



High-Hanging Fruit

2023 Inspiring Communities Learning Report

Contents

Executive Director’s Message	1
Time Dances On.....	1
The Work Evolves	2
Asserting Equity	2
Taking Care	3
This Report	3
Introduction: The Work Evolves	4
High Hanging Fruit.....	4
Evaluation Commitment.....	4
Strengthening Community Connections.....	6
Places.....	7
Themes	8
It’s More Than Geography.....	8
What we learned: Equity requires us to move beyond narrow geographic boundaries	8
Youth Strategy – Digby and Beyond	10
What we learned: Often youth are more ready and able to energetically embrace innovation and social change.....	10
Building on our Collaboration Success.....	11
Atlantic Ecosystem and our role as a Node	12
Collaborating at a national scale: SI Canada	12
Atlantic Changemakers Council	12
IC Fellowship Program	13
What We Learned About and From Collaborations.....	14
What to carry forward.....	14
What to lay down	14
Framing the Future.....	15
Demonstrating our Impact	16
Looking at our province and region with a systems lens	17
Transportation & Mobility as an entry point to Community Vitality in cities and rural places	20
Shifting Policy: Atlantic Black Policy and City Building.....	22
Atlantic Black Policy Conference.....	23
Art of City Building.....	23
Integrating Policy Change across our work.....	24
Climate Plus: looking holistically at climate change.....	24
Food and climate	25
Queer Climate Justice	25
Tamarack Climate Transitions Cohort #1 and #2.....	26

Clean Interns – Food and Climate.....	26
Arts and culture and how they work for systems change.....	26
Open Space.....	27
Changemakers Food Security Mural.....	28
Community Trauma Discussion Film Series	28
Write from the Heart – HRM Youth Writing Circle	29
Remembering Miya – Mural.....	30
Modeling Equitable, Efficient & Sustainable Processes.....	31
Our Own Work – Reflective Practice	32
Getting ourselves together.....	32
Reporting on what we experience.....	33
Modeling is a strategic direction	33
Describing the Elephant and Other Project Problems	35
Decolonizing Time	36
Addressing Burnout - The Shut Down Experiment	36
Arantzazulab.....	36

Executive Director's Message

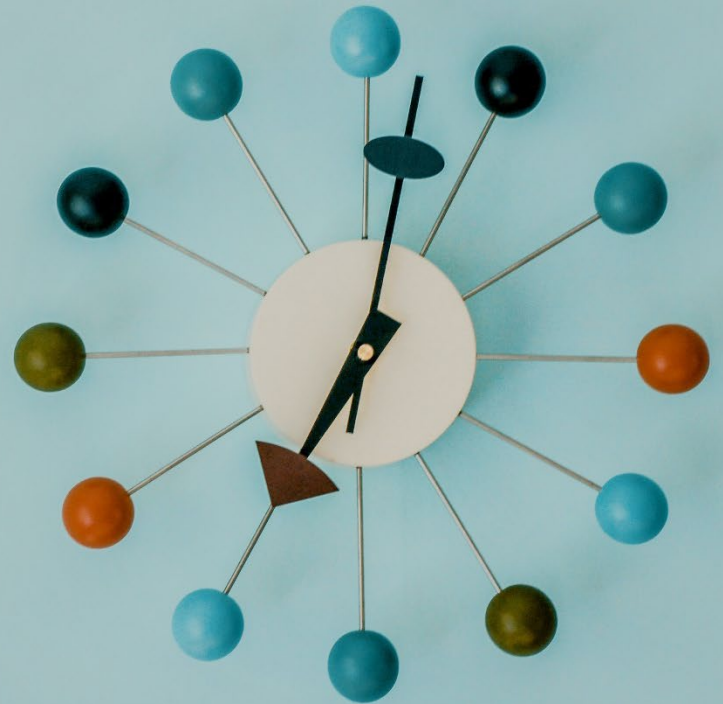


Photo by Tom Swinnen: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/white-clock-2249964/>

Time Dances On

Five years since Inspiring Communities' inception. Three years since the start of the pandemic. Two years since I became the Executive Director. People say "time marches on" but in the last few years it has become apparent that time does not move in such a regular, paced way. It dances: fast and slow, pirouetting, twisting forward, dabbing sideways, sashaying away and then electric sliding back.

Recognizing our inconsistent experience of time can help us decolonize and resist our culture's sense of time urgency. This is a notion we experimented with at our spring staff retreat, with the theme borrowed from our principles: "Mind the Pace or Change the Scope." It is a very different experience to plan an event agenda without assigning time slots.

With our time sense skewed, the way we assess our impact shifts. As always, changes are happening with or without us. It is impossible to isolate one change and map its consequences only. Real life is not a controlled laboratory. But then, this has always been the nature of systems change, even well before the pandemic. So, we track our impact with evaluation tools that don't rely on static time horizons.

The Work Evolves

We have evolved our approach as our understanding has grown. We envision thriving, equitable communities... in other words, communities that are thriving because everyone's voice is present, heard and respected. All voices have a say in the community's direction and development. Our role is to ensure that the equity-deserving people in communities have that opportunity, by developing their capacity, amplifying their voices and helping shift environmental factors like policy and bureaucracy.

We know now that Collective Impact was never our *why*. In the winter, we engaged in [Innoweave](#)'s Impact and Strategic Clarity coaching stream. It was a learning opportunity for everyone, as our development as an intermediary challenged the existing coaching model even as we were challenged to get more specific and grounded in a logic model and theory of change.

Our intended impact statement can be summarized in the image to the right.

This work followed on and deepened the strategic directions we had established in 2022 and helped us complete our logic model and theory of change

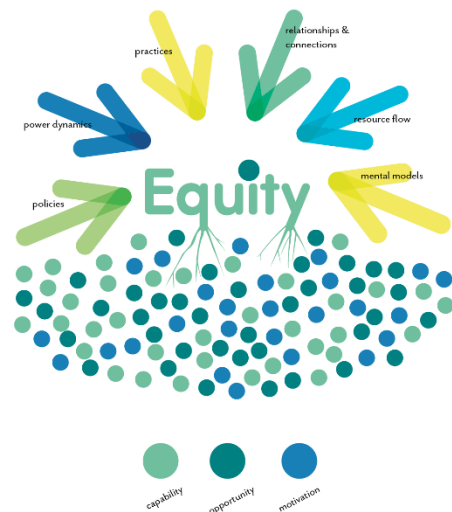


Asserting Equity

No one ever claimed that transforming systems to increase equity is easy. Making the shift to focus on equity has been a process of ensuring first that our staff and board share a common vision; and then sharing that vision with our funders, partners, community members and collaborators. You will read herein what we have learned about collaboration through this process.

The theory of change that we developed is predicated on the idea that improving conditions of fairness and justice, access to resources and opportunities and capacity for equity-deserving populations will improve our communities for everyone. Explicitly pursuing equity in this way requires courage and care. In some cases, community members who have been tremendously invested in the way we began will experience this shift as a loss. It can feel hard in the moment to disappoint people, and sometimes it can challenge our compassion to face the anger and hurt of people who are unable to see the privilege they have access to.

We have compassion for this reaction, and we remain intentional and resolved. As our work lifts and centers those who have been marginalized, all will benefit. We must trust the process.



Taking Care

[Burnout in the whole nonprofit sector is a reality](#); for those of us working particularly in the vague, long term, challenging work of systems change it can be devastating. If you are from an equity-deserving group, multiply that by the pressures, expectations and daily provocations experienced by existing in our society. When you are in leadership, you are responsible for setting the conditions to ensure your staff's resilience, but it is rare to find a leader, let alone a leader with dimensions of diversity (race, orientation, ability) who has full, easy access to the necessary supports and rest needed for recovery from burnout.

[This is a theme I am exploring in a blog series](#) this summer.

This Report

Exploring themes is how we are organizing this learning report. Part of our renewed focus is to think at a systems level about what we are learning, pulling lessons from our place-based and theme-based initiatives, and cross-referencing the learning for what might be useful going forward.

We've loosely organized these themes into our strategic directions, but even within these, you'll find that the threads interweave – for instance, we demonstrate impact in our stronger community connections and our collaborative successes.

Sharing what we learn is essential to our mission. By sharing our learnings about community—the things we notice up close, that are unique to each project, and the things we see better at a distance that may be applicable in other situations—we hope to continue to enrich the field of social innovation. We fertilize the soil that feeds the seeds of new change by composting our learnings and tilling it in, while at the same time, we try to ensure the right resources are in place and in balance: the sunshine of adequate funding and the soothing rain of policy shifts.

Thank you for your interest in our work, and for participating with us in working toward a more equitable province and world.

