



# **Learnings of the Organization from a Collective Impact Perspective**

August - October 2022

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“Convening [ hosting people in meetings] is hard, relationship building is difficult. The backbone role, across the organization, is vital to consistently and continuously hold the container for this work to happen in communities.”

*- anonymous quote*

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# Executive Summary

This has been [a year of transformation](#) during which Inspiring Communities (IC), a non-profit organization focused on systems change, has learned many powerful and often challenging lessons.

Self-reflection and evaluation have always informed the work of IC. Through harvesting insights and learnings from its employed methods and experiences, the organization is able to share learning with the community and adjust the approach as needed.

As the organization embarks on crafting a new theory of change to align with [our evolution in strategic direction](#), we recognize an opportunity to look back and across the organization to summarize what has been done and what has been learned.

This report captures some of IC's learnings and achievements from 2016 to 2021. The report uses a collective impact framework to explore the learnings of various community impact initiatives. It follows the publication of reflections on IC's year of transformation and precedes the release of the revised Inspiring Communities Theory of Change and Learning System framework.

IC was funded in 2016 as the 'backbone organization' for three Collective Impact-based community initiatives: in Digby (Turning the Tides), Dartmouth (Between the Bridges) and Northside Cape Breton (Northside Rising). In 2019, the organization took on additional initiatives in systems change/ networking building which were not place-based.

[Collective Impact](#) is a model that brings groups of people or individuals or organizations from various backgrounds and different sectors together to solve complex social problems by aligning efforts through a common agenda and measures of success. All parties involved coordinate their efforts and work together around a clearly defined goal in order to create lasting solutions to large-scale problems. The [pre-conditions to successful collective impact](#) are: the presence of influential champions, sufficient resources to support the planning process and collective impact infrastructure (ie, funding and a strong backbone), and the urgency to address the issue in new and different ways. Collective impact initiatives are characterized by these five elements:

- Common Agenda
- Shared Measurement
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- Continuous Communication
- Backbone organization

Summary of data from 2016-2021, during which IC focused mainly on five initiatives:

BACKBONE				
Northside Rising	BTB	Turning the Tide	WeavEast	Wayside
NSR backbone at the start of 2022 consisted of four staff, a Project Lead, a Community Lead, a Program Coordinator and a Research and Evaluation Lead, The team offered multidimensional perspectives and supported risk-taking, paving the way for growth. Roles were defined.	At the start of 2022, Between the Bridges had two full time staff, a Project Leader and a Community Coordinator, who had been in their positions since the spring/summer of 2016, plus a part time evaluator and a research contractor.	At the start of 2022, the backbone team consisted of five full-time staff and two youth interns. Every week, the backbone participates in updates and planning sessions to provide information on what activities are underway, how those activities are progressing, how they carry out their responsibilities, and challenges are examined through weekly reflection sessions.	WeavEast experienced a great deal of turnover in the project lead (paid by IC) throughout the three years of the initiative. This led to challenges in establishing a backbone infrastructure.	Wayside had a team of four assigned as project staff. IC provided backbone support for both projects.

COMMON AGENDA				
NSR	Between the Bridges	Turning the Tide	WeavEast	Wayside
Addressing harmful substance use ↓ Creating a network of safe spaces	Breaking the Cycle (Housing, Student Success, Accessible Health Care, Community Fabric) ↓ Working Together In New Ways for Social Impact (Community Fabric, Health, Student Success, Food Insecurity, Affordable & Quality Housing, Dartmouth North Organizations, Digital Literacy) ↓ Affordable Housing, Youth & Student Success, Health and Wellbeing	Employment + the Economy, Healthcare, Environment, Infrastructure, Community Identity and Inclusion, Narratives (youth and seniors)  Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) Education, Employment, Supports & Services, Activities and Spaces	Capacity Building, Network Building, Demonstrating the value of the field, Amplifying and scaling existing work, Creating an enabling policy environment, Enhancing access to resources ↓ Bridging across communities, sectors and changemakers; Shifting restrictive policies; Shifting narratives	Online learning platform to enable connection and capacity building among weavers & change-makers

SHARED MEASUREMENT SYSTEM				
Northside Rising	Between the Bridges	Turning the Tide	WeavEast	Wayside
<p>Look at the relevant CI components and explore how they can be strengthened</p> <p>Identify any adaptations that may be required</p> <p>Learn how relationships are developing among partners</p> <p>Identify key learnings and achievements</p>	<p>Collected feedback on group functioning at meetings as a means of monitoring members' perceptions of group process.</p>	<p>Organized under:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Governance &amp; Infrastructure</li> <li>-Strategic Planning/ Shared Agenda</li> <li>-Community Engagement</li> <li>-Capacity Building / Knowledge Exchange</li> <li>-Evaluation, Research and Learning</li> <li>-Continuous Communication - <i>internally, externally &amp; across initiatives</i></li> </ul>	<p>WeavEast shared insights from designing networks for social changemakers</p>	<p>Evaluation was based on success measures such as numbers of signups, the feedback from partners and instructors, and engagement on the discussion boards as well as alignment with IC principles.</p>

MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES				
Northside Rising	Between the Bridges	Turning the Tide	WeavEast	Wayside
<p>NSR has a collaboration spectrum to evaluate partnerships which include: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower.</p>	<p>In preparation for developing a collective plan of action, Between the Bridges organized work on four priority areas in a way that reduces gaps and duplication of effort.</p>	<p>Turning the Tide connects with nearly 35 partners from across the region, including youth organizations, emergency services, cultural and sports organizations, and faith groups. Turning the Tide's role in catalysing or coordinating activities was not as clearly delineated.</p>	<p>WeavEasters were interested in building a 'light, resilient infrastructure' to connect changemakers, and considered funded projects part of that work: building connections and capacity, engaging youth, and influencing policy, all related to the common goals.</p>	<p>Wayside was considered by backbone staff to be another activity reinforcing the work of the WeavEast network, along with meeting Inspiring Communities' larger goals around collaboration and learning.</p>

CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION				
Northside Rising	Between the Bridges	Turning the Tide	WeavEast	Wayside
NSR has communication goals that address funders, community partners, residents and Inspiring Communities / internal communications. Some communications channels NSR plans to use are social media and media engagements; community events; and stakeholder engagements.	Between the Bridges found that the trust, safety and processes that they established through the first couple of years allowed clear communication pathways. However, by not maintaining a regular outreach to the larger community, Between the Bridges may not have provided entry to other residents to become engaged.	TtT has been charged with inadequate shareback to community. Now the initiative has a robust multipronged communications strategy, engaging all levels.	The communication strategy involved newsletters, social media, and annual reports. Face to face convenings were a key communication channel.	Wayside was promoted to WeavEast participants & IC's community. Communication among participants was supported on the platform. There was a breakdown in getting early buy-in from the WE network.

## Key Takeaways

As a Collective Impact lab, that is, a test site for the ways CI and other participatory, collaborative and systems change approaches can be carried out, Inspiring Communities has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the field. Some of the resonating themes we have seen across our initiatives include:

- Establishing the pre-conditions is a long term, iterative and cyclical process.
- There is a challenge to engaging and representing a wide variety of voices in communities.
- Explaining the work of a convening organization, or a CI, is hard. There became an increasing need for clarity on IC's role as a backbone and what that meant in terms of work, processes, resources and time it takes to convene, facilitate, collaborate, build consensus, and evaluate the activities of each initiative and all their partnerships.
- There is a nuance between the Collective Impact initiative and the core or backbone team — a CI should include the community members. The backbone staff team is a support, and yet it is incumbent on them to hold the CI together and be the consistent presence of it. The staff must be both *of* the community (to gain trust and credibility) and also somewhat neutral, so as to facilitate the coordination of many voices. This is a fine balancing act.
- Collective Impact is long term and to many residents, it might look like nothing is happening. It is important to pace the work to give some concrete results along the way, and manage expectations that there will be more.



- For a backbone to be effective, it must have solid relevant skills: administrative efficiency and prowess, diplomacy, political savvy, the ability to see from multiple perspectives and deep understanding of the issues the community is tackling.
- Operationalizing financial and administrative tasks into clear processes is essential.
- If a backbone takes on other work outside the CI project, it must do so thoughtfully and ensure it has a clear understanding of the amount of attention and resources the other work will claim.

# 1.0 Introduction and Background

## 1.1 Inspiring Communities - “Context is Everything”

### 1.1.1 History

Inspiring Communities (IC) originated when a group within the Nova Scotia government realized that they needed a new way to work with communities. Collective Impact (CI) had begun to show promise for building collaborative change and trust across sectors and was being used as a framework to guide collaboration across government departments. Between the Bridges in Dartmouth North, initiated by the United Way and other partners, was an early pilot of how the CI approach might support collaborative efforts in Nova Scotia communities. IC was developed throughout 2016 and 2017, and launched as a standalone organization in 2018 as the backbone organization for the three community initiatives, with CI sites in Digby and Northside Cape Breton. Dartmouth North became part of IC soon after. From 2019-2021, Inspiring Communities also managed the WeavEast network of changemakers and the Wayside learning platform, intended to support those changemakers.

The Collective Impact framework requires expertise in evaluation, particularly expertise in evaluation in complex, innovative and evolving environments. To meet the demand for evaluation for the three CI initiatives and for overall monitoring and evaluation requirements of Inspiring Communities, an evaluation unit was established. Developmental evaluators were embedded in each of the initiatives. Early on, much of the developmental evaluation (DE) focus for IC was, as expected, centered on evaluating implementation of the CI approach. DE staff also documented outcomes achieved as early indications of impact of the work in community.

Starting in 2019, the term “nesting” was used to describe the relationship between Inspiring Communities and the three place-based initiatives. The term was included in the 2019/20 Theory of Change (see Appendix B, second theory and our [first Impact Report](#)). Evaluation briefs prepared over the years listed ways that ‘nesting’ was to be demonstrated, including *leading change management; modeling the use of a Theory of Change; providing learning opportunities including connections to a network of other nested projects; liaising with government, providing administrative and communications support; coordinating evaluation and conflict resolution*. Although these were explicitly enumerated, for many in the IC network, the concept remained elusive in the details. Was WeavEast a nested project? What relationships with funders were held by initiatives and which by core? What was the difference between “Inspiring Communities” and “core”, or “the IC network”?

