benefited from colonization at the expense of Indigenous lives and culture?
- What steps can we take personally and through our work to advance reconciliation and relationship building with Indigenous communities?



We are, together, creating a connected communities movement made up of individuals, groups, organizations and institutions from across Turtle Island. In order to authentically ground that movement in the truth of our countries we acknowledge the need to:

- Educate ourselves and acknowledge the lands we are working from;
- Learn about and integrate practices to be in right relations to the First Peoples of this land
- Seek and foster ways of knowing and being that protect and nurture the land and the people in it;
- Read the [Truth and Reconciliation reports](#)  and identify ways to integrate the [94 Calls to Action](#)  in our work;
- Ground ourselves in the truth of our complex histories and honour our treaty covenants
- Build on the legacies of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, and on the wisdom and achievements of generations of Black people and people of colour from across the globe.

[May we approach our work in ways that craft a new narrative for the future; a narrative that is built on humility, honesty, empathy and justice for our planet and all the people who reside here.](#)

What we mean by community:

Geographic communities come in various shapes and sizes and can best be described as the places where people live and interact. This could be a specific building, or a much larger geographic area such as a neighbourhood or village. The main thing is that communities are at a scale in which people reasonably interact, use the same services and green spaces and experience and address similar systemic issues..

CCA was created in response to geographic concentrations of poverty, racialization and marginalization in urban contexts we support as community ecosystems where people who have been marginalized. However, the ethos of CCA, the 10 keys, the tools and the principles can be applied in communities of all kinds including cultural communities, communities of interest, faith communities and political groups. Ultimately, though, we all live and work in place and in those places, local and broader systems play out in way that deny certain people equitable access to opportunities by reasons of racism, classism and other forms of discrimination: it is these systems that CCA seeks to disrupt.

What do we mean by systems?

When we talk about **systems** in the Connected Community Approach, we are typically referring to human systems: the interconnected interaction among people and processes, both inside and outside of institutions and governments (though systems themselves are deeply rooted in the natural world, without which human systems cannot survive)

To put it simply, the systems in CCA are made up of people and relationships. We all influence systems every day; we are not separate from the systems we intend to influence.

Our society is being confronted with the fact that many of our systems are built on oppressive foundations of racism, patriarchy and capitalism . These structural, institutional, interpersonal and internalized hierarchies underpin Canadian social, political and economic systems. The inequities existing in Canada today, are rooted in:

- **Supremacy and domination** of one group of people over another, including and especially white supremacy.
- **Settler Colonialism**, the ongoing cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and stolen lands on which Canada was built; and
- **The enslavement** of Black and Indigenous People, through legalized ownership, allowing for the production of labour needed to build Canada as a country and the practice of indentured servitude during and after the abolition of slavery¹

The institutionalization of racism and colonization as the founding story of Canada, long upheld by the dominant group and culture, has reproduced false, racialized, constructs. Today, we see this consistently show up in the policies and practices that perpetuate systemic inequities and systems of oppression, resulting in privileges for some and harm for others.

¹ <https://humanrights.ca/story/the-story-of-slavery-in-canadian-history>.



What do we mean by systems change?

When we talk about leveraging CCA for systems change, what we mean is shifting systems in ways that:

- De-emphasize top down programs to help “the vulnerable”, and emphasize social infrastructure that supports community-led and community-centred decision making and action
- Shift the locus of power and control from centralized, white, patriarchal hierarchies to decentralized power based on diverse perspectives, lived experiences and ways of knowing.
- Move away from individual, siloed and programmatic responses to complex social issues and toward collective, integrated, cross-sector solutions

A CCA TENSION

We work with people within oppressive systems and institutions that have potential and commitment to transformation while acknowledging many social movements are working towards eliminating oppressive systems and institutions which do not seek change.

What do we mean by decentring your systemic self?

Systems start with our systemic self. The **systemic self**². We are all part of the systems that we seek to disrupt. By reflecting on how we as individuals may be perpetuating white supremacist and colonial constructs, and intentionally changing our behaviour in ways that:

- Get out of the way
- Check our egos; continually question our motives
- Reflect on our identities and what we have access to (privilege)
- Ask questions about what we think we know
- Not be defensive
- Be ok with being uncomfortable; sit in discomfort and not expect someone to take it away
- Hand over power
- Remove barriers, sponsor & amplify others
- Resource and share wealth, not hoard
- Be vulnerable

² Critical Reflective Practice by Ekuia Andria C. Walcott, Akua Benjamin and Jana Vinsky. includes our thoughts and actions that are influenced by and influence the systems we are a part of.