Yours in systems transformation,



Louise Adongo, Executive Director

Introduction: The Work Evolves

High Hanging Fruit

Low hanging fruit is one of those metaphors like “don’t re-invent the wheel” – they don’t really belong in innovation spaces. At the outset, it looked like this report would be a breezy 12 pages. But as we synthesized what we have learned, and recognized the deep work done, it has stretched longer. This is what happens when you aim for the high-hanging fruit.

We have evolved our approach to our work as our understanding has grown. We envision thriving, equitable communities... in other words, communities that are thriving because everyone’s voice is present, heard, and respected.

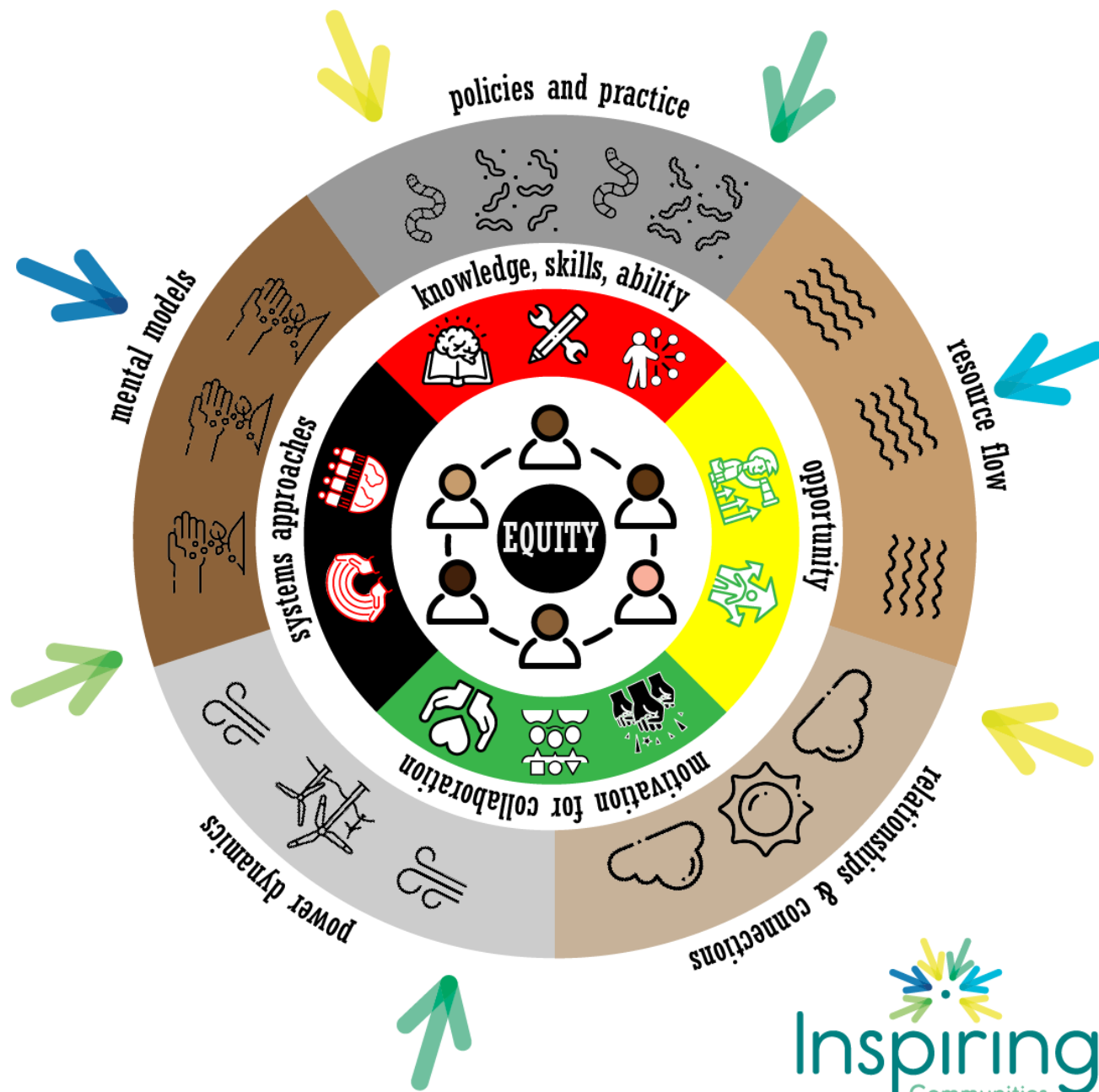
All voices have a say in the community’s direction and development. Our role is to ensure that the equity-deserving people in communities have that opportunity, by developing their capacity, amplifying their voices, and helping shift environmental factors like policy and bureaucracy.

Evaluation Evolution

Inspiring Communities has a long deep history entwining monitoring, learning and evaluation throughout our work. Nancy Carter, the evaluator who has been working with us for the last few years, explored our culture of learning and evaluation in a [blog series using the metaphor of Bridges: start here](#).

[You can read about our evaluation evolution here.](#)

Our new Theory of Change looks like this:



Inspiring
Communities
Theory of Change



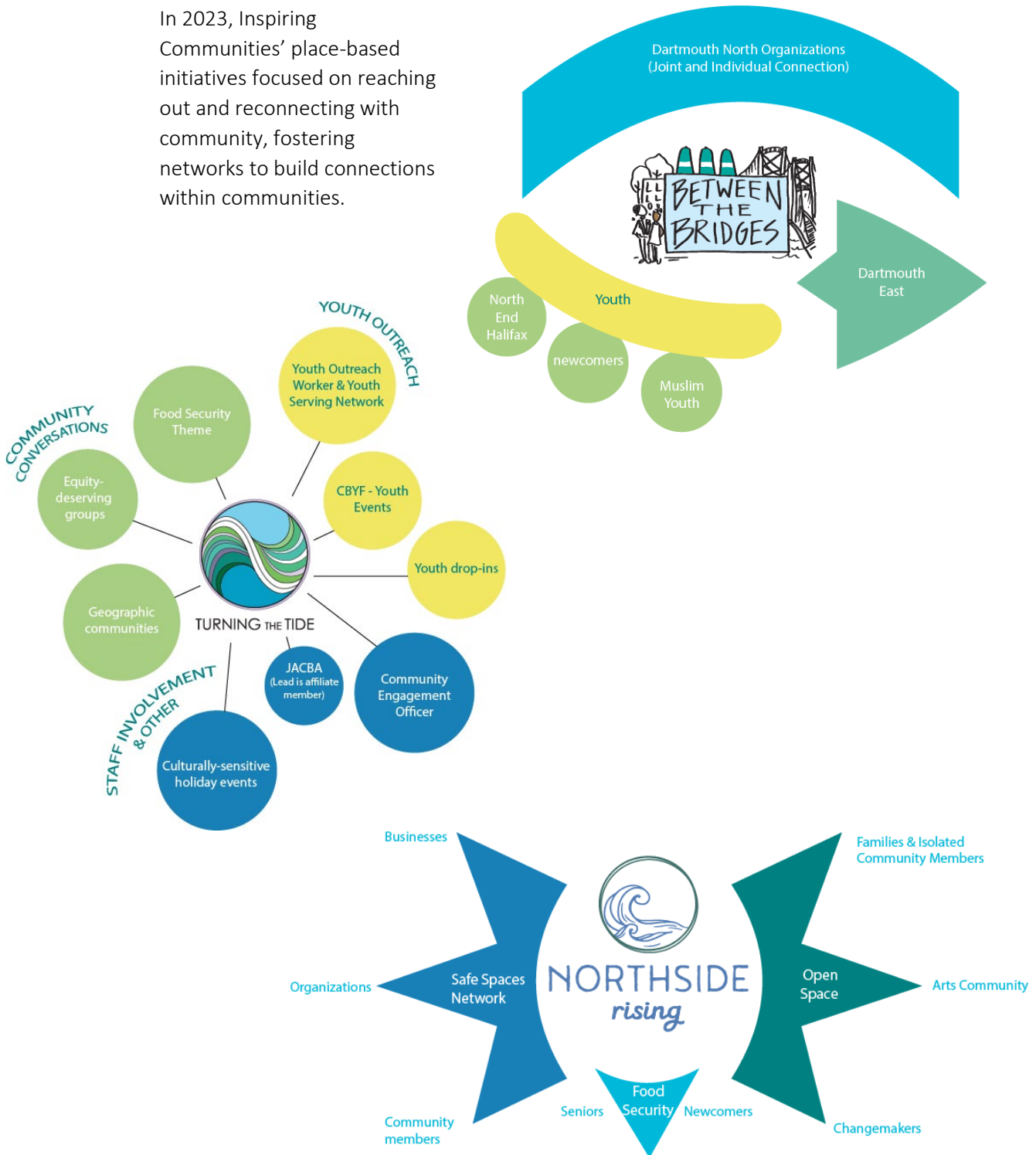
Digby holiday gathering, above. Northside Cape Breton Open Space session, below.