### 1.1.2 Evolution

Inspiring Communities has evolved into an intermediary organization, and this process of developing a common identity among disparate initiatives is an experience other intermediary organizations can attest to. Intermediaries are not quite the same as a backbone; they can play some of the same roles,

but often at a different level. Researchers with Arantzazulab [discuss the role of intermediary organizations in their blog series](#), noting:

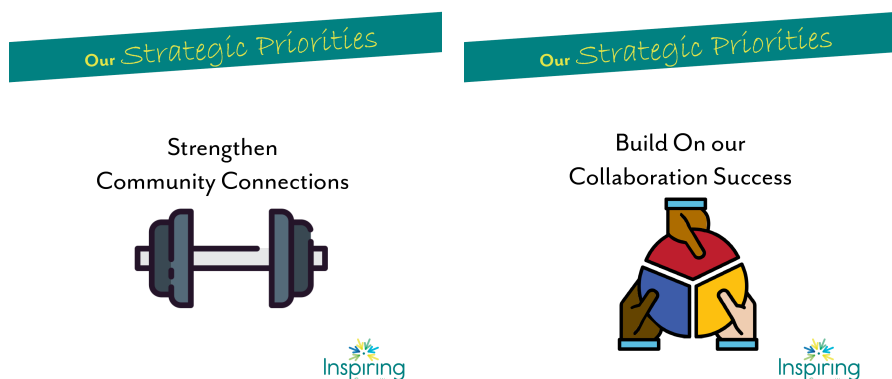
*“This actor is playing an organising, convening and co-creation hosting role across different stakeholders (between government, private organisations, organised society and citizens). [...] They are an entity (usually formal) who comes into the ecosystem with the specific purpose of working on behalf of the ecosystem and connecting efforts to amplify the impact that each organization will have in isolation.”*

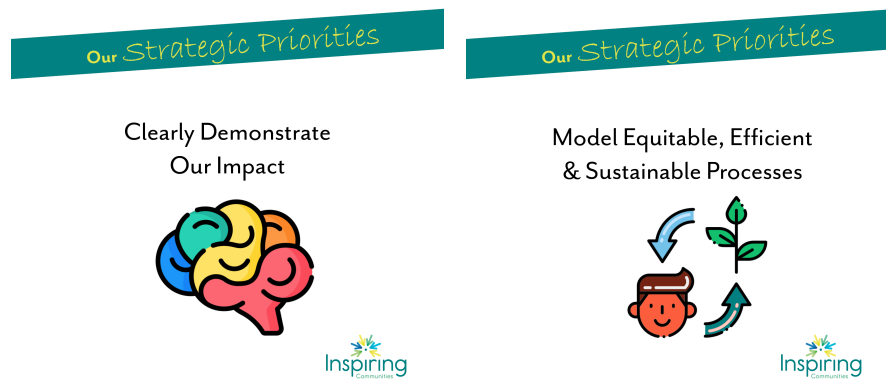
### 1.1.3 Now

Today, Inspiring Communities is a nonprofit organization based in Nova Scotia, with outreach to the Atlantic Provinces. The organization supports systems change to create equitable thriving communities through community connections, collaboration in systems partnerships and demonstrating impact; Collective Impact is one of the tools IC uses. IC started as an organization whose core funding came from a provincial government grant. To meet the demands of continued growth and enhance IC’s sustainability, a diversified funding model has been pursued.

As part of its year of transformation, IC experienced a loss of evaluation resources through a combination of natural attrition, voluntary staff turnover and layoffs. IC remains committed to evaluation, reflection, improvement and deep learning and is strategizing how best to respond to the demands for evaluation at all levels of the organization. As such, the organization is working to redesign the evaluation function to align with its current strategic priorities, existing capacity for evaluation and budget for monitoring and evaluation.

Digby, North Sydney / Sydney Mines and Dartmouth North are still the specific geographic communities in which IC works. The Atlantic Changemakers Council has recently launched; this is an evolution of the WeavEast concept which incorporates the lessons learned through that initiative, and supports IC’s role as the Atlantic node for Social Innovation Canada. There are also theme-based communities, where the themes include topics like climate change and belonging. Equity is centered in IC’s work, and this was formalized in early 2022 when [Inspiring Communities’ strategic directions](#) were renewed to these:





## 1.2 Collective Impact

Collective Impact, [according to the Tamarack Institute](#), is a term that refers to groups, individuals or organizations from various backgrounds and different sectors working together to solve complex social problems using a common agenda, aligning efforts, and using common measures of success. All involved must coordinate their efforts and work together around a clearly defined goal to create lasting solutions to large-scale problems. The [pre-conditions to successful collective impact](#) are: the presence of influential champions, sufficient resources (ie, funding and a strong backbone), and the urgency to address the issue in new and different ways. Five elements are characteristic of a collective impact initiative:

- Backbone organization
- Common Agenda
- Shared Measurement
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- Continuous Communication

The Collective Impact framework is used to solve issues that are complex and systemic in nature rather than those that are technical. Examples of large-scale socioeconomic concerns that can be approached with Collective Impact are those such as education, homelessness, the environment, healthcare, and community development.

As Collective Impact as a practice has matured, practitioners have critiqued some of its shortcomings, and actively refined the practice to address these. Some of the criticisms are captured by the Stanford Social Innovation Review in [this 2020 article, "SSIR Guide to Collective Impact, 10 Years Later."](#) Data reviewed indicate that several limiting factors and criticisms of Collective Impact were observed by Inspiring Communities. These include (though are not limited to) the following: CI may favour organizational voices over individuals, which can lead to the obscuring of first and diverse voice feedback; it may not be suitably diverse without conscious action to make it so; and it is doubly challenging to implement where there is no dedicated backbone organization in place.

The following chart from the [Northside Rising Early Evaluation Report](#) demonstrates that Inspiring Communities captured these issues and lessons through evaluation. Using evaluative evidence to inform

their work, IC has intentionally sought to address these challenges to implementing a Collective Impact approach in a variety of ways. IC continues to use learnings from evaluation and monitoring data to inform implementation of community-level collaborations. Adapting implementation in response to emerging issues is important to meet the evolving needs of communities undergoing transformation and therefore IC supports a developmental approach to evaluation for each site.

## About Collective Impact

Inspiring Communities draws upon a Collective Impact approach to help build stronger communities across Nova Scotia. Collective Impact core conditions and values include...

**Shared Agenda:** All participants have a shared vision for change, a common understanding of the problem, and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions

**Continuous Communication:** Consistent and open communication across the many players is needed to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation

**Backbone Function:** Dedicated, skilled staff are needed to coordinate participating organizations and agencies, and design and support good process and a learning culture

**Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action

**Shared Measurement System:** Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures that efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable

**Trust and Relationship Building:** Participants need to take the time to build trusting relationships so that they can work together differently and productively on a shared agenda

**Learning and Evaluation:** Dedicated resources are put in place to guide the process, capture and communicate what's working, to inform decision making

**Equity, Diversity and Inclusion:** The community's voice is the core of the work; ongoing efforts are made to ensure that all voices are heard.

## 1.3 Purpose of this document

A primary purpose of this report is to surface what IC has learned in about five years of working with Collective Impact frameworks. What has worked? What has not worked? How do projects or initiatives *not* set up as Collective Impact projects compare?

This report also serves to capture the learnings and achievements of Inspiring Communities during early stages of organizational development. The report follows a great deal of reflection and priority setting during IC's year of organizational transformation and precedes the release of the revised Inspiring Communities Theory of Change and Strategic Learning and Evaluation framework.

Since BtB started, and from IC's earliest days, there has been a conscious effort to collect data and evaluate success, usually using a Developmental Evaluation approach. This means IC now has rich pockets of data. The organization is in a place to begin mining this data for deeper learnings across sites and capturing organizational knowledge that may be useful to inform future organizational growth, development and sustainability. Relatedly, the role of IC as a Backbone organization is discussed.

The report is organized around the five core elements of Collective Impact: Backbone Organization, Common Agenda, Shared Measurement, Mutually Reinforcing Activities, and Continuous Communication. The Collective Impact approach has been foundational to IC from the outset and incorporated into the work of various initiatives led by IC; data from each of the three geographic initiatives and two other projects, Wayside and WeavEast, were analyzed for the current report. While CI was a foundational method, IC has since incorporated more approaches and tools to guide its systems change work.

Evidence was gathered through a review of IC files and analyzed by the authors. Staff and leads have provided context and clarification on initial findings and contributed to the document through their own reflections and feedback on several iterations. The learnings are being used to further inform the newest iteration of IC's evaluation and learning system framework and to share our history internally and externally.

It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic pivoted much of the work of Inspiring Communities initiatives and while this contextual factor is acknowledged in some elements of the report, it will not be discussed deeply.

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## 2.0 Backbone Support

A well-established backbone infrastructure requires dedicated staff with specific skills to coordinate participating organizations and agencies, and to design and support good processes and a learning

culture. The Collective Impact backbone provides project management support, including monitoring progress toward goals and connecting partners to discuss opportunities, challenges, gaps and overlaps. Because they have the respect of partners and stakeholders, they are able to bring these parties together to ensure alignment of activities and measurement. In collaboration with the steering committee, backbone staff provide support, strategic guidance and leadership for the initiative. The initiative is responsible for allocating adequate resources for the backbone infrastructure and for ensuring partners and stakeholders respect the role of backbone staff.

Within Inspiring Communities, the core team was intended to provide backbone support to each of the initiatives, and also the initiatives' staff members were considered a backbone in their own community. This "backbone of backbones" role has since evolved and been clarified through IC's role as an intermediary organization.

## 2.1 NSR Backbone Support

The Northside Rising backbone at the end of 2021 consisted of four staff, a Project Lead, a Community Lead, a Program Coordinator and a Research and Evaluation Lead, who all brought different strengths.

The team as a whole offered multidimensional perspectives of looking at socioeconomic issues and supported risk-taking, and paving the way for growth. Roles were defined with percentages assigned to particular areas of work and agreed-upon specific initiatives that were undertaken by members of the NSR team.

### 2.1.1 Learnings

The backbone team's "deep dives" explore topics that are critical to the Northside, including anti-oppression, substance use strategies, and stories of the Northside. The team also holds monthly check-ins. The team holds a complementary blend of education, life experience and approaches. With lean teams such as NSR, there can be a challenge in creating some redundancy or cross-training to support continuity in the event of staff changes.

During 2022, this became evident. Two team members left and new members have joined. The team is currently shifting their approach away from collective impact to base building as they reframe their primary work into the Safe Space Network. Rebuilding a balance of skills and approaches with a team that overall doesn't have the same level of experience, while challenging, has been an opportunity to bring in new energy.

## 2.2 Between the Bridges Backbone Support

At the end of 2021, Between the Bridges had two full-time staff, a Project Lead and a Community Coordinator, who had been in their positions since 2016, plus a part-time evaluator and a research

contractor. These backbone staff members provided a wide range of different types of support for the initiative, including everything from designing strategies and processes to recruiting community members and organizations, to preparing materials, arranging logistics, and facilitating meetings.

### *2.2.1 Learnings*

The scope of BtB's work grew over time. With so many groups to organize, and such a lean team, the ability to engage deeply may have been affected. Succession in any role would prove challenging. This was evident during the restructuring of IC, when both primary staff members at Between the Bridges left their roles. This process was disorienting for community members who did not understand Inspiring Communities' role in BtB, and it was a learning experience as many of the assets and connections to the work were tied to individual strengths and relationships.

## 2.3 Turning the Tide Backbone Support

At the end of 2021, the backbone team consisted of five full-time staff and two youth interns. Every week, the backbone participated in an update and a planning session to provide information on what activities were underway, how those activities were progressing, how they carried out their responsibilities, and challenges (if any).

### *2.3.1 Learnings*

As with the other initiatives, turnover has affected the team. The research team were unable to find notes from the backbone reflective sessions and meetings with other stakeholders, as well as any detail defining the roles and responsibilities of those involved. In renewing the team, there has been a conscious effort made to ensure wider representation.