Six Conditions of Systems Change

Systems are complex. When enacting CCA, you are creating the conditions for systems to change in six distinct ways: **“mental models, relationships and connections, power dynamics, resource flows, practices and policies.”**³

Mental Models: In order for change to be truly transformational, the underpinnings of that change need to be deeply rooted in how people think. Much of CCA is designed to shift the way people think about solutions to geographic marginalization and introduce a new paradigm that centres community members as agents of change and to see the community as a complex ecosystem of people, organizations and institutions

Relationships and Connections: Who interacts with whom and how is at the core of any system. CCA is designed to foster and nurture relationships that are cross-sector and at multiple scales so that systems are designed to work for everyone and especially those they are designed to benefit.

Power Dynamics: At its core, the reasons that so many systems fail so many people is because they are designed to support capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy: keeping power in the hands of a few privileged people. Connected community strategies are designed to disrupt the status quo by increasing the power of communities that have historically been racialized, marginalized and made vulnerable.

Resource Flows: One of the ways in which communities have been made vulnerable is through the inequitable allocation of resources. CCA seeks to drive resources to marginalized communities and co-create community based social infrastructure that supports equitable decision making about their use.

Practices: Meaningful systems change is about how systems impact people’s day to day lives. CCA seeks to see people, organizations and governments work across a range of disciplines, helping to ground decision making in the realities of life in communities that have been historically racialized, marginalized and made vulnerable.

Policies: Ultimately, for systems to change, the change needs to be enshrined in and perpetuated through policies. Governments and institutions can look to CCA for frameworks to co-create strategies that increase the influence of people who have historically been excluded from the design and development of policy.

A CCA TENSION

Our focus is on human interaction and authentic relationships. Personal wellbeing is a critical CCA success factor; CCA seeks to influence the systems that create and sustain wellbeing, and can only be effective when there are also programs in place that support individual wellbeing.

Why Community Development?

Community development centres the people who live, work and interact in a specific geographic context as decision makers and actors in shaping their community. Critical to the success of community development is the social infrastructure that supports it.

In CCA we define social infrastructure as the people, processes and physical elements of a community that facilitate bringing people together, creation of social capital, support for people's needs, celebration of culture, and building of community so that local people can effectively interact with and influence the systems affecting them.

With the right social infrastructure, collaborative coalitions of community-based actors: grassroots groups, organizations and institutions can work effectively with each other and with players outside of the community to address systemic issues in ways that are inclusive, strategic, mutually reinforcing and get stronger over time.

A CCA TENSION

Working within the system to change the system is an incremental approach to improving inequitable outcomes for communities who require urgent change.

Community based social infrastructure can be described as the interaction between five interrelated things:

- The physical spaces in which people interact
- The services that people receive
- The community-led processes that support people to work collectively to be agents of their own change
- The decision-making structures in place
- The ways in which people communicate and connect with each other

The Connected Community Approach is grounded in community development practices and seeks to improve the social infrastructure so that people who live, work and interact in a specific geographic context are active players in shaping their community.

Why Community Development strategy?

While community development supports people who live in a shared geographic context to be active agents of change in their communities, social infrastructure is shaped by forces both inside and outside of the community.

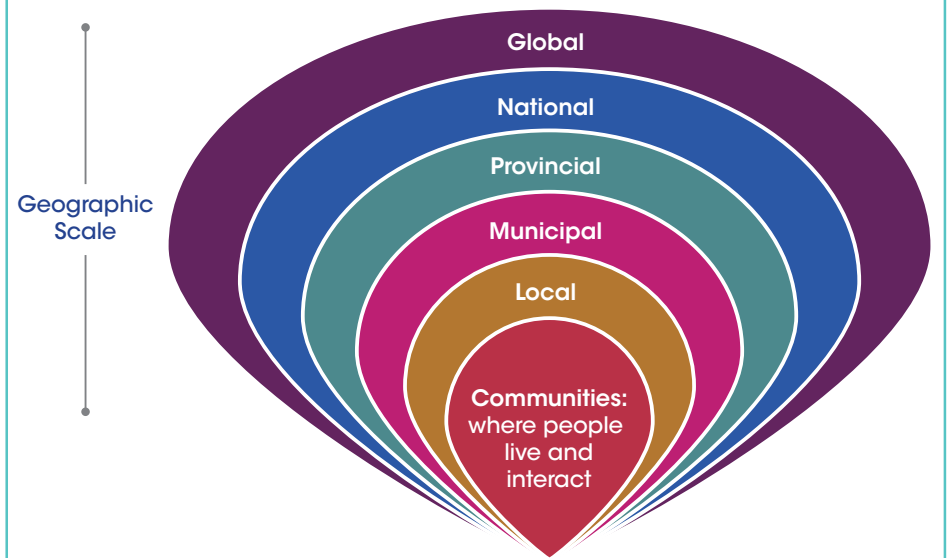
Community development strategies may originate inside or outside of the community itself; either way, the purpose of community development strategies is to create the conditions so that:

- community is central in decision making and action (and especially those communities who, in a colonial system have histories that affect them)
- strategies and actions of larger systems are aligned to support community priorities and
- structures, resources and mechanisms are in place so that communities have ongoing influence on the larger systems that affect them.

A CCA TENSION

The best community-centred approach cannot result in total harmony due to the multiplicity of voices, divergent opinions and actions.

Centering Communities in Systems Change



A CCA TENSION

CCA focuses on the local as the optimal scale for social change while most systems change approaches focus on larger scales.

Definitions:

The Connected Community Approach introduces a paradigm that centres geographic communities, the places where people live and interact, as the focal point of systems change work. The Connected Community Approach recognizes communities as ecosystems, and the people in those ecosystems as agents of change. The Connected Community Approach is a set of principles and practical applications known as “the 10 keys” that can be adopted and adapted to address various systemic issues in ways that are grounded in community

Community Integrator aka Community Backbone

Organization:⁴ The Connected Community Approach introduces a specific role in a community: the role of the people, group(s) or organization(s) whose purpose is connecting and integrating priorities, strategies and activities across the community ecosystem and between the community ecosystem and larger movements, institutions and governments whose actions impact the community. This role includes:

- Centring equity and fostering inclusive processes
- Connecting people to knowledge & opportunities
- Helping people to support one another and work better together
- Facilitating opportunities for systems players to centre community in the planning and implementation of strategies

- Leveraging assets and resources
- Weaving networks.

Community builders: Anyone proactively engaged in activity that makes a specific community more equitable and liveable for the people who live there.

Community Development: is a process whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. Community development typically supports people who live in a shared geographic context to be active agents of change. Community development is the intentional development of relationships, systems and structures to improve community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural). Community development is distinct from service delivery in that community development seeks to change community conditions and service delivery seeks to help people adapt to conditions as they are.

Equity: In CCA we define equity as the societal provision of opportunity and support in ways that are meaningful and effective for individuals to thrive. Equity means both righting historic injustices and respecting the autonomy of individuals to decide what it means to thrive.

⁴ This role was originally labelled as a “community backbone organization”. As the thinking evolves, there have been concerns that the idea of a “backbone” does not appropriately describe a role that is facilitative in nature. For our purposes, we seek to understand the nature of the role rather than label it. The role can equally be called “community backbone”, “community facilitator”, “integrator” or “network weaver”: it is up to the individual community to use whatever label resonates.

Equity-deserving people and groups: People and groups who experience barriers to equal access, opportunities and resources due to systemic oppression and discrimination

Grassroots: grassroots action in CCA is defined as any non-professional action that focuses on collective priorities and is accountable to a specific community.

Grassroots leadership: is a purposeful set of actions taken by local residents to galvanize collective strengths and bring about collective benefit. Grassroots leaders engage in a wide range of hyper-local actions from neighbourhood barbecues to civic action campaigns. A thriving community includes an ecosystem of grassroots activities and processes.

Institutions: Big systems players (eg funders, governments, policy makers, universities, colleges and hospitals) whose work impacts marginalized/racialized communities. Especially relevant are institutions that make rules and laws that dictate how communities evolve and institutions (sometimes referred to as Anchor Institutions) physically located in a specific community.

Community ecosystems: The complex interaction among a diversity of players in a defined geographic area

Systems: the interconnected interaction among people and processes (both inside and outside of institutions and governments)

Cheerleaders in Castles: Players who work in large bureaucracies who champion a Connected Community Approach⁵

Social Infrastructure: the people, processes and physical elements of a community that facilitate bringing people together, the creation of social capital, support for people's needs, celebration of culture, and building of community so that local people can effectively interact with and influence the systems affecting them.

⁵ Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, *New Power*, Random House Canada 2018