Strengthening Community Connections

Places

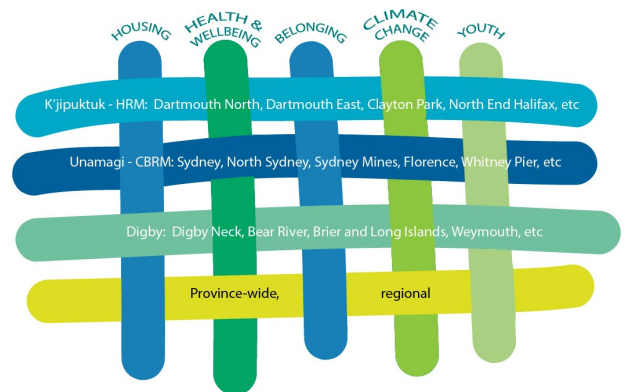
In 2023, Inspiring Communities' place-based initiatives focused on reaching out and reconnecting with community, fostering networks to build connections within communities.



Themes

Meanwhile, some of theme-based work was centered on building connections:

- [in the rural transportation space;](#)
- [around Dalhousie University among those interested in using the public space more effectively and pro-socially;](#)
- [throughout Nova Scotia among equity-deserving groups ready to take on climate change;](#)
- [among immigration services staffs seeking innovative ways to welcome newcomers,](#) among others; and
- a Youth Strategy beyond our work in Digby.



It's More Than Geography

What we learned: Equity requires us to move beyond narrow geographic boundaries

Our culture of evaluation has taught us to bring together the evidence uncovered in each project. When we began reviewing collective impact results across the province, it became clear that directing our focus in place-based ways meant we were missing opportunities to connect with communities that don't themselves exist within our constrained geographic boundaries.

There are sound reasons for place-based social innovation and our [collaborators Tamarack have written and thought a lot about this](#). Proximity is a factor in much community building work. However, in recent years, and especially during the pandemic, we've seen the growth of communities of common interest facilitated by technology. Themes like climate change are much less dependent on a physical location than a common understanding and commitment to solutions.

More relevant to our equity focus, many of Nova Scotia's equity-deserving communities are dispersed geographically. These communities may experience rivalries or conflict among themselves -- this occurs in most communities throughout our region, as [IC Fellow Kjeld Mizpah Conyers-Steede notes in this blog](#). But the connections – cultural, familial, economic and otherwise – between and among these communities form strong networks across Nova Scotia and beyond.

Finding focused common interests that cross geographic boundaries can open the door to stronger, more resilient communities that can learn from each other, and

better appreciate their own strengths. And weaving together cross-geographic themes with our existing place-based initiatives helps us access greater diversity of thought and therefore access to more, and maybe better, solutions.

To demonstrate how place-based and theme-based initiatives intersect and interplay, we can point to our work in transportation and food security.

In January, we pulled some learnings from a project we had initiated (originally in Dartmouth) exploring the use of electric vehicles (EVs) and combined it with learnings from a youth transportation initiative in Digby. We pulled together a few other collaborators from the social innovation field and hosted a webinar called [“Sustainable, Affordable, Accessible Rural Transportation.”](#) The panel allowed us to open a space to begin to map some of the existing actors in the greater network of rural transportation, hear from community members what their experiences have been, sense where there was energy and interest in building new connections, and, importantly, identify where there were gaps. The panel has opened up several opportunities to explore collaboration that will address not just transportation but the issues that transportation represents to communities: isolation, accessibility and mobility, economic opportunity, climate change challenges, independence, affordability and more.



[Photo: Jack S. on Pexels](#)

This summer, each of our place-based initiatives was selected to receive an intern through Clean Foundation’s excellent Clean Leadership Internship program. These interns are each working independently on research and engagement projects in Cape Breton, Digby and Dartmouth, and at the same time are in contact with each other to collaborate and compare notes, successful tactics and reflective learning. The goal is a better understanding of the state of food security in each area and a comparison set for other parts of the province. Coordinating the projects allows us to pilot several techniques for engagement and focuses for events, extending what can be learned.

Youth Strategy – Digby and Beyond

What we learned: Often youth are more ready and able to energetically embrace innovation and social change.

With the CBYF project in Digby, launched about four years ago, Inspiring Communities began learning about the deep potential of our youth, particularly as they engage with the ideas of social innovation and community building. Our Turning the Tide initiative has done a remarkable job learning about working with rural youth, identifying the barriers to connection, building a network for collaboration and establishing a flexible structure for engagement to allow space for experimentation.

In the spring of 2022, during a series of community outreach sessions in Dartmouth, we heard again that young people were feeling omitted from our work. At the same time, they showed a strong appetite for systems change and social innovation. We have now identified youth as a group we intentionally work with across the province.

Engaging with interns is a step in this strategy. This summer our Digby team has once again hired two youth as CBYF interns. Across the organization we have hired eight youth interns, three through the Clean Leadership Program of Clean Foundation, a co-op student who is leading youth work in Dartmouth, a Skills Canada youth intern who is reaching out to newcomer youth, and a recent NSCC graduate who is working with our core team.

Below, Clean Leadership Interns Priya Prabhu, Graham Cromwell and Jessica Casey.



Building on our Collaboration Success

Atlantic Ecosystem and our role as a Node

Inspiring Communities has played a role in Social Innovation Canada’s network as the Atlantic Node for several years. In this capacity and with our understanding that the context of our region lends itself to a stronger and more resilient and supportive network of changemakers, we continue to collaborate with regional partners to conceptualize and undertake work at this regional scale.

Some of our activities in this endeavour over the last few years include:

- WeavEast, which birthed the Atlantic Changemakers Council
- The annual Atlantic Black Policy conference
- The annual Art of City Building Gatherings
- Fellowships in which we seek to recruit fellows from across the region.

Collaborating at a national scale: SI Canada

We serve as the Atlantic Node of the Social Innovation Canada network, a role which comes with responsibility for fostering an inclusive space of growth and awareness of the concepts of social innovation in our region and building our capacity to act on them. This role also gives us a national perspective on our work and an opportunity to leverage a much wider network to share learnings and connect for advice.

Atlantic Changemakers Council

Part of our work with SI Canada has resulted in the Atlantic Changemakers Council, which has met quarterly for the last two years. The Council expands and distributes network leadership and storytelling in support of Atlantic Canada’s innovation ecosystem. Outcomes from the Council have included several changemakers appearing on the Polarizing Conversations podcast (see below), stronger awareness of disability as an access of diversity, and the recent blog post on the [potential of the cooperative business model to help rural communities be self-sufficient](#). Authors Inda Intiar and Kristen Murray finally met in person in July in St. John’s, after serving together on the council two years and co-writing the article.





IC Fellowship Program

Another part of our work with SI Canada has seen the development of our IC Fellowship program. The program fosters research and experimentation to develop positive social change through a systems approach. The Fellowship Program is designed to catalyze change throughout our region. SI Canada funding supported the first two Fellows:

Vanessa Paesani. Vanessa was the moving force behind Amplify East, grounded in the #MeToo movement, which shone a spotlight on remarkable women in Atlantic Canada. Vanessa’s Fellowship focused on the topics that polarize public discourse. Her podcast, [Polarizing Conversations](#), is now complete.

Kjeld Mizpah (KJ) Conyers-Steede put his extensive experience in public service to work, exploring ways to shift policy from the current cause-and-effect linear thinking (colonial approach) common in the field toward a decolonized systems approach. [KJ’s blogs start here](#).



Moira Sinclair, Chief Executive at the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (UK) told me that *“sometimes our work [as leaders in this field] feels like we are in a carriage drawn by horses running in different directions and at different paces”*, but we need to keep steering the carriage to keep the passengers safe and to reach where we want it to go.

From our Guiding Principles:

Mutual Benefit/Reciprocity

We know working for change isn't always easy. We know we need each other to go far. We approach relationships with an intention for mutual / collective benefit to achieve greater outcomes than we could individually.

What We Learned About and From Collaborations

We identified early in our strategic direction setting that collaborations would not only remain important but would in fact be central to our ongoing work. Collaborations enable us build complementary strengths on project teams, to bring more diverse voices to our work, and to reach into networks and communities with whom we do not yet have a presence. We have been consciously focusing on the values we are bringing to and deriving from our collaborations this year, as per our guiding principles, and with each collaborator and potential partner we have learned new lessons.