## 2.4 WeavEast and Wayside Backbone Support

WeavEast suffered from turnover in the IC-employed project lead role throughout the three years of the initiative. The most common feedback received during evaluations related to the constant leadership turnover that transpired. Members said that this led to a lack of effort in the work, as there was no feeling of consistency to go along with it. An insight noted, "There has been a pattern of reliance on the backbone for leadership and administration despite efforts to provide training and lead with organization practice." Wayside had a team of four assigned as project staff, including technical and communications resources. IC provided backbone support for both projects.

### *2.4.1 Learnings*

Clarity of whether WeaveEast was a "nested initiative" within IC remained a point of contention, as it could not be decided on collectively what was meant by the term *nested*. Some of the contention hinged on the concept of 'ownership' as reflections later revealed.



## 3.0 Common Agenda

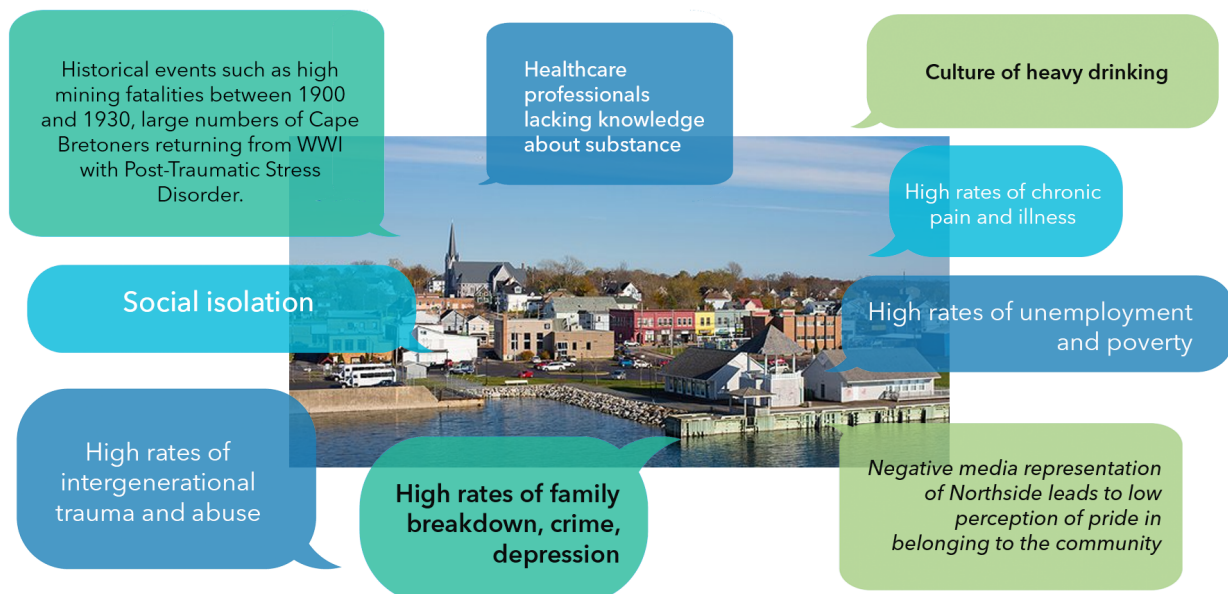
A common agenda is a shared goal or a vision for change shared by all participants of the initiative that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed upon action ([FSG](#)). In this section we capture the identification and evolution of the Common Agenda for each initiative reviewed as part of the report.

### 3.1 Northside Rising

#### 3.1.1 Development of the Common Agenda

Northside Rising (NSR) focused on solving the problem of harmful substance use on Cape Breton's Northside. In 2018, the backbone team conducted a community survey in the Northside region to determine key priority issues for Northsiders. The goal was to identify the best lever issue to tackle to effect change. According to survey results, 38% of community members were concerned about issues related to substance use and addiction. A literature review and meetings with stakeholders in late 2018 were held to identify the various causes of harmful substance use in the Northside. An analysis of prevalence in the region determined that Northside had a high rate of overdose cases in comparison to other regions of the province. The following figure illustrates some of the causes identified in early developmental phases of NSR.

#### CAUSES OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE, NORTHSIDE CAPE BRETON (2018)



### *3.1.2 A Shared Vision*

In early 2019, NSR held a roundtable discussion to answer the question of “how will we move forward in the community?” In attendance were a wide representation of partners: government, local community organizations, representatives from schools and community members.

Several key issues were identified that related to healthcare, mental health care in particular. Another set of issues had to do with lack of diversity in services available to people who use drugs; breakdown in relationships among key actors; the normalization of trauma and abuse, and stigma leading to people not being treated humanely. The group recognized a need for systemic change and collaboration.

With Inspiring Communities’ recent explicit commitment to centering equity, it is perhaps important to note that the NSR team and their partners embedded a commitment to equity and diversity, as well as first voice representation, from the beginning.

### *3.1.3 Evolution of the Common Agenda*

In 2018, actions were identified to deepen the collective understanding about the challenge of addictions, and the ways each participant could address immediate needs and root causes of substance use. However, in keeping with a DE approach to evaluation, the [Northside Rising Early Phase Evaluation Report](#) concluded the following about establishing and acting on a common agenda:

“Defining a common agenda can be difficult in communities like the Northside that face a variety of significant challenges. Picking one or two issues to address runs the risk of losing the support and interest of residents who don’t identify specifically with those concerns. On the other hand, working on a wide range of issues can spread energy and resources too thin. Another option is to focus on building community capacity as an end-in-itself. However, capacity-building does not occur in a vacuum; it develops from working on real issues and learning as you go.”

To act on this learning, roundtable discussions were held in 2019 to determine how to move forward given the evolution of NSR and learnings from early evaluation. As noted on the web page, [Northside Rising: The Back Story](#), “participants from all groups affirmed the value of the initiative, saying that its greatest contribution had been its way of working to address the Northside’s challenges and opportunities: A process of community-driven change in which local residents have the opportunity to reflect on their community, identify priorities to be addressed and work together to generate solutions. Continuing to build the capacity of the community to work in these ways was seen as Northside Rising’s greatest potential.”

Through [3 years of convening a roundtable](#) focused on improving community conditions related to substance use on the Northside, a [Substance Use Action Plan](#) was developed by the members. Some key learnings are identified [here](#).

## 3.2 Turning the Tide

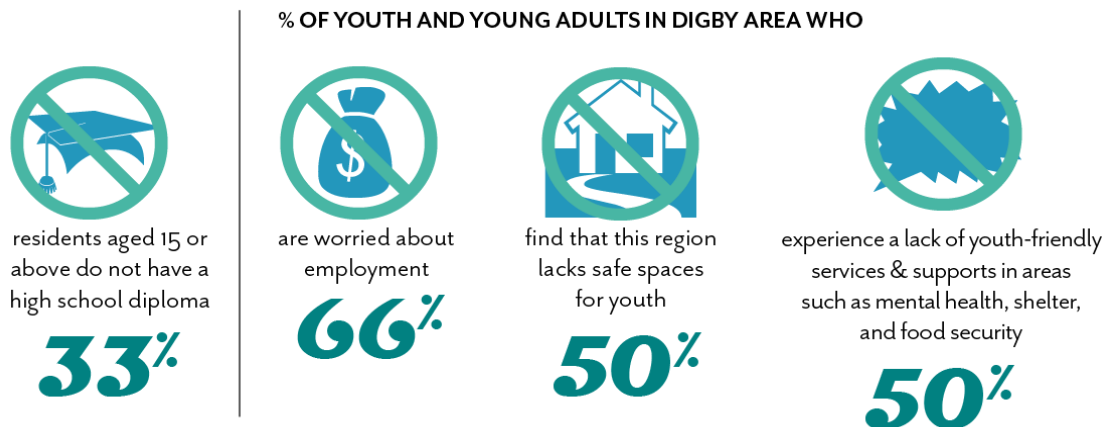
### 3.2.1 Development of the Common Agenda

To identify a common agenda for Turning the Tide, a community survey was conducted to identify issues of concern for the Digby region. More than 800 responses were received and several themes emerged, which are captured in the table below.

#### Turning the Tide Themes

<b>Employment + the Economy</b>	There is a strong correlation between employment and all other themes. This region is well known for its seasonal employment and a lack of secure jobs with a stable income, and this leaves small businesses struggling as many working age people emigrate for opportunities
<b>Healthcare</b>	The healthcare crisis is affecting all of Nova Scotia as 43% of respondents were concerned about healthcare and this topic is more important for seniors. People report long wait times to see doctors and having to leave the community to see a specialist. Healthcare is connected other socioeconomic aspects such as housing and employment opportunities for spouses of healthcare professionals, social determinants of health, and unequal access to healthcare based on income
<b>Environment</b>	Concerns about environmental sustainability, unsustainable industry practices, and environmental degradation were primarily expressed by the youth.
<b>Infrastructure</b>	The Digby area is rural in nature, so participants are concerned about the infrastructure as it ties to all other areas of concern. For example, limited internet* and power grids hinder business and employment opportunities, roads and transportation access affect accessibility to recreation and healthcare. <i>*NB: this is less of an issue after 2020/21 because of efforts by the provincial government to increase rural high speed &amp; broadband.</i>
<b>Community Identity and Inclusion</b>	Grievances about historical racial discrimination exist and not everyone feels included as there is unequal access to opportunities based on race and other factors. Participants expressed a need to increase immigration and raised concerns that not all newcomers would feel welcomed into the community
<b>Narratives</b>	Participants also raised the issue of changing the narrative of the Digby region by presenting it in an optimistic way as one participant noted, <i>“people’s negative attitudes and complaining instead of taking the time to check out the facts or thinking how they can help can either support or undermine efforts of community change”</i> .

A common agenda was arrived at through extensive consultation with educational institutions, community members, and government representatives to identify and prioritize community needs, gaps



in service delivery and collective actions to address them. A survey of youth and young adults indicated the need to focus on investing in local youth to improve issues in the region.

The common agenda for Turning the Tide's youth work focused on providing Digby area youth with needed supports in the following areas:

- **Education:** increasing the graduation rates for high schools and creating awareness of traditional and alternative opportunities for education and learning.
- **Employment:** making youth aware of existing employment opportunities and creating future employment opportunities in the area by creating supports for youth to become entrepreneurs and innovators in the Digby region.
- **Supports and Services:** make youth aware of a variety of local services and how to access them, including identifying and addressing barriers to access.
- **Activities and Spaces:** increase awareness of activities for youth and work to add more youth-friendly spaces. Barriers such as transportation to accessing activities are also addressed.

