

SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM FOR ATLANTIC CANADA

2021 Annual Report to the McConnell Foundation



Land Acknowledgement

We respectfully acknowledge that it is our privilege to gather, in Atlantic Canada, in large part in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded homeland of the Mi'kmaq and Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet) Peoples, and in Newfoundland, the home of the Beothuk People, as well as, in Labrador, the land of the Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut and the Innu of Nitassinan. Many of us are settlers on these lands. Together, we strive for respectful partnerships with all the peoples of this region as we search for collective healing and true reconciliation and honour this beautiful land together.

(Adapted from the CAUT Guide)

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank everyone who contributed to the journey of the Atlantic Canada Social Innovation Ecosystem and WeavEast in 2021 including:

Wayside pioneers: Sera Thompson, Jenn DeCoste, Alan Sloan, Dr. LeQuita H. Porter, Omolara Ogunbosi, Hailey Vidler, Catherine Hart, Annika Voltan, Sharon Alexander, Emma Beukema, and Seana Jewer.

Innovation leaders: Sobia Ali-Faisal, Nikki Baldwin, Karen Berglander, Sarah Crocker, Kate Dempsey, Megan Dorrell, Nina Elliott (The Rock Vandal), Julia Feltham, Sarah Ferber, Kevin Gallant, Alana Hunt, Jillian Kilfoil, Moashella Shortte, Josh Smee, Julie Smith, Tamara Steele, John R. Sylliboy, Tara Taylor, Ryan Veltmeyer, Christel Walsh, Jim Ward, and Kehisha Wilmot.

Staff members: Miranda Cobb, Olusegun Osunrinde, Tyler Colbourne, Charlene Boyce, and Louise Adongo.

Our warmest thanks to the original cohort of Weaveast Fellows, and everyone who has attended and participated in our convenings, shared opportunities, inspiration and thoughts with the community and engaged in the work of weaving. And our sincere gratitude to those who are gathering energy to lead the next chapter in the Atlantic Canadian Social Innovation Ecosystem.

Map is from a 2018 Spring Garden Archaeological Report by Davis MacIntyre & Associates, adapted from the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, 2007.

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About the cover: *This is an artistic representation of the extending, rippling impact that the WeavEast initiative has had. It reflects the effects we have witnessed with social innovation outcomes being passed along through the reach of our various prototypes and explorations.*



1 | INTRODUCTION

Social innovation is not new, but Weaveast's original vision of a democratic network of changemakers felt fresh and inspiring in 2019. It was founded to demonstrate the power of a non-hierarchical, collaborative network built on trusted relationships.

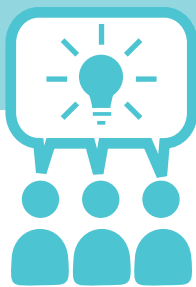
This was the ship that set out. The storms and shoals it encountered along the way are well documented in a series of blog posts we have gathered from various leaders and participants involved. [A review of these posts can be found on the Inspiring Communities blog.](#)

In 2021 our main focus has been both testing the strength of the relationships established and fostering new roots, while harvesting learning from a new cohort of seed grant recipients. We approached the promotion of these seed grants with a humble awareness of our failure to reach some of the communities we had hoped to in the past. A proactive approach resulted in a more diverse community representation in the cohort: Black, Indigenous, French and English, and 2SLGBTQIA++ people were brought into the circle. There were projects from each Atlantic province and a broad set of work. In keeping with the relational basis the network called for, we personally responded to each applicant who wasn't chosen and sought to connect them with other resources where possible.

WeavEast has been many things in this short three year journey, and the main thing it has been is educational. We are happy to share the lessons we have learned in weaving an iteration of this network, and from the many people it has brought us into contact with.

LEGEND

Look for the following icons throughout the report to see highlights of our learnings, challenges, successes and impacts.



Learnings



Challenges



Successes &
Impacts

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2021 YEAR IN REVIEW: PROTOTYPING

Wayside

Wayside came to Inspiring Communities as an opportunity for the WeavEast network to benefit from an online space designed for changemakers. It responded to two challenges: COVID-19 and the geographic distances that made in-person meeting costly and challenging pre-pandemic.



After 2020's soft launch with two courses (*The Art of Collaboration* and *Hosts' Table*), Wayside formally launched in February 2021 with a *Course in Mindfulness*. We also had video assets for a course on systems thinking, which required some redevelopment to be offered as an open course; and we had plans to re-run *The Art of Collaboration*.