What to carry forward

In some cases, we are exploring long-term relationship building. There is, as yet, no work at the centre, but we are continuing to stay in touch and know that at some point, our work lives will intersect. This is the case with Feed Nova Scotia, which has set up an Innovation Lab. Staff members of Inspiring Communities and Feed Nova Scotia have had check in meetings several times over the last year.

We are working with the CMHA-NS in developing a project right now, and we have established that the project will sit astride the line between traditional hierarchical health structures and less formal, more decolonized and innovative community-centered organic structure. Our role has been defined and we are trusting the process. We know that it is important to show up with honesty and transparency and be clear about what we bring to the partnership: our equity lens, an openness to push for decolonized methods and the benefits of experience employing both lens and methods in communities.

What to lay down

Our research, design, and facilitation roles in the Street Party Culture project provided an opportunity to work with a different kind of community and allowed us to bring our equity lens to a thorny problem that, on its surface, may not have seemed to be an equity issue. Having catalysed an initial set of interactions, as the project rolls over into a longer-term phase, Inspiring Communities, in alignment with our new intermediate role, has been happy to suggest other social innovation practitioners to work with the neighbourhood and students. Dalhousie's

community relations staff, who were so easy to work with, honest and generous in the process of this work, remain committed to the collective impact process.

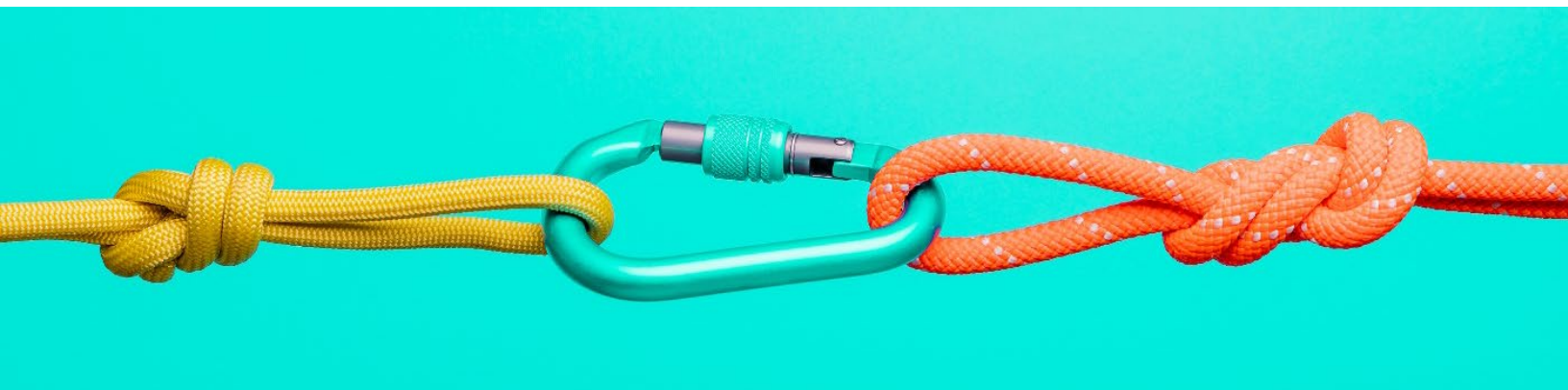
We were partners in a three-year project, offering social innovation expertise with the Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAISA). The project aimed to support staff who work with Immigrant Serving Agencies (ISA) across the region, offering professional development in social R&D and evaluation to spark new ways to develop a sense of belonging among newcomers. Our reasons for initiating the partnership were a desire to explore ways to build belonging, an interest in extending our reach into bilingual communities and a desire to spread social innovation methodology into a different area. At the time of applying for the funding, we were engaged in launching Wayside, an educational platform. The project made sense in this context.

This year, we dissolved the partnership after two years. There was a myriad of reasons why the project didn't work, from different leadership expectations to unaddressed power imbalances, to very different work styles and cultures. Friction infected the working relationships.

Ultimately, we learned that Immigrant Settlement Agency staff, coming out of the pandemic, were suffering from burnout and overwork, in a context of multiple crises and unprecedented waves of refugee resettlement from multiple countries in less than 18 months – more than 33,000 immigrants arrived in Nova Scotia since 2019. It was apparent that there was limited capacity or wide-scale readiness to embrace new methods. Rather than limp to the finish line, we digested this learning and withdrew.

Framing the Future

From what we have learned and based on our principles, we are developing a mutual reciprocity framework, which will serve to help us build all collaborations better.



North Dartmouth mural reveal, Miya's World. June 2023.



Demonstrating our Impact

Looking at our province and region with a systems lens

Nova Scotia, like many parts of the world, has a long history of resilience: our citizens have coped through disasters, crises, and bad times. Think about the Springhill Mine Disaster, Westray, Goldboro, and all the other mine disasters; the Deportation of the Acadians (la Grand Derangement); the Halifax Explosion; the Swiss Air disaster; the SS Atlantic; Africville; economic disruptions caused by the pullout or collapse of major industries or employers like shipbuilding, the Pictou mill, Trenton and Sydney Steel (and the lingering environmental costs of these); infrastructure loss like the provincial railway system.

Since the start of the pandemic, when everyone everywhere had their resilience tested, here in our province, we have experienced Canada's largest mass shooting event in 2020; one of the most devastating hurricane events in our history (Fiona); an accelerating affordable housing crisis; massive record-breaking forest fires and then floods; and locally-focused challenges that have rippled through our province, like the dispute over Indigenous moderate livelihood fisheries.

A systems-change approach requires radical collaboration, trust, getting past traditional politics, funding and timelines that are reinforced by short-term election-cycle-dependent planning.

Each of these things in themselves can result in trauma, grief, economic hardship, and health problems. Now, begin to overlay them on a population that is growing remarkably fast; aging; has a large influx of newcomers, many with their own traumatic past and struggles to belong; and that has been marked with racial inequities for a long time. Add onto this a lack of primary health care, inadequate mental health care, an opioid crisis, climate change effects on weather and primary industries; and

infrastructure that clearly shows the effects of lack of maintenance. Demand has long since outstripped the supply of important labour pools—health workers, tradespeople. The complexity of the issues is compounded to the point where only a systems-change approach can hope to untangle the leverage points that might lead to change.

A systems-change approach requires radical collaboration, trust, getting past traditional politics, funding and timelines that are reinforced by short-term election-cycle-dependent planning. Further, it requires the brainpower and contributions of ALL Nova Scotians, particularly those of equity-deserving groups.

The Mass Casualty Commission unearthed some of this in their final report. Large parts of [the section on Community](#) discuss the unmet needs of the people


affected, noting that scale, rurality and inadequate knowledge of needs were factors that hampered efforts to address the numerous and far-reaching impact of the event on community members' mental wellbeing and sense of safety.

The Lionel Desmond inquiry; a case that's been ongoing with delays since 2019, has opened public discussion on the intersecting of several crises. Limited mental resources to meet veterans' needs, lack of mental health supports, particularly in rural communities (in this case African NS) and especially in equity-deserving communities already experiencing disproportionate outcomes and lack of access, domestic violence, and social isolation. An inquiry is a key step to formally acknowledge government's requirements and role; however, a concurrent systems-change focused convening and consulting process might have already resulted in some trauma-informed community-driven novel solutions to be tried in community.

In the Mass Casualty consultations that Inspiring Communities took part in, Commissioners repeated that there was a gap between the immediate safety response and a longer-range responsibility for community care, and an intermediary organization to help coordinate the services available and connect these with the people in need, while ensuring consistent and coordinated information was available, would have been beneficial. These supports are particularly important with increasing incidence - it is worthwhile to note that cities such as Toronto have named intimate partner violence as an [epidemic](#).

This gap in the intermediary role was evident again in the longer-term response to Hurricane Fiona. The Red Cross was engaged with a limited mandate to support distribution of immediate and short-term help. The limitations on this role left some people with seriously damaged houses who lacked insurance and a voice to fend for themselves, talking with neighbors for information since they did not have the technology access or digital navigation literacy to reach appropriate help in time. This is not an indictment of the important and necessary work of the Red Cross, simply an observation of the limits imposed by short-term funding. An intermediary organization focused on bringing in the voice of equity-deserving communities, connecting at the community level, and engaging in broad asset mapping and consulting might have identified some innovative ways to bring more people along.