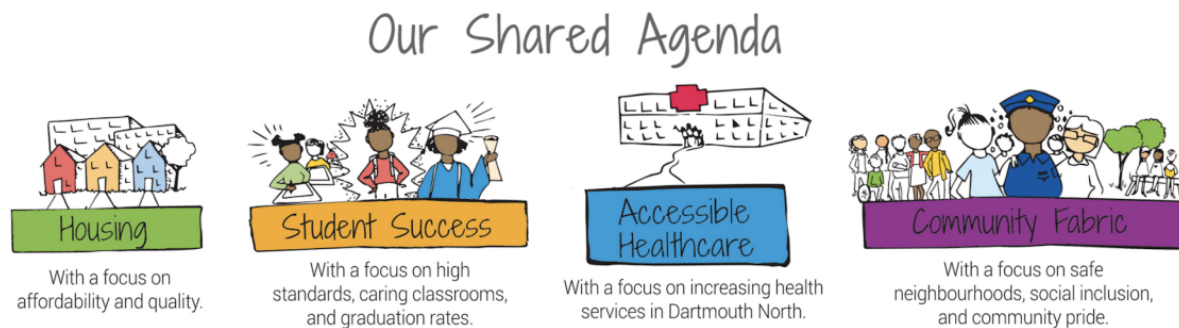
### *3.2.2 Evolution of the Common Agenda*

The Turning the Tide (TtT) team engaged in a series of consultations and community conversations, and chose to maintain separate collaborative approaches for addressing issues broadly and specifically for local youth. The Common Agenda grouped several issues of concern rather than just one.

TtT found that youth and young adults may require different action planning than would be relevant for the general population, which led them to develop specific initiatives targeted toward supporting youth in the key areas of concern. This demonstrates a targeted approach toward addressing issues for diverse community members and implementing change. Thus, the Community Building Youth Futures initiative

(CBYF) emerged as a Collective Impact initiative focused on youth. CBYF is positioned within the broader Turning the Tide Initiative.

### 3.3 Between the Bridges (BTB) Common Agenda Items



#### 3.3.1 Development of the Common Agenda

In 2016 Between the Bridges (BtB) conducted a survey and series of community consultations to obtain input from community members with diverse perspectives and lived experiences. An analysis of the data collected identified four priority areas that would form the shared agenda for Between the Bridges: housing, student success, accessible healthcare, and community fabric. As with Turning the Tide, multiple issues were taken on by the initiative as a high level common agenda, which was referred to as 'Breaking the Cycle.' BtB established working groups for each of the four priority areas and action planning began.

#### 3.3.2 Evolution of the Common Agenda

A formative evaluation of the initiative ([BtB Formative Evaluation Report, 2019](#)) identified and discussed challenges encountered in organizing collective action in a diverse, disconnected community, which were apparent from the moment the common agenda was established. For example, while the common agenda was formed based on feedback from community members, there is evidence that some community members had concerns about the process for selecting the priority areas. The survey in 2016 was offered in several languages and was distributed with attention to including unheard voices. However, when they did this 600 voices survey, they had already engaged with the community sufficiently to develop a list of potential priority areas, and these were presented already organized and grouped on the survey. Some community members were concerned that this may have introduced bias and affected results.

The evaluation was transparent about the challenges faced and notes, "Several members noted that they or others don't feel they can speak freely during meetings; sometimes they needed support or additional time to encourage their participation, and sometimes they felt their views would not be accepted or respected. Still others noted that some voices were not present around the table."

Evaluation helped Between the Bridges recognize early on that there were challenges with having all voices heard and represented and there were further barriers to overcome for all community members to be engaged. Residents experienced a variety of barriers to participation in the work of BtB including those related to education, income, language, cultural norms, experience and skills for doing this type of work, stigma and issues of health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the CI model may have contributed to an imbalance in power between staff and other representatives of service organizations who could attend meetings and dedicate time to the initiative as part of their paid work, and community members who would participate on their own unpaid time. The result was a common agenda that was supported by all parties, but which had not been co-created with equitable input from all parties. This was recognized by the BtB team as a hurdle, and one they sought to ameliorate through capacity building efforts.

The common agenda “Breaking the Cycle” evolved into “Working Together In New Ways for Social Impact” and collective action items were adjusted to reflect the new agenda for the initiative.

The image to the right was developed in 2020-21 and captures a new conceptualization of BtB and elements of the common agenda. The revised common agenda established the BtB team’s role as conveners and community builders who did not create projects *per se*, but instead were committed to providing the backbone infrastructure needed for community-led and initiated projects, as well as those led by community partner agencies. The work of the BtB team is captured in the gray circle surrounding the stated agenda. Defining activities and services in this context looks different than typical community projects, and demonstrating and communicating the value of this approach has been an ongoing challenge for BtB.





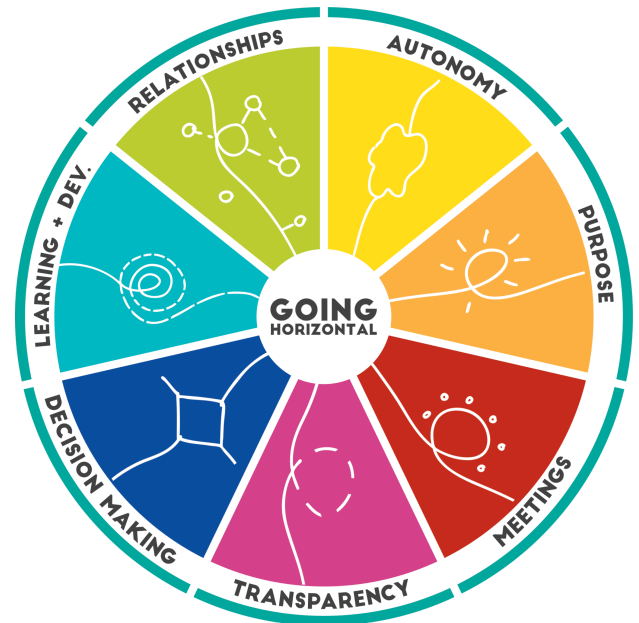
## 3.4 Wayside & WeavEast: Network Building through a Common Agenda

WeavEast was a network of changemakers housed at IC from 2019 to 2021. Wayside was a learning platform acquired in late 2019, with the intent to support learning and capacity building throughout IC's network (primarily WeavEast changemakers, but also the wider community).

### 3.4.1 Development of the Common Agenda - WeavEast

WeavEast was not conceived of as a CI initiative, but as another model for collaboration, a network based on [Going Horizontal](#)'s proposed non-hierarchical model. This model is based on seven domains of practice: purpose, autonomy, relationships, meetings, learning & development, decision making and transparency. For the purposes of this discussion, the group's agreed-to purpose may serve as equivalent to a common agenda.

In 2019, a group of 25 changemakers from Atlantic Canada created the WeavEast initiative. The changemakers co-created agendas using a collaborative decision-making process and laid the foundation for a network of weavers across Atlantic Canada. These twenty-five people were somewhat representative of the ecosystem, and served as a 'coalition of the willing' but were not equivalent to a full consultation with the community. The horizontal governance / network model of WeavEast created a different kind of project, one perhaps more nimble at the outset as compared to traditional CI initiatives, and therefore theoretically more able to pivot in response to changes, being unencumbered by an expectation of large-scale consensus.



The coordinated vision statement is captured in this line from the [WeavEast 2019 Convening](#) proceedings: “WeavEast is about coordinating conversations across the region to move important work to action more quickly, and to leverage this action to attract larger and broader support.”

The [2019 WeavEast Annual Report](#) outlined the three-year goals for the project, which constitute a collective action plan similar to those developed for CI initiatives:

- Capacity building for collaborative leadership and systems change
- Network building to create stronger linkages between those in the field
- Promoting and demonstrating the value of the field
- Amplifying and scaling existing work
- Creating an enabling policy environment
- Enhancing access to resources

In 2020, these simplified priorities were outlined:

- Bridging across communities, sectors and changemakers
- Shifting restrictive policies
- Shifting narratives

### *3.4.2 Development of the Common Agenda - Wayside*

If a common agenda is considered an initiative's mandate from the community, a common understanding of the problem and a set of ways to approach it, it is safe to say Wayside did not have one. Wayside was established by a community leader, and following his death, the board of Wayside approached Inspiring Communities seeking a new home for the charity. At that time, it consisted of three courses and a platform concept. IC's leadership perceived the possibility of a match. The alignment was never perfect, and the group of changemakers who identified as WeavEast were not broadly consulted as to their needs or desires for a common online learning space. Staff turnover at IC disrupted the connection with the Weaver network, and thus while Wayside was being developed, its integration with the WeavEast network was neglected. The Inspiring Communities network did not fully explore the ways the platform could support its work because the resources required to run the platform outweighed the benefits for an internal learning system.

Wayside arrived as a solution looking for a problem. Inspiring Communities was not prepared for the administrative, legal or financial challenges of undertaking a technology start up nor an education platform, and Wayside was both.

### *3.4.3 Learnings*

It is not clear that there was ever a collaboratively established common agenda for Wayside.

The common agenda built for WeavEast through initial gatherings was not sustained throughout the initiative as detailed [here, in the reflection piece Lessons in Weaving a Network](#).

Internally at IC, the knowledge about what WeavEast and Wayside were and how they aligned with the remainder of the work the organization was doing was not broadly known.

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## 4.0 Shared Measurement System

Collective impact initiatives establish a system to collect data and measure progress as a means of ensuring that efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable to the Common Agenda. A measurement system also provides feedback to the initiative so that goals and strategies can evolve with new learning. ([Read Tamarack Institute's discussion paper about Shared Measurement here.](#))



Inspiring Communities overall has a strong culture of evaluation and learning. Different kinds of evaluation are appropriate to different phases in social innovation experiments such as Collective Impact projects. As expected, in the early years much of the focus for IC was centered on developmental evaluations of the implementation of the Collective Impact approach, while also documenting outcomes achieved as early indications of impact of the work in community.

As the work evolves, the focus for evaluation generally shifts from implementation and operations to reporting on outcomes and demonstrating impact. As deeper impacts are achieved, programs, services and the initiative itself may evolve and go through a new cycle of development and implementation, which requires returning to DE activities appropriate for those phases of program design.

In support of a comprehensive approach to evaluation, each of IC's three Collective Impact programs have in place a framework that outlines a shared measurement system that is based on a developmental evaluation approach. These frameworks are implemented by program staff and the evidence gathered is being used to inform ongoing development.

## 4.1 Shared Measurement System for Northside Rising

Northside Rising developed an evaluation and learning framework to guide evaluation and monitoring activities and to plan for learning opportunities. They established the following goals for evaluation, which reflect the developmental evaluation approach called for by the framework:

- Look at the relevant Collective Impact components, and explore how they can be strengthened or further developed
- Identify any adaptations that may be required
- Learn how relationships are developing among partners
- Identify key learnings and achievements

To achieve these goals for learning and evaluation, NSR engaged in a variety of data collection methods including document review, stakeholder and key informant interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. Data analyses were compiled in a developmental evaluation report used for learning and program improvement.

Individual programs and action steps have been and continue to be evaluated regularly for purposes of learning and to capture the impact of efforts on community members. The approach for ongoing evaluation and monitoring consists of regular check-in through quarterly team retreats and weekly team meetings which are focused on capturing and reflecting on:

- progress towards intended outcomes;
- evidence of success;
- learning from experience in terms of what is working and what is not; and
- how to use evaluative evidence to make adjustments going forward.

NSR has evolved their work away from the CI model. Their current model incorporates the idea of base building ([a model described well in this primer](#)) and is focused around supporting the creation of a network of safe spaces through the community. NSR has put a great deal of effort into regular tracking of activities and sharing learning internally and while they have moved away from a formal shared measurement system, a useful evaluation and learning framework continues to guide the collection, analysis and use of evaluative evidence to support learning, reporting and accountability requirements and to demonstrate impact. The team has a strong culture of evaluation and high capacity for evaluative thinking, as is evidenced by the way they regularly reflect on what they are learning and use evidence to pivot their work in response. The current need for NSR is evaluation support that connects their program level evaluation and learning activities to the evaluation process under development for Inspiring Communities as a whole.