We bolstered Wayside with updated social functionality and a more user-friendly 'groups' feature. We seeded discussions and made easy ways for members to find each other. Through partnerships, we examined other ways the platform could contribute to the innovation ecosystem. For example, we hosted: a [public speaking course](#) intended to build confidence in the African Nova Scotian Community (with the East Preston Empowerment Academy); discussions for The Big Meet Up ([with Engage NS, who shared their learnings](#)); and a [capacity-building course series](#) with the Community Sector Council of NS. The Developmental Evaluation course we planned was created, but then delivered via Kumospace and Jamboard, as the leadership and Board of Inspiring Communities paused Wayside work in order to establish its financial viability. Inspiring Communities undertook a review of its strategic directions over the summer of 2021 and in the fall, the Board of Directors made the hard decision to wind down Wayside.



The WeavEast community did not embrace Wayside. We learned that yet another social platform was not the key to connecting a network. Technology is a tool, not the heart; in fact, it often adds a barrier to genuine connection.

Wayside Playspaces & WeavEast Convenings: Open Spaces

In December 2020 we heard loud and clear that WeavEast participants wanted more informal ways and opportunities to gather and connect.



Responding to comments that Zoom fatigue was real and technology daunting for some as the pandemic wore on, we implemented a series of informal gatherings with two goals: to explore some new tools for connecting online and to do it in a fun, playful way. We explored Gather.town, KumoSpace, whereby.com, Mural, Miro, Jamboard and [new ways to use Zoom](#). Participants shared glowing feedback about the meaningful connection, new friends and laughter-filled explorations of new tools.

Riding on the success of Playspaces, we subsequently offered a monthly virtual gathering using Open Space Technology where participants set the agenda for discussion. This was co-hosted by original WeavEast Fellow Julia Feltham to begin to assess whether there was appetite to continue WeavEast beyond the funded project housed by Inspiring Communities. While there were several lively discussions, notably one that dove into the idea of what a light, sustainable infrastructure for social innovation might look like, overall the attendance dropped steadily and interest waned.



Maintaining connections solely through online spaces required sustained energy from the centre, and it proved challenging to spark interest to ignite the periphery. With no funded projects or resources involved, connecting is less prioritized. We hope the dormant connections that were forged may be reactivated in the future when needs arise.

Sharing Learnings - Blog



In order to honour the original vision of WeavEast as an entity apart from Inspiring Communities, and to make our learnings more accessible to a wider audience, we transported all the blog posts from [WeavEast to the Medium platform](#). With the Weaveast site and social media shut down, this offers an ongoing presence to the community, and leaves open the possibility of others contributing in the future.

Social Innovation Policy Project: Arts Funding



An African Nova Scotian filmmaker and social innovator, Tara Taylor picked up the torch of the Policy Project awarded in 2020's WeavEast funding round that hadn't gained traction. The project examined the state of arts funding in Atlantic Canada for communities of colour. The findings include that while there are many funding opportunities, there is a small pool of regular recipients; it's hard for new or emerging artists or organizations to get funding; and BIPOC are disproportionately excluded. [A series of recommendations in the final report](#) include being intentional in targeting funding and dividing the processes for vetting large and small awards.

WeavEast Project Funding, Round 2 & Changemakers Circle



A highlight of the 3 year journey, we were successful in achieving our intentions for a second seed funding round, including:

- Funding a mix of large, cross-region projects and smaller place-based projects.
- A targeted approach through partners to reach BIPOC and other marginalized communities.
- Monthly 'Changemakers Circle' sessions bringing together project leads to share learnings and support, and build new cross-Atlantic alliances.



Project topics ranged from 2SLGBTQIA++ health through art, climate change mitigation infrastructure, food action, literacy and researching racism. Facilitated 'Changemakers Circle' sessions allowed new relationships to blossom and provided much-needed connection during COVID-19. We aimed to weave connections among these organizations that might spark further creative collaborations in the future. One unintended outcome experienced by grantees was 'breathing space' - a place to collectively decompress and feel solidarity about the pressures and burnout of the sector (i.e., front-line innovative non-profits).

[Find brief descriptions of each of the funded projects here](#) and a sample [Jamboard from our final reflective Changemakers Circle](#).