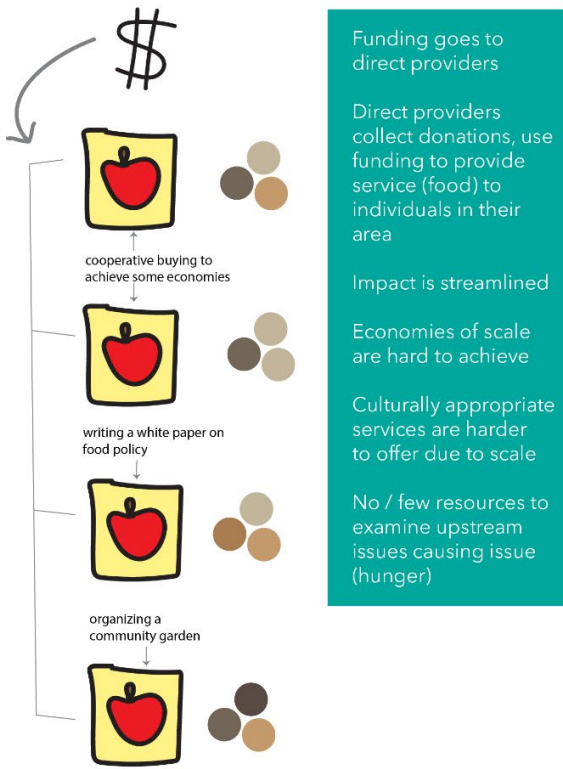
Inspiring Communities works at this intermediary level, bringing in the voices of equity-deserving people and engaging with communities. It can be challenging to



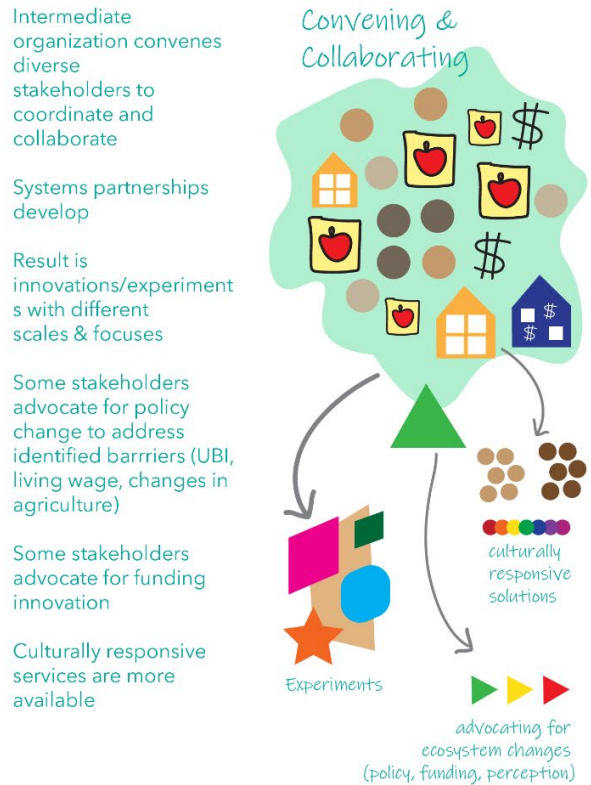
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explain (and often, to have funded, particularly when challenging the status quo) but it is necessary. To help illustrate this idea, below is a graphic very loosely based on some of what has happened as Feed Nova Scotia has evolved its role towards intermediary.

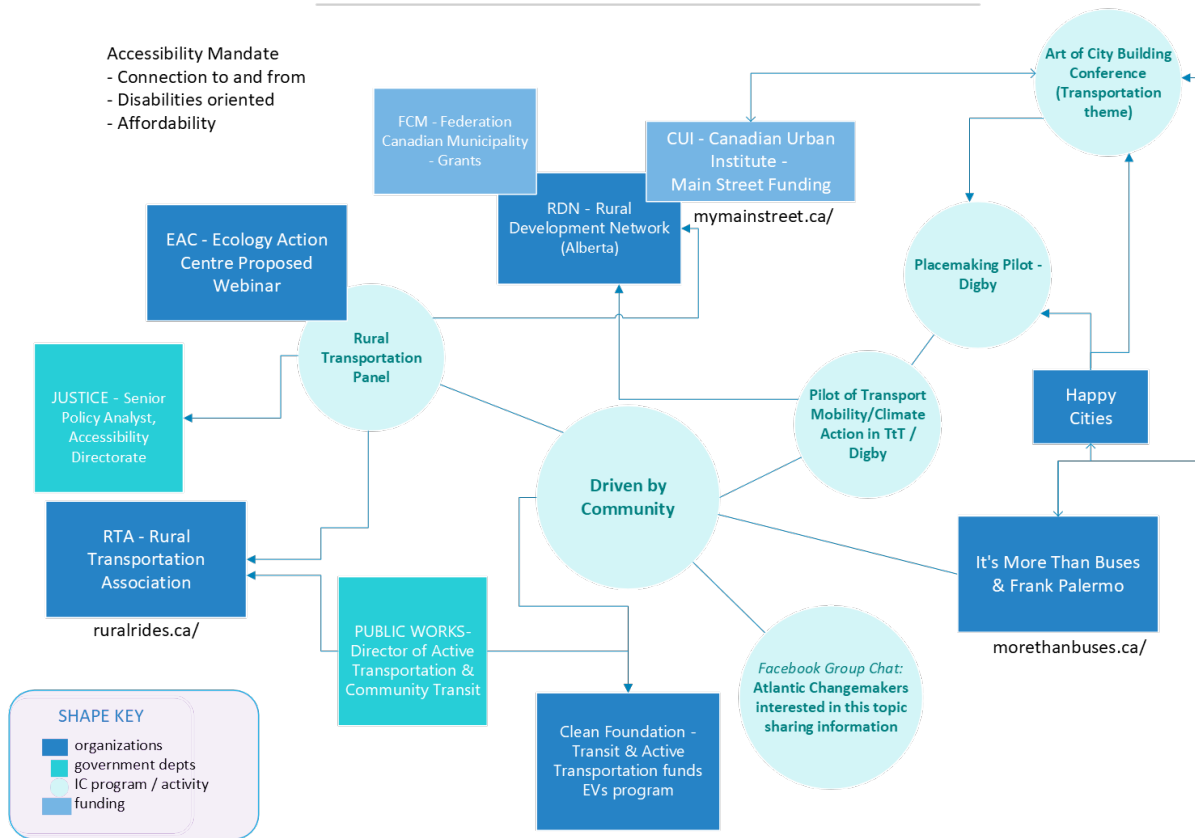
TRADITIONAL APPROACH



SYSTEMS CHANGE APPROACH WITH AN INTERMEDIARY



EQUITABLE TRANSPORTATION CONNECTIONS MAP



Transportation & Mobility as an entry point to Community Vitality in cities and rural places.

Transportation has proven to be a key issue for rural community vitality.

The Driven by Community pilot was our first foray into exploring the ways social innovation and climate change intersect around transportation. The original vision was to explore how an EV carshare could empower and support the work of three nonprofit organizations in Dartmouth. The learnings were almost immediate:

1. Carsharing has logistical challenges around ownership and insurance;
2. Engaging non-engineers in a low-emission transportation program with an engineering component creates potential for confusion;
3. Time and attention are scarce commodities among the senior staffs of social impact organizations who have spent years running lean and whose challenges are now compounded by dealing with and recovering from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These early findings from our monitoring process told us we needed a different approach to exploring this intersect, so we pivoted the pilot to exploring a Digby

carshare in partnership with our Turning the Tide and CBYF colleagues. In wrapping up the pilot, we hosted the *Sustainable, Affordable, Accessible Rural Transportation* panel, which opened a space for current actors in the rural transportation and transit space to connect and comment, and which identified gaps in the ecosystem and unearthed opportunities. This map (above) is a partial model of the connections, actors and interests that have resulted from the small pilot.

The pilot wrap up led to hosting the panel discussion. A follow-up presentation was planned by the Ecology Action Centre, who have an active transportation and climate change mitigation mandate. Through this panel, we connected with the Rural Development Network in Alberta, who approached us to learn more about our work and explore opportunities to collaborate. With them, we identified two funding sources: FCM and CUI.

We have begun planning a pilot project in Digby which we hope to fund through FCM and plan to share results with the RDN among others.

Through our networks and with the background of this project and the panel we have connected with the people who run It's More than Buses. This connection has led to Happy Cities working with Turning the Tide in Digby. Dalhousie Planning professor emeritus Frank Palermo contributed to our Street Party Culture work and has remained engaged with the Art of City Building conference, which in 2023 will be hosting another discussion on transportation to further explore the gaps.

Our Atlantic Changemakers Network has a Facebook chat ongoing about transportation, based on the points raised in the panel talk.