## 4.2 Shared Measurement System for Between The Bridges

A strong culture of evaluation is also evident for Between the Bridges. Engaged community members value the concept of shared measurement and expressed interest in its development and use of shared indicators of success to report on progress and improve their work. An example is found in program notes of discussions among the Student Success Team, which reported that the table members are interested in identifying appropriate indicators to monitor progress toward achieving identified outcomes. It was decided a formal shared measurement system would be a priority following decisions about a specific course of action for implementation.

Between the Bridges had data collection processes in place as a means of promoting accountability and tracking activity and operations. For example, the Community Insight Team maintained records of projects funded through its grants program, and collected monitoring reports from many of the funded projects, particularly during the first year.

Importantly, Between the Bridges collected feedback on group functioning at every meeting of the Residents' Roundtable, the Student Success Team, and the Strategic Roundtable, as a means of monitoring members' perceptions of group process. This aligned with their focus on developing community trust and capacity to engage further in the CI process.

With evolution in the Common Agenda, BtB has a need to evolve their measurement system to reflect the current strategy and approach being taken by this initiative. Like NSR, there is also a need to align evaluation and learning with that of the broader organization.

## 4.3 Shared Measurement System for Turning the Tide

A framework for change was developed after consultation with community members to support this community impact initiative. The framework for change focuses on strengthening community

engagement and connections, collaborative initiatives, and information sharing within communities across communities. The three objectives detailed by the framework for change are:

- **Engaged and Connected:** residents feeling connected to their community
- **Positive, Celebrating Success:** community members taking pride in their community.
- **Sharing Resources:** Residents are aware of a transparent pathway established by the community to access resources that meets their needs.

The shared measurement system for TtT was designed keeping the core objectives of the framework for change in mind. An evaluation plan was established that is intended to support the following evaluation goals:

- Learn from experience and experimentation
- Assess progress towards identified outcomes
- Be accountable to funders
- Meet internal and external reporting requirements, and
- Plan for next steps

*“The Evaluation plan for TtT was developed with both TtT and CBYF in mind - and it has been reviewed by the Leadership Table, who agree that it will meet our needs.”*

- Erika Rolston, Project Lead for Turning the Tide

The [full evaluation framework is accessible here](#) and provides guiding questions, indicators and measures for the following six key components of Turning the Tide’s work and is applicable to the work of CBYF as well:

- 1) **Governance and Infrastructure:** how the initiative is organized for its work, who guides and carries out the work, and how the initiative makes decisions, shares responsibilities, works together.
- 2) **Strategic Planning/Shared Agenda:** how TtT collectively defines the problem, develops a vision, identifies prospective solutions, and develops a collaborative plan to work toward these solutions.
- 3) **Community Engagement:** How TtT involves community sectors in designing and implementing TtT’s plan of action, how it encourages community connections and how to ensure diverse voices are heard.
- 4) **Capacity Building/Knowledge Exchange:** how TtT supports the development of capacity across community sectors, and shares knowledge related to important community issues and the work of the initiative.

- 5) **Evaluation, Research and Learning:** How TtT tracks and reflects on its progress and impact, how it learns from research and experimentation, and how it assesses success in achieving goals.
- 6) **Continuous Communication:** How TtT builds trust and respect across all participants by sharing information about its work, what the initiative has learned, how it supports cross-community communication, and plans for the future.

While a robust and comprehensive evaluation framework was developed, TtT has reportedly struggled with implementation of the framework. For example, team members were engaged in regular data collection through reflection exercises with guidance from a developmental evaluator. However, the weekly reflections became cumbersome as the work of implementing the program increased and turnover in the evaluator role left a gap between the desire for comprehensive evaluation and capacity to do evaluation as intended. To address this challenge, TtT has secured temporary supports.

Turning the Tide's DE also prepared a [report on the Community Connections Grant process](#). The DE role in capacity building was to encourage the TtT team to explore their own solutions and develop strategies to address the needs arising from the community. However the DE cautioned that the approach to develop solutions on their own could be problematic because there are instances where, *"You don't know what you don't know."*

CBYF benefits from support of Tamarack coaches to guide data collection, analysis and use and evaluation support is also available to the broader program through a contracted evaluation consultant. Over the course of its history, Turning the Tide has engaged in community-based research to inform its development and decisions about programs and services. TtT continues to engage in data collection and analysis to inform its work and is exploring opportunities to build evaluation capacity. Like other initiatives, there is a need to connect the evaluation function of TtT to the broader IC evaluation framework.

## 4.4 Shared Measurement System for WeavEast

WeavEast network members said they hoped to see evaluation reports become more accessible. They were often overlooked by members due to the level of time and effort required to access them.

Of the seven domains WeavEast aimed to operate in, learning and development and transparency are the most aligned with a shared measurement system. These domains guided evaluation and monitoring activities that were used to ensure learning, development and accountability. For example, after the first year of this project, WeavEast gained ample insight from designing networks for social changemakers, and although there was not a 'shared measurement system' established, the insights were captured and used to inform decisions.

These insights align with lessons learned through evaluation of the Collective Impact initiatives.

Insight	Brief Description
Setting aside time to clarify expectations	There were tensions between those supporting the work regionally and the backbone. Similar challenges were faced during the launch of the fellowship as the energy required for putting together travel itineraries and training programs drained the resources of WeavEast.
Relationships are very important	Geography makes it difficult to connect Newfoundland with the rest of the maritimes. Greatest successes came when time was spent in-person developing relationships with 'credible messengers' from communities who would help spread the word about WeavEast.
Field building with boundaries	There has been a pattern of reliance on the backbone for leadership and administration despite efforts to provide training and lead with organization practice.
Progress is not linear	Social Network Mapping had been identified as one of the key priorities. Got stuck on a discussion regarding which tool is the best for mapping out the social networks. Eventually realized that the work needed to focus on trust building and building a value proposition for participating in the network before mapping.

## 4.5 Shared Measurement System for Wayside

The Wayside platform was acquired by IC in 2019, not developed as a collaborative project. It was intended to integrate learning and capacity building to the network through a learning platform. As such evaluation and learning for Wayside was based on success measures appropriate for developing and assessing training programs, such as number of participants, feedback from partners and instructors, and engagement on discussion boards. In feedback on the *Art of Collaboration*, the first course offered by IC on the platform, respondents spoke to the importance of staying connected and information sharing, and the desire to access course content beyond the original date. When it came to responses to improve Wayside almost everyone agreed that the user interface was hard to navigate and buggy; participants were vocal in their desire to resume face-to-face convening.

## 5.0 Mutually Reinforcing Activities

When this core collective impact condition is in place (usually in the middle phase of the work, after a solid foundation has been laid), initiative partners have developed a collective plan of action which clearly specifies the activities that will address disparities, and indicates what each partner has committed to implementing.

Partners have clear goals for their own contributions to their working groups; and they understand the roles of other working groups and how they support the common agenda. Through the work of the backbone the Collective Impact initiative coordinates the differentiated activities of partners to align with the plan of action, in a way that fills gaps and reduces duplication of effort.

### 5.1 Northside Rising - Mutually Reinforcing Activities

The goal of partnerships is to develop the network, grow the network, and evaluate the relationships as to how they have been contributing to the collective impact. NSR has a collaboration spectrum to evaluate partnerships which include: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. As of 2022, Northside Rising has convened several networks that represent a variety of community organizations, government, academia, business and residents. NSR uses their base building approach to build leadership skills, strengthen relationships, and provide spaces where diverse stakeholders can build common agendas. The mutually reinforcing activities described below are related specifically to the collective impact work in substance use that has transitioned to the Safe Space Network.

[In the NSR 20-21 Community Impact Report \(page 11\)](#), the backbone role is described through the activities that they lead (Substance Use Roundtable -SURT) vs activities they support, led by other groups & organizations, which contribute to the same overall objectives of the Substance Use Action Plan. [CAPED](#): Cape Breton Association of People Empowering Drug Users and the Naloxone Business Engagement Project were both supported by the Northside Rising backbone team, being mutually beneficial to making



progress on priorities identified by stakeholders of the SURT: having a user advocacy group for people who use drugs in Cape Breton and reducing the stigma of people who use drugs in CBRM communities. The NSR Virtual Coffeehouse was also used as a format to encourage greater community awareness and support of substance use related community aspirations. The online public discussion format was used to host two conversations: one [dispelling myths about naloxone](#) and substance use and one which [promoted the new mobile health outreach unit](#) for stigmatized populations in CBRM.

### 5.1.1 Learnings

NSR identified that content experts working with context experts can create an effective set of mutually reinforcing activities, as shared on page 20 of their [Community Impact report](#) (image above). Other key learnings are shared in this [2021 presentation to the SURT by Eric Leviten-Reid](#).

## 5.2 Between The Bridges Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Between the Bridges concentrated its early efforts on laying the foundation for collective impact work; it focused primarily on building trust and relationships, and on developing agreements for working together and decision-making. Many table members feel this effort has enabled them and others to change the way they interact in group settings so that they can better express their views, understand and appreciate each other's views, and have constructive discussions about difficult and conflicting issues.

In preparation for developing a collective plan of action, Between the Bridges organized work on four priority areas in a way that reduces gaps and duplication of effort. For example:

- Instead of establishing a working group for the healthcare priority area, Between the Bridges provided backbone support for an existing community initiative focused on increasing health services in Dartmouth North.
- Instead of establishing a working group for the housing priority area, Between the Bridges compiled research describing the issues and identifying activities already underway to address these issues in Dartmouth North; it also hosted a lab as a vehicle for various parties working on housing issues to come together to understand the problem better, and to start considering potential actions to address the issues.
- BtB created and hosted a Video Directory of community services, preparing other organizations to create short videos introducing themselves. This served to build the community fabric, one of their initial directions, but also helped other organizations promote their services and individuals navigate what was available.

Between the Bridges identified ways to support and leverage existing work, as described above. Residents who were engaged might have looked to BtB to create opportunities for them to engage in mutually reinforcing activities. Inspiring Communities received feedback that BtB was consistently in the community getting to know the members and their needs. They were integral as a catalyst for action.

However, residents would say in later feedback they would prefer less backbone support; there was an urge for meaningful engagement amongst Dartmouth North residents, where “meaningful engagement” meant more active, hands-on contributions. This may have been a case of unmanaged expectations for collaborative systems change work, or an opportunity for more volunteer-based organizations in the community.

Between the Bridges also experienced some challenges in developing mutually reinforcing activities. The step of getting from establishing a shared vision to concrete action steps that might be measurable or quantifiable is a challenge in Collective Impact and can take time, since building trust with the community and establishing relationships can take a long time. Between the Bridges was scrupulous in following the CI model, meaning this critique can be ascribed to the model itself. That said, the current BtB configuration is new and due to these recent changes, a refocus on evaluating the process and reestablishing the community trust will need to occur.