What we learned about how to support innovation through small grants:

Keep it simple, minimize administrative burden. We streamlined the proposal process, kept parameters to a minimum, and created more inclusive/accessible opportunities. This kept the focus on the people, learning and the work, not reporting.

Flexible budget. The dollars weren't tied to specific items. This allowed teams to be responsive and adaptive.

Short & flexible timeline. A quick turnaround from proposal to start of grant allowed the work to be timely and relevant. A short yet open-ended timeframe encouraged prototyping and experimentation.

Broad framing. Instead of targeting the grant subject, we used the WeavEast priorities as broad frames. This allowed innovation to shine, instead of organizations trying to contort into boxes for the money.

Risk tolerant & meandering. Allowing space for the meandering work of relationship building, exploring new ideas and partnerships is necessary for innovation. It allows for course change and pivots, and creates breathing room around the project-based work. This is rarely funded because it requires minimizing the focus on outcomes/outputs.

Foster connection & collaboration. Minimize competition. Having a stand alone grant removed the competitive experience of "trying to get the next grant in the series." By requiring grantees to attend gatherings, build relationships, share resources, ask for support, and co-learn, attached importance to these precursors of collaboration.

Reflection & developmental evaluation. We gave space to reflect on and learn about the work, which helped grantees increase clarity and find the golden nuggets.

Being human & joyful. We consciously worked to set a tone that welcomed the whole person, that recognized the challenges of the sector and welcomed the struggle. We employed facilitation tools from the Art of Hosting, Liberating Structures and Deep Democracy to support meaningful conversations led by the energy of the group.

Except for the short timeline, most of these reflect our experience of using the McConnell funding provided for WeavEast.

Significant impacts of this seed grant process as shared by grantees:



- *Getting to do good work:* Projects happened that wouldn't otherwise; scaling up existing work; exploring technology that leapfrogged many elements of the work; and keeping impactful projects going.
- *Connection & new relationships to others in innovation:* "Being able to see my experience reflected"; "seeing myself in the innovation landscape for the first time."
- *Solidarity & support:* Getting to ask for help, offer help and be supported, and feeling less isolated.
- *Breathing room:* Building new relationships, exploring new areas, being creative; to pause, reflect and celebrate the good work.
- *Justification for innovation:* Getting an 'innovation' grant brings legitimacy to innovative work to Boards and colleagues.
- *Feelings of abundance* through being well resourced.
- *Feeling uplifted & energized* through the Changemaker Circle sessions.
- *Ideation & co-learning:* Getting to socialize ideas and brainstorm; learning Kumospace, a new gathering platform; and learning new facilitation tools for problem-solving.
- *Leveraging larger funding sources:* One project created two large partnership proposals to shop around; and another went on to receive \$50,000 from the Canada Council.

ARAIISA Partnership

Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAIISA) staff had participated in The Art of Collaboration, a course offered to WeavEast and other changemakers via Wayside. Through this, a relationship was forged. [ARAIISA](#) then approached Inspiring Communities to co-create a service delivery project for immigrant-serving agencies and apply for funding from Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada.



A three-year project proposal aligned with WeavEast goals resulted, focused on learning and experimentation through Social Research, Development, and Innovation practices. The project was funded and began in November of 2021.

McConnell resources allowed for the creation of this project and lessons learned from WeavEast related to prototyping, communications, network building, and community seed grants will be applied. This work will leverage relationships with changemakers throughout Atlantic Canada created through WeavEast, with intended positive impacts for newcomer, immigrant, and refugee-serving organizations and stakeholders in Atlantic Canada.

Closing Remarks

Inspiring Communities is an intermediary organization, and as such, it plays a different role at the various layers of systems change: local and downstream in specific communities; upstream in relationships across sectors; and more broadly across geographies and cross cultural intersections.

WeavEast was fertile ground for us to experiment and learn about when, how, with what, and by whom, changemaking happens. We have learned elements of this from everyone involved: the community grantees, the initial funding applicants and all staff, advisors and volunteers along the way. We embrace, appreciate and will benefit from this learning in our future endeavours in transformational change. Going forward, we remain committed to growing the network of changemakers and social innovators in our region as the Atlantic Node of Social Innovation Canada.

More about Intermediary Organizations:

[The Important Role of Intermediaries in Collective Impact Work.](#)

More about Transformational Catalysts:

[Weaving Transformational Change for a Flourishing World for All.](#)