Clean Foundation, which hosts a program to share information and build awareness around EVs, was invited to the panel talk and consulted in Driving Change. They receive funding from the same part of Public Works, Community Transit and Active Transportation, that we are in discussion with regarding future work.

Finally, we have been following up with other potential network connections, ranging from government officials to the RTA (Rural Transportation Association) to begin exploring future collaborations.



[The Digby CBYF Transportation pilot] definitely allowed me to be able to say 'yes' to more things (work shifts, coop hours and social activities) ... it was beneficial in that way.

digby youth
program
participant



Shifting Policy: Atlantic Black Policy and City Building

One of the things that intermediary organizations like Inspiring Communities do is attempt to influence or affect the policy environment. This year, through our social innovation fellowship program, we engaged Kjeld Mizpah Conyers-Steede, to explore the ways that colonialism has affected policy development in Canada and other countries of the Commonwealth. KJ has produced four blog posts outlining highlights of his learning and progress through the Fellowship:

- [Who has power? Who exercises control? Who needs to build trust?](#)
“...as I enter my first decade working within the policy development ecosystem, I realize the struggle between power, control, and developing trust in that ecosystem is causing a shift in our governance structure. [...] This shift stems from the identity crisis of being a collection of colonized people.”
- [The Colonial Place](#)
“Our challenges surrounding defining power and exercising control, especially within the Commonwealth context, showcase what happens when societies evolve ahead of their governance systems. The best analogy I can make is operating the latest game on dated software.”
- [Strategizing as a Collection of Communities: Inclusive Policy Development that Embraces the Diasporic Journey](#)
“As our society navigates our complex challenges, it is critical we understand the needs of fellow communities. Our system bugs within the policy development structure reflect our inability to normalize two

concepts important to innovation: a “collection of communities” and strategizing through understanding skill sets.”

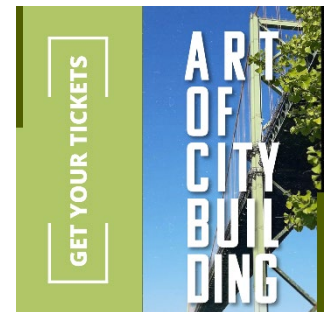
- [Phase Zero: Testing Community-Based Strategizing](#)
“When I engage with different community champions, they discuss a desire to embrace a regional approach to development. I realize our current policy structures hinder regional development when I hear this. As I have stated, our governance structures must improve their ability to collaborate on collective economic prosperity.”

Atlantic Black Policy Conference

KJ’s third post discusses his takeaways from the Atlantic Black Policy conference. Two current and one past IC staff members also attended this diaspora-targeting event, helping build an understanding of how shifting policy can help increase equity. The conference is one step toward connecting the dispersed community of Black Atlantic Canadians and aligning on common interests. As KJ points out, “When you look at Black lives within Canada, the evolution of the relationship on these lands has always been one of division. Since 1604, the Black diaspora within the region has not been able to explore what it means to have collective prosperity.”

Art of City Building

In 2021 and 2022, we participated as cohosts in the Art of City Building, a conference intended to inspire citizens, planners and developers to come together and envision a new way of building community in urban spaces, a way that will support diversity and strengthen equity. We are proudly hosting the conference as lead sponsor in 2023 with Downtown Halifax Business Commission as cosponsor and Downtown Dartmouth business association as host. The annual hybrid event aims to shift policy and make the whole approach to community building, development and placemaking more inclusive and community centered.



[The 2023 Conference will be held in Downtown Dartmouth on September 18.](#)

This year, the conference is looking to embrace the idea of city building through a regional lens.

"Nova Scotia doesn't have cities. We have regional municipalities."

– [KJ Conyers Steede](#)

Like the [UK Urban Futures RSA project](#), we aim to unlock the potential of cities to “drive prosperity through inclusive and place-based growth.” And not just economic prosperity. Cities and large towns are well placed to influence social innovation. We are inspired by the work of Jane Jacobs among others to realize the impact that residents can have in planning their neighborhoods and communities.

Integrating Policy Change Across our Work

Through our work on unsanctioned street parties, we reframed the issue from “a group of students doing bad, just requiring stronger police action” to draw attention to the privilege of the particular students, and the behavioural norms of other students, including racialized and international students who felt unfairly painted by coverage of these events; to attitudes toward the use of public space, and reclaiming this for common good; to the changing face of the neighborhood in response to housing pressures and market realities, which was causing consternation among the residents. We recommended a harm-reduction approach, focusing on a longer-term culture shift rather than a crime and punishment approach.



Photo by Harrison Haines: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-glacier-during-daytime-2869568/>

Climate Plus: looking holistically at climate change

At IC we apply a systems lens to all aspects of our work, this includes our work in climate (adaptation and mitigation) with equity at the centre.

As previously noted, we found that exploring transportation provided an avenue to talk meaningfully about climate change with a wide cross section of the community. Transportation proves to be a juncture where accessibility, people’s day-to-day realities, affordability and the urban / rural divide can be explored. As a tangible way to take action on climate change, transportation brings what can feel like a giant, unwieldy matter for scientists to a manageable human scale problem to be parsed.

Food and climate

Like transportation, food and food security are another entry point to the larger discussion of climate change. In this case, food has the added dimension of being intrinsically tied to culture and upbringing. Through a HalifACT grant, our Between the Bridges team implemented a food and climate discussion and experience group, engaging a group of African Nova Scotian youth from North End Halifax and a group of Middle Eastern youth in discussions about food and climate challenges.



Queer Climate Justice

Inspiring Communities engaged Lily Barraclough as a Climate Fellow with support from HiC3. Lily's work puts a spotlight on the ways that climate action intersects with queer identity, and in doing so, invites an expansive reflection on the intersections of climate change, social justice, and equity.

Lily shares her learnings in a blog post and in a hosted panel conversation with other queer climate activists. Some highlights of Lily's first blog post, [Queering Climate Justice in Mi'kma'ki](#):

“One of the top threats is the threat of climate change impacts to those who are unhoused or lack secure housing. Members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are far more likely than our cis and straight counterparts to face numerous barriers to housing [...] The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates what impacts immediate global crises may have on mental health, and a survey of the mental health of Canadians made it clear that 2SLGBTQIA+ people were more likely to experience poor mental health.”

“Historically and through to today, eugenics has violently policed the bodies of Indigenous, Black, People of Colour, poor, Queer, Trans, and disabled people through forced sterilization, state removal of children from their families, and neglect. [...] There have been many recommendations over the years drawing on Thomas Malthus' theory that the betterment of human life was impossible without imposing limits on human population growth.”

The [Queer Climate Justice panel discussion](#) explored further the ways that queer identities are uniquely impacted by climate change, and the challenges facing climate activists and community organizers in the 2SLGBTQIA community. The panelists shared their experiences and observations on mental health in their communities and, on a hopeful note, the importance of community support.

Tamarack Climate Transitions Cohort #1 and #2

Through our engagement with the Tamarack Climate Cohort, we are exploring ways to use Collective Impact and other tools to help communities engage in a just and sustainable transition. Tamarack describes the cohort's purpose this way: "The Climate Transitions Cohort is a unique opportunity for communities across Canada to learn from some of the most promising emerging solutions and collaborative governance innovations to build and/or advance a climate action plan that is unique to their local needs."

Clean Interns – Food and Climate

The work of our interns will offer an opportunity to learn about the food security needs of equity-deserving groups across our three place-based initiatives, in isolation from *and* in conversation with each other. The projects are uniquely shaped, yet we have encouraged the interns to stay in contact with each other and learn from each other's work throughout the summer. We look forward to reporting on the results of this experiment in future communications.

Arts & Culture work for systems change

"Art is the scaled way that we know what it is to be human. You and I can have a conversation and experience each other's humanity. But, art allows us to do it larger, right? It will reach people who haven't even been born yet and tell them something about our humanity today."

Elizabeth Alexander, poet and president of Mellon Foundation, [Fast Company interview](#)

Arts and cultural activities go naturally with systems transformation. Making or participating in art can allow people to access types of understanding and wisdom that don't require our overused executive functioning. At the same time, art can convey very complex ideas in a visceral way that doesn't necessarily depend on language or vocabulary.

For example, in 2015, UN members gathered in Paris to discuss climate change.

“Artist Olafur Eliasson and geologist Minik Rosing placed 12 glacial icebergs from Greenland’s Nuuk Fjord in Place du Panthéon square. As commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions took shape and the Paris Agreement formed, the citizens of the city walked amongst the melting *Ice Watch* installation “witness[ing] the ecological changes our world is undergoing”. Eliasson and Rosing brought the climate debate to the fingertips of the people.”