## 5.3 Turning the Tide - Mutually Reinforcing Activities

To action the common agenda Turning the Tide connects with nearly 35 partners from across the region, including youth organizations, emergency services, cultural and sports organizations, and faith groups. The role TtT plays is captured well in the initiative’s most recent evaluation report (which can be accessed here: [TtT report on the Community Connections Grant process](#)) *“Turning the Tide acts as a conduit and facilitates the process of eliminating the silos that have historically created barriers to service delivery; and to construct the environment in which collaborations and trusting relationships between the multiple and diverse members of the cross-sector coalition can be established and nurtured. In addition to building a cross-sectoral coalition, Turning the Tide recognizes the need for building trusting relationships within the communities and across communities; and these must be nurtured as a prerequisite for building community cohesiveness.”*

The evaluation report elaborates on the beliefs underlying the organization’s approach: *“Turning the Tide believes that if the Collective Impact model is to be successful then it requires providing the micro-communities with the resources to build upon and/or create cohesive communities embedded in community engagement and connections, information sharing and communities working collaboratively to achieve their respective goals.”*

Programs and services provided include (but are not limited to):

- Community Ambassador program
- Lunch and learn sessions
- Community Connection Grants
- Community Building Youth Futures (CBYF) program



The 2021 evaluation report assessed the contribution of the Community Connection Grants (CCG) program. The program provides short term funding opportunities (up to \$3,000) to implement projects that assist community members and build upon community cohesiveness. The evaluation found the program to be successful in terms of achieving intended outcomes established by the framework for change for the CCG program. The report notes that creating connections between community partners, facilitating collaborative efforts and relationship building were important achievements and that without CCG funding and support from TtT, the 29 projects included would not have been implemented; these initiatives were noted to be crucial to the community during the pandemic. The evaluation captured success as well as opportunities for improvement of the program and made recommendations to improve the CCG process and impact going forward.

## 5.4 WeavEast & Wayside Mutually Reinforcing Activities

In 2019, the WeavEast fellowship program was launched. The main purpose of the fellowship was to engage with communities across the region to gather input for the WeavEast initiative and various objectives of the fellowship were as follows:

- Identify potential points in the system that could be strengthened to improve outcomes, create opportunities for alignment or scale existing network
- Create a peer network among the stakeholders
- Understand the system of social innovation across Atlantic Canada.

The WeavEast fellows collected stories and listening for challenges and opportunities. Through their work, some social innovators began to realize how WeavEast might support them to amplify their work. A second in-person gathering was held to identify the purpose, scope and vision of WeavEast for year two, points of leverage where resources and energy could be directed, and potential organizational concepts and structures that could hold this vision well. The action steps identified for the second half of the project were: bridging across communities, sectors and changemakers; shifting restrictive policies; and shifting narratives.

The WeavEast fellows had connected with projects across the region in the first year, and many of these projects were invited to submit for a round of funding in the second year. How We Thrive, Atlantic Youth Photovoice, and a policy research project were funded.

The people most engaged in WeavEast were very interested in building a 'light, resilient infrastructure' to connect changemakers, and considered the projects part of that work, each doing what might be considered a 'mutually reinforcing activity': building connections and capacity, engaging youth, and influencing policy, all related to the common agenda.

Wayside was considered by backbone staff to be another activity reinforcing the work of the WeavEast network, along with meeting Inspiring Communities' larger goals around collaboration and learning.

Improving the user experience and adding forums to foster conversation were undertaken in 2021, along with experimenting with different kinds of partnerships and engagement and learning opportunities, engaging with other activities that supported changemakers, such as the East Preston Empowerment Academy's public speaking course, Engage Nova Scotia's Big Meet-Up and a series of Capacity-Building workshops with the Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia (now IONS).

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## 6.0 Continuous Communication

Communication is essential for the success of any diverse team or working group; however, the challenges of effective communication across sectors and diverse stakeholders is well known. In order to address this issue, Collective Impact initiatives purposefully engage in open and continuous communication, across the many players and among external stakeholders, to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation. Continuous communication can be shown through regular, well-attended working group meetings with lots of engagement; regular multi-party dialogue and coordination of efforts among initiative partners; and the presence of open information sharing structures and processes. External stakeholders are engaged with, understand the initiative's goals, and know how they can support or become involved, as well as how to contribute feedback. In the Inspiring Communities context, initiatives engage in multi-level communication: in tables or groups, in their communities, through the IC network, and through the social innovation community. These last two are important because they allow shared learning, help initiatives build on each others' work and, in the case of IC, help provide clear milestones and reporting to funders.

### 6.1 Between The Bridges Continuous Communication Strategy

Pre-pandemic, average meeting attendance for project tables was around 65% to 70% of members. With few exceptions, table members participated in, and felt engaged in, the work of their tables. Table members regarded the modeling and facilitation provided by backbone staff, and the development of agreements for working together as helpful to them. This was particularly true of residents, helping them feel comfortable expressing their views on the issues being discussed.

Apart from informal encounters between meetings, backbone staff provided most of the communication and coordination relating to Between the Bridges groups.

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Between the Bridges found that the foundations of long term change – trust, safety and processes that they established through the first couple of years – allowed the diversity of residents and cross-sectoral organizations to establish clear communication pathways, and identify the purpose and focus of their time together, with clarity and accountability on who is doing what and getting things done.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on most community work, and BtB was no exception. The initiative noted they underwent a major adaptation in practices: very regular communication at the start of and during COVID. Weekly Zoom socials with residents during this time kept a core group of residents from suffering social isolation. When the lockdowns began to ease, the BtB team reported it felt like starting from scratch.

Between the Bridges circulated newsletters occasionally, but relied on face to face or online meetings, as well as direct outreach, as a primary communication tool.

While the engaged parts of the Dartmouth North community participated in continuous communication, there remained a challenge of missing voices, and parts of the community that were not engaged. The BtB team reported,

“There are about 12,000+ voices that haven’t come to the table, we recognize/hope for/strive for enough people with enough diversity to represent the community. When we have specific initiatives that crop up, then we are able to bring a good breadth of perspectives - for example in the Housing Lab - when we knew what we were recruiting for we were able to fulfill diversity well. We don’t have much private sector involvement (and on their end, it’s not part of that sector’s mandate to get involved); we do well with residents, community orgs and public.”

As an organization centred on equity, BtB strives for a diverse group of residents to inform their work. BtB notes that diverse voices matter because individuals living in a particular area don’t all interact with the space the same way, have the same experiences, or get treated equally within those spaces. By not maintaining a regular outreach, through a newsletter, “open door” events, or other means, to the larger community, engagement of additional residents may have been limited.

During the initial stages of implementation, Between the Bridges sought input from the community through a series of community consultations. In 2022, as part of a re-envisioning of Inspiring Communities’ strategic direction and a resulting transition in staff, a series of consultations were held to help inform a new mandate. In a community with such a long history of distrust, regular, proactive outreach, transparency and open doors remain important tools for leveraging the assets and strengths of the community to support positive growth and foster wellbeing of local residents and organizations.

## 6.2 Turning The Tide's Continuous Communication Strategy

Continuous communication helps build trust and respect across all participants by sharing information about the work, what TtT has learned, how TtT supports cross-community connections, and plans for the future.

For Turning the Tide, continuous communication involved the following activities:

- Ensure that TtT has a communication plan.
- Provide information about its work to its community partners and members of the community such as through reports, newsletters, facebook posts, project lead interviews, and backbone reflection sessions.
- Making sure community partners and members of the community feel sufficiently well informed about the work of TtT through meeting feedback forms, community partner reflections, and collaborative framework reflections.
- Ensuring that people working in different parts of TtT are informed about activities in all parts of the initiative through backbone reflective sessions and project lead interviews.
- Ensuring participants in the initiative feel comfortable expressing their views and feel their voices are heard through meeting feedback forms and collaborative framework reflections.
- Ensuring that TtT shares the results of its activities and projects with the community members and those who have also been involved with its work through document reviews of project files and project lead interviews.
- Measuring in what ways TtT provides opportunities to enhance cross-community and cross-sector communication.

In early years of the initiative, communication with community members was primarily through in-person data-collection. Reports on findings from community data collection are posted to the website. Social media and newsletters have been the primary methods of transmitting information to community members.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first began, CBYF delivered activities and services for youth virtually, however remote participation rates dropped significantly as the pandemic progressed. The 2022 communications plan includes intentional outreach to diverse partners and community members including youth, in-house communities, community partners, equity seeking groups, and funders. TtT intends to communicate to these partners their value, role and intentions in an effort to attract new audiences and recruits to support the initiative. As restrictions eased in summer of 2022 TtT (including TtT) has increased outreach to community members through presence at community events and initiating connections with youth across communities in the region.

## 6.3 Northside Rising's Continuous Communication Strategy

The main objective of a communications strategy for NSR is to *“further establish Northside Rising’s core role in the community which is aligned in the emerging programs and stakeholders (IC network, CBRM community, program stakeholders).”* Some communications channels NSR currently uses are social media and media engagements; community events; and stakeholder engagements. Communicating about the initiative’s work and programs is identified as a priority for NSR. The initiative has grown and evolved. It positions itself as a base building organization and is intentional about informing community members and agencies about NSR’s role in supporting systems change in the region. A communications strategy being developed aims to:

- Ensure funders understand what is going on in the community and the fact that systems change take a long time.
- Build long-lasting relationships with community partners and mutual understanding as to how they can build on each other’s progress.
- Help the community differentiate NSR from other non-profit organizations.
- Help NSR and IC coordinate messaging and strategy.

Blog posts have been completed which inform readers of the various elements of work in the Northside region. NSR has published Community Impact Reports that help crystallize the impacts the initiative has made in community. The initiative has adopted a distinct graphical and visual style that makes their communications recognizable. NSR also hosts regular coffeehouses which open a space for two-way communication and dialogue.

## 6.4 WeavEast’s and Wayside’s Continuous Communication Strategy

WeavEast used a website, newsletters, social media, blog posts and annual reports to communicate with its network members and stakeholders. Newsletters updated the community on systemic change. Some important topics mentioned were rising up against anti-black systemic racism, photovoice project with the Atlantic Council for International Cooperation (ACIC), policy research projects, job opportunities for Inspiring Communities, and social innovation. Instagram was used to tell stories of resilience and fellows provided regular blog post updates and changemaker profiles from their communities. An invitation was sent out to the WeavEast network to share insights of key learnings such as supporting action to address systemic issues, expanding communications efforts, and sharing survey results and analysis. WeavEast also maintained a “Distribution List” of people from diverse backgrounds who were part of the network to disseminate valuable information.

The Wayside staff team contacted the WeavEast (WE) list with information about the platform and course offerings. These were also promoted via IC channels. The Wayside lead directly approached desirable partners to create courses. As part of the intention of Wayside was to provide a communication space for the network of weavers and changemakers, Wayside users (regular members and course attendees) were engaged via message forums.

Face to face convenings were a key communication channel at the outset of WeavEast and when a combination of staff turnover and the pandemic affected the ability to host these, WeavEast lost some of its momentum.