*From Tansy Robertson-Fall, Senior Editor,
Ellen MacArthur Foundation, [Medium](#)*

If you still need convincing that art (and technology) can create powerful and accessible social change, watch this TED talk – [Why I built my own time machine.](#)

From Inspiring Communities’ earliest days, we have used art interventions to connect with community. Northside Rising was involved with the Rising Tide festival. Between the Bridges engaged in a performance of the Stone Soup allegory to connect with the community. Digby asked community members to contribute to the project’s name and visual identity.

In 2022-2023, Northside Rising engaged in three art-based initiatives: the Open Space Mobile Art Centre; a Changemakers Community of Practice-led food security mural; and, through the Safe Spaces Network, the community trauma discussion film series.

Open Space

The Open Space Mobile Arts Centre started as a prototype project in the Northside Changemakers Program. The community pilot program brought arts materials and facilitators/ art therapists to three communities, and offered free drop-in arts programming.

Throughout the project, attendees were provided art therapy, facilitation, instruction and materials to participate in both unstructured and structured creative activities including collaborative music exploration, gentle theatre, zine tutorials, mask making, sculpture and installation with recycled and natural materials, performance, puppetry and group storytelling. The format allowed participants to work at their own pace while accommodating a wide variety of experiences and ages. Participants were also invited to explore new materials and deepen their creative practices.

Open Space Mobile Arts Centre created opportunities for residents to conveniently connect with each other, explore art, and enjoy warm meals.



Changemakers Food Security Mural

The Changemakers Community of Practice, comprising alumni of the Northside Changemakers program, came together in fall and winter of 2022 and early 2023 in order to help plan Open Space and concurrently brainstorm ways to support and promote food security. The idea for a mural emerged from this planning. Cape Breton artist [Bailee Higgins](#) was engaged to create the mural.



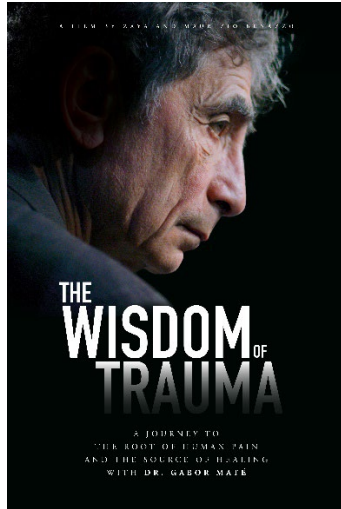
Community Trauma Discussion Film Series

The Safe Spaces Network aims to create a more trauma-informed Cape Breton Regional Municipality. As the name suggests, the Safe Spaces Network's primary focus is to explore the conditions needed to foster healing on both an individual and community level in spaces that people access.

A film series was chosen as a community engagement catalyst which would allow the concepts of safe spaces and trauma-informed practice to be introduced in a way that might be replicated across Inspiring Communities initiatives. [Learn more.](#)

Watching a film together as a community can be an eye-opening tool for bringing about social impact. Films can unravel hidden stories and can introduce other perspectives. Each film was well-attended and the discussions were meaningful and rich.

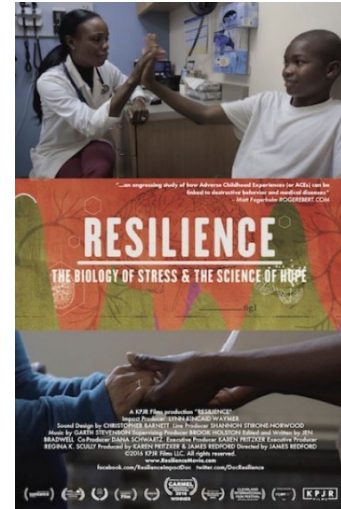
The films chosen and the concepts explored through each were:



Individual Trauma,
Community Trauma,
Addiction



ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences)



Resilience, Toxic Stress

Write from the Heart – HRM- youth writing circle

In HRM, in the spirit of forging connections beyond Dartmouth North, Inspiring Communities sponsored the Bus Stop Theatre Co-op's Writing Circle youth project, Write from the Heart. The short series of creative writing exploration, which was designed to “allow local youth to creatively process and make legible how it feels to be coming-of-age during unprecedented times” was facilitated jointly by HRM Poet Laureate Sue Goyette, theatre artist Meg Hubley and author Andre Fenton.

[Learn more.](#)

Evaluation following the event showed increasing youth engagement over time, and a web of stronger connections being forged among participants. The YMCA approached the Bus Stop to send some of their youth participants to future iterations.



“We all have unique identities. And I feel like this is a good space where we can learn a lot from each other.”

- Andre Fenton, author & facilitator



Some of the youth engaged in Community Healing Community. Photo credit: Alvero Wiggins, Abstract Vision Media.

Remembering Miya – mural

In Dartmouth, community consultations in spring of 2022 revealed that we were missing connection with youth in Dartmouth North. Youth who attended the session shared some of the challenges they were dealing with by telling us the story of Miya Harris, a local youth who had suffered from a mental health crisis, and subsequently died. They felt that the story was too easily dismissed as “another teenager on drugs” and wanted the opportunity to express their genuine grief and tell the community what Miya was really like: warm, funny, affectionate.

Between the Bridges set up a youth consultation to explore how the youth might like to proceed and what else might be possible. As a result, a months long facilitated art exploration project, Community Healing Community, was initiated that resulted in June 2023 in the reveal of the Miya’s World mural on the side of the Boys and Girls Club in Dartmouth North. [Learn more.](#)



Above: IC Staff Retreat, Tatamagouche, Spring 2023. Below: IC Board retreat, November 2022



Modeling Equitable, Efficient & Sustainable Processes

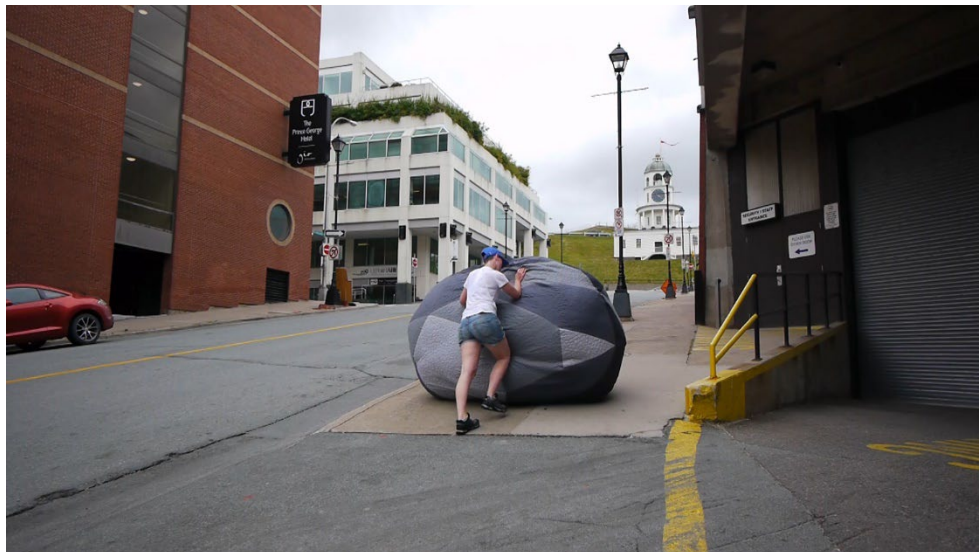
Our own work – Reflective Practice

Getting ourselves together

One of the first principles of social change is that to change others, you must change yourself first. Reflective practice [Reflective Practice](#) is encouraged in social innovation, systems change and developmental evaluation. In the nonprofit world, sometimes this is challenging; funders are rarely lining up to fund internal training or deep connection retreats for staff. But, particularly in equity work, we are required to do our own work first – learn systems approaches, deal with our unconscious biases, learn intercultural competence, build our team trust, constantly work on staying comfortable working in change, without clear directions and often with no clear immediate outcomes. Oh yes, and grapple with the burnout that comes with all of this.

Then there is organizing the actual work: beyond changing our individual selves, we must have our ‘house in order’. Our financials should be well organized and up to date; our HR processes should demonstrate our commitment to equity; our communications should be clear and effective.

Trying to achieve this state of efficiency can feel Sisyphean. We’re not there yet. But we have come far!



Pushing It, endurance performance about futility and narratives of success in labor, sculpture: quilting cotton, 200 lbs memory foam, Benny Welter-Nolan, 2017

Sometimes the lessons learned are the kind we don’t want to hang out on the line for the neighbors to see. However, radical honesty is authentic to our identity, and

further, it is important for other organizations and groups trying to tackle systems change to see what the challenges are.



Reporting on what we experience

It is in this spirit of transparency that we published our [report on our five years of collective impact results last November](#). In March, we invited past Digby evaluator Darlene Lawrence to craft a guest blog for us [turning a spotlight on her experiences as an African Nova Scotian evaluator](#). This summer, our Executive Director Louise and Benny Welter-Nolan are hanging out “unmentionables” like [burnout, and systemic barriers like racism and ableism experienced by nonprofit leaders in a blog series](#). The series will explore succession planning and co-leadership models in addressing these challenges.

Modeling is a strategic direction

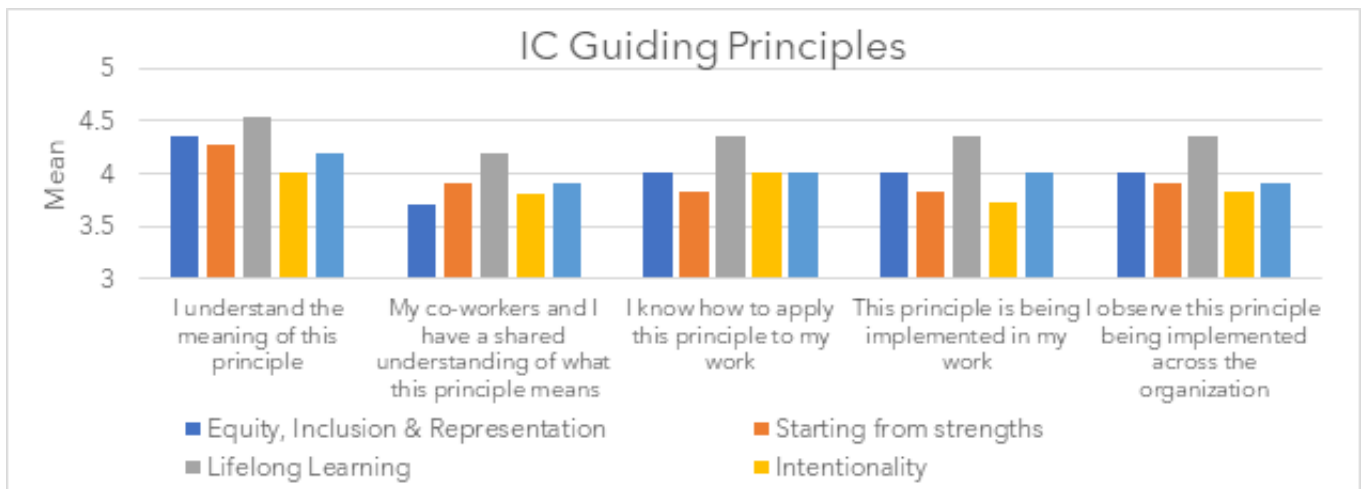
Modeling Equitable, Efficient & Sustainable Processes is one of our strategic directions. Demonstrating effective governance and operations is part of the reason. But even more important, removing friction from the operational parts of our work will gift our staff with the ability to focus maximum attention on their work in communities. In early 2023, we engaged an evaluator and researcher named Jane Ouillette to prepare an internal report (Annual Monitoring & Evaluation Report) to gauge how well we were doing in developing our internal alignment and processes.

Findings showed gaps in staffing are impacting our effectiveness:

“Sufficient staff capacity continues to be a challenge for IC, as the staff team is still working to rebuild after a restructuring that occurred in the previous

year. Staff turnover and gaps in people to fulfil fund development, financial administration, communications, and human resources roles have been identified by IC leads. Staff survey and key informant interviews demonstrated high levels of workload and burnout. It was reported that at times, the Leads take on many competing responsibilities, and this workload can lead to an inability and lack of capacity to maintain a sense of intentionality and care in their work. During this monitoring and review process, leads reflected on how these gaps in staff capacity have a negative impact on IC’s ability to fulfil their potential and meet their strategic goals with communities and partners.”

The report also explored how well our Guiding Principles are understood and embedded in our work.



“The results demonstrated strengths in Lifelong Learning, which aligns with the number of ways IC incorporates it into their workplace culture and provides opportunities to implement it. The survey also demonstrated a gap in the relative rating of Equity, Inclusion, and Representation given that this principle is fundamental to IC’s mission and purpose.”

If you are interested in reading the Executive Summary of this report, [you can download it here](#).

Describing the Elephant and Other Project Problems

One of the situations we have identified to work through points to the importance of documentation at all stages of a project, which can be a resourcing issue; timelines between grants submissions and funds being awarded (which are outside our control); and the need for consistency of project vision and intent. We have had two experiences of a staff member writing a grant application and then, when the grant has arrived, that staff member (and their original vision for the project) has gone or our priorities have shifted. In one case, the grant application was updated and re-submitted several times, with the last few rounds of changes made primarily to the budget. These changes were fundamental to the project (and to receiving the funding) but were made by core staff and missed in the early implementation by project staff, perhaps because the changes appeared primarily in the submitted budget. Many of the challenges that emerged in that project were directly attributable to differing interpretations of the critical success factors in a project (the “blind men describing the elephant” problem”), and, to bring it back to the internal monitoring report mentioned above, differing interpretations of what “equity” means. Additional staff training on our principles and project methodology, along with consistent, regular messaging and regular cross-network check-ins are essential to address this kind of challenge: change management basics.



[Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko](#)

Decolonizing Time

We held a retreat at Tatamagouche Centre in the spring, with the theme of “Mind the Pace or Change the Scope.” Just before we arrived, there had been a gathering of Indigenous Elders, and, with that energy lingering, we felt good about an experiment we settled on in planning the retreat – decolonizing time. We planned our agenda mostly without reference to specific times, aiming to rid ourselves of the urgency culture that is endemic in White supremacy culture.

What we learned: we can only manage our reactions to things. Which is to say, we can decolonize, but circumstances will still require us to pay attention to time, unless we are able to exert full control on our environment. For instance, when we are having others cater our food, we should establish our time expectations ahead of time, or we should be aware of time. We were late for every meal, sometimes leading to our food being cold and the dining hall staff being forced to stay later.

Our first session at the retreat was a gripping presentation from IC Board member Robert Bernard on Mi’kmaq history and culture. We did not inquire how long the presentation was ahead of time, and therefore we did not prepare our staff for how long it was. It was a captivating session, but no one expected to be sitting and listening for more than 3 hours (until about 11 pm) on our first night there. Knowing that our presenter was fitting us in on his way to catch a flight tempered any impatience, but our evaluation from the retreat indicated that people would like to know ahead of time how long presentations would be.

Addressing Burnout - The Shut Down Experiment

In June, coming out the retreat still thinking about pace and scope, we found ourselves with two lead positions requiring replacement, our Executive Director experiencing serious burnout and other staff feeling stretched rope-thin. We chose to shut down our work for a week. Our rationale was that everyone needed a break (which was true!) and that if everyone were to take the time together, no one would be sending emails or encountering emergencies that required intervention while we were off. Our Leads group did a debrief on the experience and while it was felt to be important, the execution was lacking. Staff members had community commitments they were unable to or unwilling to cancel, meaning that not all staff took the time off; interns were not able to take the time off and still required someone to check in with them; our audit was ongoing, meaning our accountant was not able to take the full time. We agreed that a joint time off, and the rationale for that, were sound; however, if we decide to do a week shut down in the future, we will plan it further out and ensure it is well communicated.

Arantzazulab

In Spring 2022, our Executive Director Louise discovered research being conducted in Europe on systems conveners, or intermediaries. Arantzazulab posted [four blog](#) entries delving into the research. Learning from this research has helped us affirm

some of the strategic choices we have made this year. Among the gold in these posts:

Since system convenors are often working in the in between spaces, the funding ask is far more difficult to articulate, it is harder to quantify the benefits and therefore funding is less easily attracted from traditional sources.

... there were three common structural challenges articulated by each person interviewed. The point at which the three structural challenges seemed to be the most disruptive is following success! Where the system convenor had demonstrated that their approaches have started to create change, there is often a desire from others (within the ecosystem or other related ecosystems) to scale the initiative up, spread the initiative wider or disseminate learnings so others can have similar successes. What this often means is the workload for the system convenor grows exponentially. They are seen as a key part of the success, and as being neutral, therefore their approaches are considered transferable to other places and similar challenges. There is also often a desire for them to act as teachers for other parts of the ecosystem. This unfortunately often creates pathways that impact future successes.

- [Michelle Zucker et al \(find all four posts here – they are easier to find than on the Arantzazulab site\)](#)



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