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## 7.0 Inspiring Communities as a Collective Impact initiative

### 7.1 Common Agenda

From the beginning, Inspiring Communities was termed a ‘backbone’ intended to support the three community sites. This would imply that all of IC - what was then called the IC Network – was perceived as a Collective Impact initiative. However, there was no captured information outlining a common agenda beyond “supporting the community sites”. As IC has grown and engaged in other projects beyond these CI sites, this confusion has compounded and is evident at all levels. Feedback in evaluation reports and from community surveys make apparent the lack of clarity about what IC or its initiatives are or do, exactly.

In 2022, the organization released new strategic directions that definitively state that IC is an equity-centered intermediary organization, which is a convening role in the systems change sector. While this sector and role may not be familiar to the preponderance of Nova Scotians, this is a needed step toward clarity of purpose and sustainability of IC.

### 7.2 Shared Measurement System

Inspiring Communities had a detailed evaluation system, shared indicators for tracking early signs of change, and a Theory of Change dating from 2018 (changed and updated in 2019). With a tremendous focus on evaluation and continuous monitoring, there remained a blind spot in reporting on the work of IC core. In fact, there was not an overarching, shared measurement system for IC as a whole that allowed for organization-wide reporting and learning. There are many reports and Developmental Evaluation briefs that were accessible to IC staff but the demand for evaluation support at the community site level was the primary focus. While evaluation was a continuous process, apart from the annual Impact reports from 2020, 2021 and 2022, there was no published formal reporting on the work of IC across initiatives. The impact reports also report on the work of the initiatives with little evaluation of how the projects aligned to ‘move the needle’ on bigger strategic priorities for the organization. To address this gap a revised Strategic Learning and Evaluation System (SLES) is under development. The revised shared measurement system will build on existing evaluation frameworks and activities being applied by IC staff across the organization.

## 7.3 Mutually Reinforcing Activities

If IC were understood to work as a collective impact project, the ‘multi-stakeholders’ coordinated would include the CI sites, the funders and other collaborators, as well as actors from other sectors.

The three CI sites have coordinated work in the past; a specific example was work on an equity compensation framework to acknowledge the work of community first voice and lived experience contributors. Unfortunately this was not shared with the parts of IC that were not part of “CI3”, that is, the three collective impact sites.

The potential to share more work in common and align agendas across all IC initiatives remains. IC is increasingly examining partnership structures and principles of partnership as needs emerge in Nova Scotian communities including affordable housing, food security and better coordination during crises (such as recent Hurricane Fiona and traumatic community events).

This coordinating work is valuable in meeting the challenge of surmounting a geographically-located work focus which makes our work distributed, easily siloed, and complex. There is also a need to continuously communicate what is being learned in part of the organization with the whole, so that lessons can be contextualized and considered in new places and in iterations of models being used to support communities (place-based and theme-based).

## 7.4 Continuous Communication

The Inspiring Communities network is committed to continuous communication, particularly “internal”, or within the network. A short internal newsletter is distributed weekly (monthly until 2021), a reflections newsletter is shared bimonthly, and two meetings per month are devoted to encouraging the network to come together to share learning and reconnect. A quarterly newsletter is distributed to community members and a retreat is held at least annually.

The challenges to communication are lack of time, technology, geographic dispersion, and lack of attention. There is also an issue of prioritization. Community needs are demanding, and easily take precedent. When people are busy, reading a newsletter is easy to put off.

## 7.5 IC as Backbone - CORE

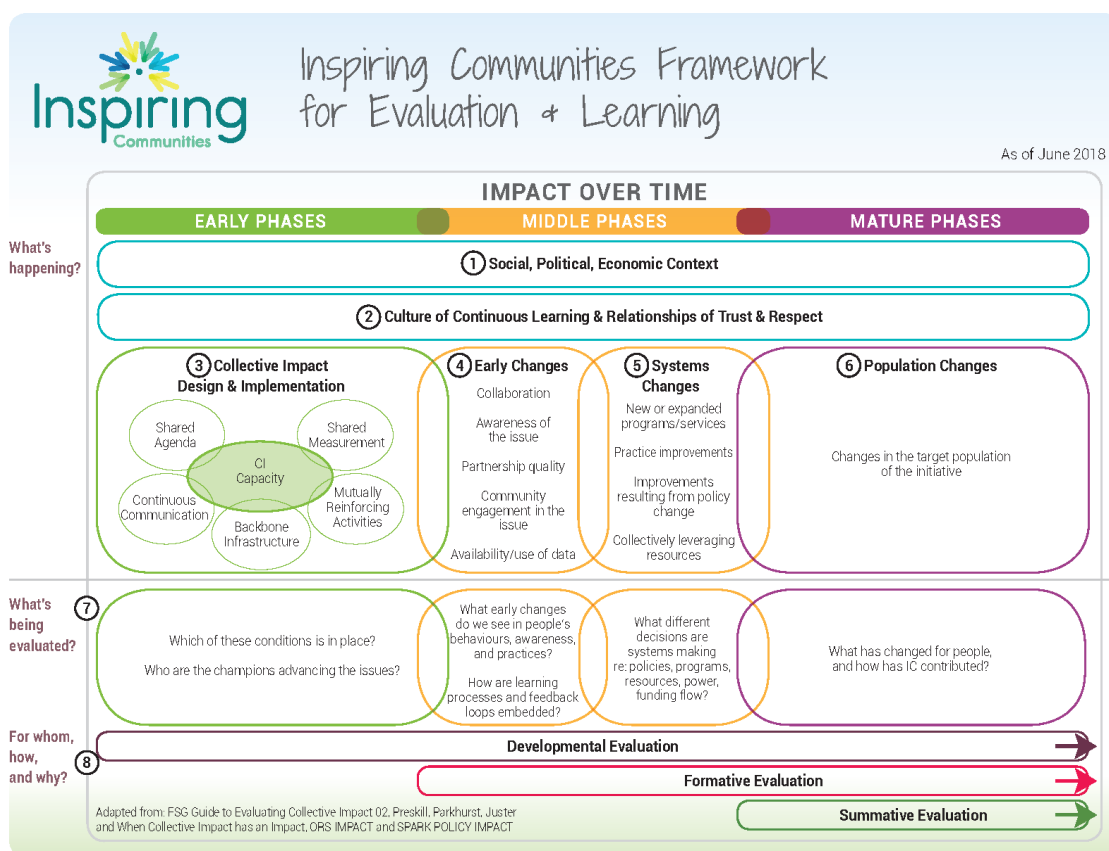
Inspiring Communities supports social change initiatives, providing backbone support for initiatives so they can focus on developing their ideas rather than being bogged down with operational burdens. This role removes Inspiring Communities from directly engaging with residents, and can lead to a perception of a shadowy ‘central office’ that is pulling strings and disconnected from the community work.

If the organization was intended to be solely an administrative support body, hiring for administrative efficiency, financial prowess and governance effectiveness might have taken precedence. However, the organization has struggled with crafting resilient, clear, efficient processes and uncomplicated financial reporting, and has undertaken other ways of working toward systems change.

## 8.0 Final thoughts

### 8.1 IC as a Learning Organization

Members of the IC research and evaluation team developed tools for learning and evaluation for the organization in 2018: the IC Theory of Change (see Appendix B) and IC Framework for Evaluation and Learning (below).





While these were communicated through the website, some team members did not find that they were well understood across the organization, nor was there continuous communication about how they might be useful in context for each of the five initiatives.

The IC principles (10 at the time) were a more often-used rubric for consistently reflecting on activities and actions of team members and were integrated into team reflections about the work as well as in personal HR review processes.



As a Collective Impact lab, that is, a test site for the ways CI and other participatory, collaborative and systems change approaches can be carried out, Inspiring Communities has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the field. In the process of reviewing the rich stores of data collected over the years, we have come up with some resonating themes and learnings. (See next page).

In 2019, Andrea Redmond wrote a thesis profiling Inspiring Communities as a learning organization. The organization has learned through challenging times that simply employing regular reflection is insufficient to harvest and integrate learnings. There must be a more conscious method applied.

## Integrated Learnings

Some of the resonating themes we have seen across our initiatives include:

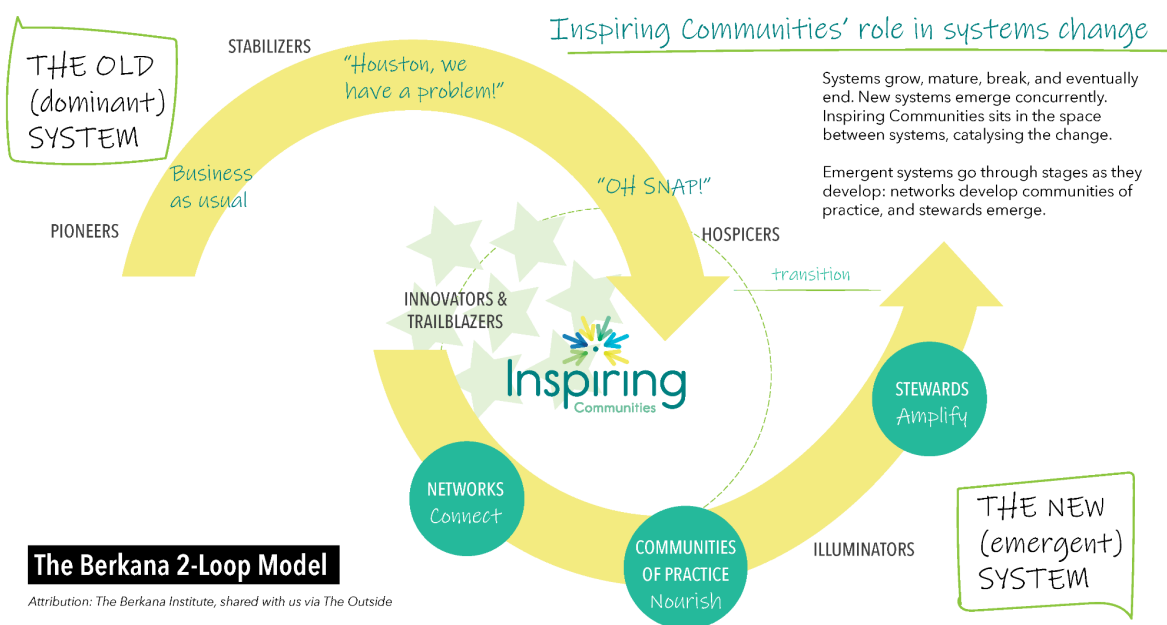
- Establishing the pre-conditions for CI is a long term, iterative and cyclical process.
- There is a challenge to engaging and representing a wide variety of voices in communities.
- Explaining the work of a convening organization, or a CI, is hard. There became an increasing need for clarity on IC's role as a backbone and what that meant in terms of work, processes, resources and time it takes to convene, facilitate, collaborate, build consensus, and evaluate the activities of each initiative and all their partnerships.
- There is a nuance between the Collective Impact initiative and the core or backbone team — a CI should include the community members. The backbone staff team is a support, and yet it is incumbent on them to hold the CI together and be the consistent presence of it. The staff must be both of the community (to gain trust and credibility) and also somewhat neutral, so as to facilitate the coordination of many voices. This is a fine balancing act.
- Collective Impact is long term and to many residents, it might look like nothing is happening. It is important to pace the work to give some concrete results along the way, and manage expectations that there will be more.
- For a backbone to be effective, it must have solid relevant skills: administrative efficiency and prowess, diplomacy, political savvy, the ability to see from multiple perspectives and deep understanding of the issues the community is tackling.
- Operationalizing financial and administrative tasks into clear processes is essential.
- If a backbone takes on other work outside the CI project, it must do so thoughtfully and ensure it has a clear understanding of the amount of attention and resources the other work will claim.

This report, which provides a summary review of the work the organization has done up to 2021, has been one step towards continuing and integrating that learning. We look forward to releasing our new evaluation and learning systems framework to demonstrate:

- an evolution in our understanding of our work and how we do it and
- the impact we would like to have as a whole, and in each of our initiatives.

We have maintained the three geographic sites and have consolidated all our emergent work into a new function termed “Strategic Initiatives”. Our “fifth” initiative is our CORE/Ops. We have been intentional in making visible what would otherwise be termed “admin” in recognition that all parts of our organization must function well and are integral to the success of our activities and to achieve our intended impacts.

Looking back, the linear quality originally ascribed to Collective Impact (number of years for early, mid-term and long-term changes) was not resonant to the reality Inspiring Communities has witnessed. Community work is cyclical. In recognition of this, the Berkana Two-Loop model has helped IC identify their position in the systems change field.



## 8.2 Reflections to consider as we look ahead

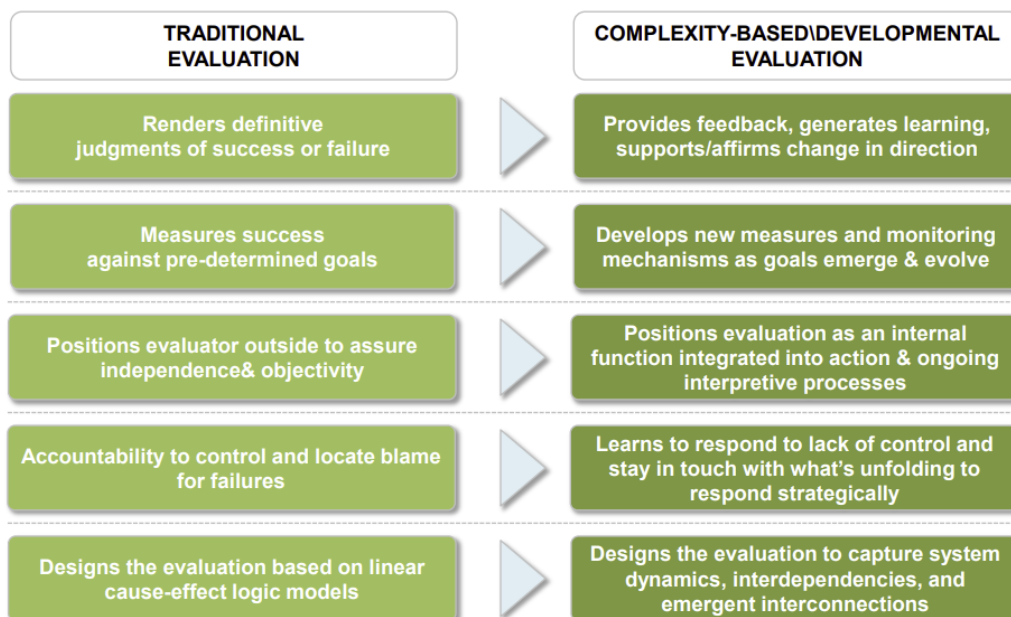
*What will we be mindful of as we embrace what comes next?* Identifying the common progress or barriers and sharing how we learn from our projects across our organization and with external networks is a great opportunity for IC. We particularly seek to animate this throughout Atlantic Canada as a node for SI Canada and through stories we share with our Atlantic Council of Changemakers.

We have learned a lot from reviewing our work and these evaluation products as well as consulting with some experts in the field who have supported us to make sure that we consider and integrate the following going forward:

- The role of an organization at different points of a project can be a critical evaluation point when compared against progress indicators. For example, we will look at whether projects consistently move forward after a particular intervention by IC - within and across areas (place-based and theme-based).
- How to amplify the incredible amount of work it takes to form partnerships, and what successful partnership looks like in all our projects (across areas). We will also reflect on and document the stages in partnership. We have learned a lot about partnerships, readiness and clarity and how to restore relationships that fracture due to misunderstandings or shifts in context.
- We see an opportunity through this report to compare and contrast the five (and our future) initiatives:
  - what worked well, where and with who, and why or why not (including what preconditions were present or absent but needed).
  - what were / are the minimum specifications for progress across the projects? Did staff turnover impact trust/relationships, progress, anything else? Were there common patterns across the projects when this happened (or not)?
- With EDI as the primary lens for other principles and our [new Guiding Principles](#), it will be interesting to see what (if anything) would lead to a prioritization among those principles? For example, do you need Trust/Relationship building before agreeing to a shared agenda and measures?
- What impact on the work did the other initiatives and projects that Inspiring Communities was part of at the time have on focus, resource, learnings? What learnings can we glean from that work – NSN4SC, SI Canada partnership among others – that we can apply to the learnings in this report?
- An in-depth evaluation of pattern-sensing over time is planned for our work as our projects and strategic priorities mature and evolve.

We have shared, and will continue to share, these learnings regionally or nationally (for example, with Tamarack and SI Canada) so that we can inform other communities seeking to implement similar projects as ours. We also see opportunities to share what we are learning in and about evaluation with networks such as the Canadian Evaluation Society.

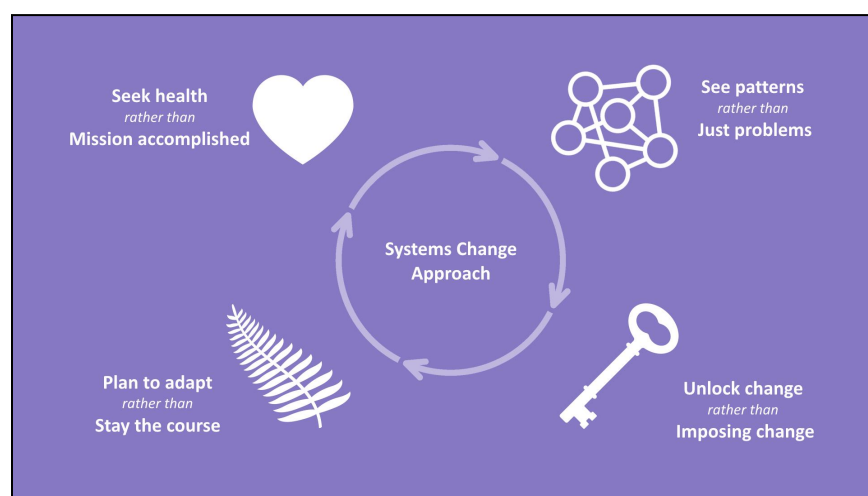
As we look to what comes next we will be informed in part by slide 9 in this incredible resource [Evaluating Collective Impact](#) by Mark Caba comparing two evaluation paradigms (see next page).

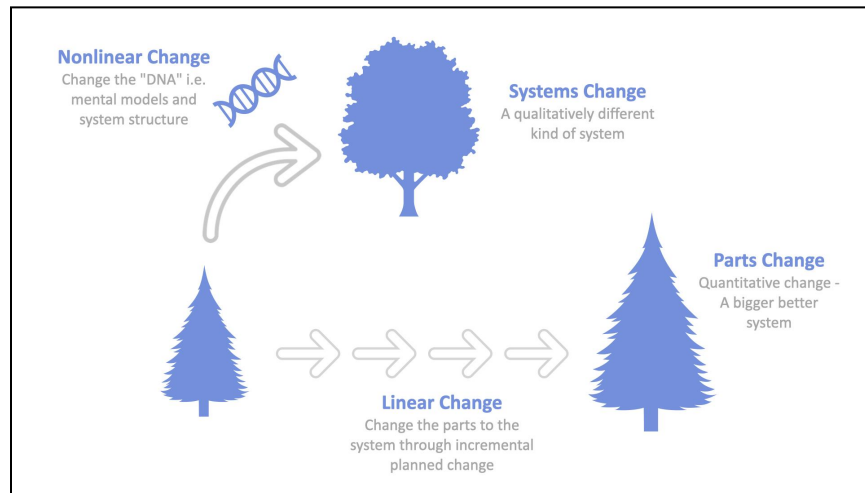
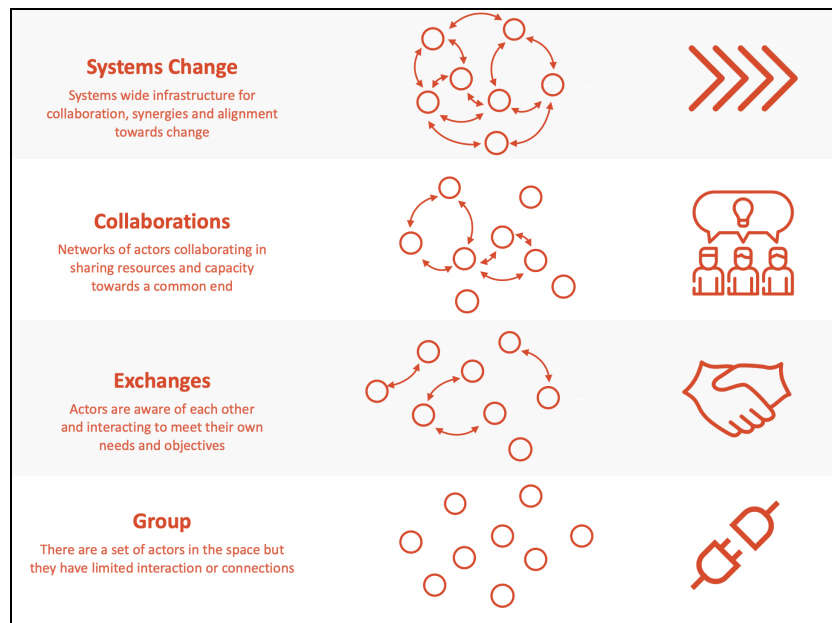


Developmental Evaluation: Using Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation & Use. Patton. 2008.

We will also consider how the systems change approaches we have embraced overlap and intersect with the Collective Impact work, for instance through [six conditions of systems change](#).

The next few pages show illustrations of some models that describe approaches to systems change, courtesy of the [Systems Innovation network](#).





## Appendix A - Documents Consulted

This report was prepared after reviewing all documentation that could be considered monitoring and evaluation products in each of the five initiatives of the organization.

Internally, a deep dive into the records and document folders for each of the initiatives was undertaken by the project team.

Externally, publicly available reports and content on the IC website were also considered.

**Northside Rising :** [Find NSR's reports here](#)

**Between the Bridges:** [Find BtB's reports here](#)

**Turning the Tide:** [Find TtT's reports here](#)

**WeavEast:** [Find WE's reports here](#)

**Wayside:** (1) [Wayside Journey](#) (2) [Wayside a case study](#)

**Other reports:** [Research Depot of reports is here](#)

Also of note: Redmond, Andrea. *An appreciative inquiry case study of evaluation practice in a non-profit organization: Discovering the factors of sustained practice.* St. Francis Xavier University. (Master's Research Report) 2020.

# Appendix B - Theories of Change

First Theory of Change (2018)





Progress chart based on this Theory of Change:

