

Accelerating Community Innovation: The Role of the Field Catalyst

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Keywords: Field catalyst, community innovation, social innovation, collective impact, systems change

Abstract

This article explores the contribution of community innovation – a place-based form of social innovation – as one of five interconnected practices to advance community change. It also profiles how Field Catalyst Intermediaries – a unique form of intermediary – play a high-impact but often invisible role that enhances the success and impact of promising community innovations. Examples drawn from Tamarack Institute’s 20+ years' experience as a Field Catalyst Intermediary illustrate how promising community innovations are strengthened, linked, and amplified to achieve high-impact, lasting transformation on an array of complex social issues.

INTRODUCTION

There is no shortage of promising social innovations being implemented in communities around the globe. Fundamental questions that are top-of-mind for social innovators often focus on how to make this practice simpler, more effective, and capable of generating greater impact. This article explores how Field Catalyst Intermediaries – a unique form of intermediary – play a high-impact but often invisible role in enhancing the success and impact of promising community innovations. Field Catalyst Intermediaries focus specifically on driving change and pushing for bold, transformative solutions. Their contribution is necessary to effectively address complex issues such as poverty, climate justice, youth success, health, and well-being because, while innovation is an essential ingredient to finding new solutions, it alone rarely leads to lasting transformation.

Tamarack Institute is a Field Catalyst Intermediary and registered Canadian charity with a history of advancing social innovation within communities. When we were established 20+ years ago, we were a small organization with two big goals. The first was to establish a learning centre that would provide research and document real stories, exemplary practice, and effective applications for community change. The second was to apply what we learned to end poverty. Our role as a Field Catalyst Intermediary has encompassed four integrated roles that provide added value to accelerate the impact of local, place-based social change efforts. Together, these four roles amplify local strategies and innovations, strengthen the capacity of local initiatives, make the work of local change initiatives more visible, coherent, and robust, and connect promising local change efforts and innovations in ways that catalyze transformational change at a systems level.

COMMUNITY-INNOVATION: WHAT IS IT AND WHY PLACE MATTERS

The first three years of the global pandemic highlighted, yet again, the vulnerabilities of our communities and laid bare the limitations and inadequacies of many existing programs and services. This has led to a growing consensus that fundamentally new approaches are needed to generate better results for communities and the recognition that incremental changes to our current approaches are insufficient. To achieve needed breakthroughs, fresh perspectives and new approaches are required. Community innovation has become imperative. As dynamic ‘living labs’, communities offer the perfect container for social innovation and are a powerful driver of social change and transformation. We define community innovation as social innovation that is rooted in a specific place. Effective community innovations are the result of processes that engage all stakeholders and leverage their collective competencies and creativity to co-design novel solutions.

Tamarack recognizes community innovation as one of five essential skill sets – along with multisector collaboration, community engagement, collective leadership, and evaluating impact – needed to effectively mobilize and successfully achieve community and systems-level change and impact. Successful community innovation requires both an appreciation of the issue being addressed *and* a deep understanding of the unique characteristics of the community – the place and the people – where the innovation will be implemented. This appreciation of the importance of community context reflects the wisdom of Edwin Land, inventor of the polaroid camera, who noted that “Every innovation has two parts: the first is the invention of the thing itself; the second is the preparation of expectations so that when the invention arrives it seems both surprising and familiar - something long awaited.” (Westley, Zimmerman and Quinn Patton 2007)

Successful community innovation leverages the unique strengths, history, and context of the community – particularly the knowledge of those experiencing the impacts of a complex issue – to reimagine what is possible and work together to develop promising new solutions. This honouring of place makes the implementation of promising community innovations easier because it utilizes local knowledge, relationships, and connections and engages the support of leaders from different groups and sectors. People are far more likely to appreciate, value, and contribute to an innovation when its results are visible, they have contributed to its design, and, they experience first-hand how its benefits positively impact residents of their community. Local pride and passion make it easier to leverage the necessary resources to support the successful implementation of an innovation.

Community innovation is an essential ingredient in addressing complex issues such as poverty, youth success, climate justice, health, well-being, and other related issues – but it alone rarely leads to high-impact, lasting transformation. Social issues are resistant to change. They are the result of a multitude of interconnected factors that are mutually reinforcing and, therefore cannot be solved by isolated interventions, no matter how well designed. This challenge is compounded by the fact that programs aimed at addressing complex social issues are usually delivered by

siloed systems that generate systemic barriers which further reinforce the issue and preserve the status quo. Rarely can one community innovation, no matter how successful, create sufficient impact. Meaningful change on complex social issues is more often the result of an array of loosely connected community innovations that, together, broaden awareness of the issue; strengthen, expand, and better align programs and services; and advance meaningful systems-level changes in policies, practices, relationships, resource flows, attitudes, and beliefs.

Another limitation individual community innovations face in addressing complex social and/or environmental issues is that even successful community innovations that have generated significant impact in one – or even a handful – of communities usually represent just a small victory in the longer-term, broader effort to transform social systems and generate lasting change. Scaling a promising community innovation requires financial stimulus, political support, technical assistance, and other resources from a diversity of sectors and players both within and outside the community, including provincial, national, and/or international entities. These challenges faced by promising community innovations are significantly minimized with the help and support of a Field Catalyst Intermediary.

THE FIELD CATALYST INTERMEDIARY | A FORCE MULTIPLIER FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION

A “field” is the term used to define the space where the work of community innovation and change occurs. It is a space that is made up of “individuals and organizations who are working to address a common social issue or problem, often developing and using a common knowledge base.” (Farnham, et al. 2020, 3) This work includes “connecting fragmented players to create an organized industry around an issue or challenge so that the field can operate more effectively and efficiently, tease out best practices and improve outcomes.” (SiG 2012) A field-level focus is critical because many social problems that innovators are working to solve are systemic. They are “held in place” by imbalances in power, organizational norms and culture, social attitudes, beliefs, and narratives. That is why these issues cannot be solved by new or improved programs alone. Solutions that address the systems factors that contribute to the issue are required as well.

Field Catalyst Intermediaries are a newer, unique form of intermediary that is often invisible. They do the work of understanding, building, and connecting actors in a field to generate systemic solutions. They also play an important role in the scaling of promising community innovations to enhance the likelihood that they will successfully impact a complex social issue. Tamarack’s role as a Field Catalyst was first shared in the 2022 article, [How Field Catalysts Accelerate Collective Impact](#) (Cheuy, Weaver and Cabaj 2022), which builds upon initial thinking articulated by Mark Cabaj and later refined by Liz Weaver, Tamarack’s Board and staff. It has also been informed by the article [How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change](#), which described the work of Field Catalyst Intermediaries this way, “they deploy different capabilities, quietly influencing and augmenting the field’s efforts to achieve population level change”. (Hussein, Plummer and Breen 2018)

Effective Field Catalyst Intermediaries focus on achieving population-level change which can but does not always, involve scaling up an organization or intervention. They focus on influencing the actions of others overtaking direct action. They are less concerned with building broad consensus and instead focus on creating a significant impact with a “coalition of the willing.” They resist the temptation to embrace an “either-or” approach and instead focus on how to best weave together promising “bottom-up” community innovations and strategies with effective “top-down,” systems-focused solutions. Successful Field Catalyst Intermediaries “navigate the middle” – linking community initiatives and then connecting them to the work of larger political, philanthropic, and other non-local system actors.

The contributions of Field Catalyst Intermediaries increase the likelihood that local community innovations will be spread more quickly and easily. They also connect promising local community innovations to an array of other strategic efforts to create a coordinated change effort that engages multiple actors at multiple levels. These aligned activities disrupt the status quo and galvanize fundamental changes that transform social systems in ways that are more likely to have a significant impact that will be sustained over a long period of time.

The emphasis that Field Catalyst Intermediaries place on reimagining and restructuring existing social systems is more ambitious than making modest improvements to programs or organizations. They are motivated by a sense of urgency and a belief that incremental change will be insufficient to address the pressing social issue that they want to change. They understand that bold, transformative change which includes the fundamental reform of structures, processes, and practices within existing social systems, is the only way to achieve a more equitable, sustainable, and just society.

Tamarack’s role as a Field Catalyst Intermediary began in 2001 with the convening of [Communities Ending Poverty](#) (CEP), a national network of locally based poverty reduction initiatives. What initially began as a prototype in 13 Canadian cities has now grown to become a national movement that includes more than 90 local or regional poverty-reduction roundtables whose work impacts 22 million Canadians, equivalent to 58% of the country’s population. In 2020, data showed that Canada had achieved the lowest level of poverty in the country’s history. CEP played an important role in achieving this success. Between 2015 and 2020, Communities Ending Poverty network members contributed to a reduction in poverty for more than 1.3 million Canadians. (Tamarack Institute 2021, 1) The mobilization of a successful national Living Wage strategy was one important innovation that contributed to this success. It also illustrates how Field Catalyst Intermediaries add value in ways that significantly amplify the impact of local community innovations.

Raising people’s income to a living wage was identified as an important pathway out of poverty by the members of Tamarack’s CEP Network. People fall into poverty for a multitude of reasons, but it is a lack of income that often traps them in a cycle that can be extremely difficult to break. Several members of the national network had developed successful local living wage strategies. However, the impact of these community innovations was significantly accelerated when Tamarack, acting as a Field Catalyst Intermediary, convened a national living wage conversation in Canada. These national conversations validated and strengthened the individual local living

wage strategies already underway and ultimately led to the creation of a national methodology to calculate living wages which Tamarack and members of the network were deeply involved in. This, in turn, provided momentum to the efforts of local and provincial Living Wage Networks to recruit employers successfully and made it much simpler for national employers to adopt the strategy.

Since the initial National Living Wage conversations that Tamarack hosted, the focus on the living wage issue has expanded nationally to include connected conversations about increasing the minimum wage and adopting a universal basic income. This includes the Government of Canada's Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit, which provided \$2,000/month income support to individuals impacted by COVID-19 job losses, and the implementation of a \$15 per hour minimum wage in federally regulated workplaces. The implementation of an innovative provincial basic income pilot project in three Ontario communities between 2017-2019 is another example. Although the basic income pilot was cut short when the provincial government changed, its findings showed that it had a profound impact on the lives of its participants. Individuals leveraged the income to pay down debts, get better jobs and upgrade their qualifications. They also reported less stress, improved health, greater food security, and stabilized housing.

The successful advancement of a Living Wage strategy at the local, provincial, and federal levels, along with the ripple effects it has had on other dimensions of income policy, has been a significant contribution to the reduction of poverty in Canada. Many different groups contributed to gaining significant commitment to a living wage across the country, including policy groups who developed first-class policy designs on universal basic income, local poverty-reduction roundtables that championed local strategies, and advocacy groups who added pressure on policymakers and business groups to adopt Living Wage strategies. The coordination of an effective national effort of linked poverty-reduction strategies to achieve commitment to living wages demonstrates the complexity involved in eliminating poverty. It also highlights the importance of Field Catalyst Intermediaries and their role in convening, linking up, and amplifying local community innovations to generate transformative change across systems.

Tamarack supports local communities in developing collaborative strategies that engage citizens and institutions to innovate and solve major challenges. Today our Field Catalyst Intermediary role has expanded beyond the issue of poverty to include three other issue-focused national learning networks, each of which aims to "move the needle" on some of society's most wicked problems. These additional learning networks are focused on deepening the community, improving outcomes for youth, and supporting communities to contribute to a just and equitable climate transition. (Schnurr, Our Learner Brochure 2021, 4)

The development of each of these learning networks has followed a similar trajectory that includes engaging a small number of trailblazing communities and providing them with learning opportunities and individualized coaching as they engage multi-sector leadership teams and develop and implement local action plans. The development and momentum of the [Community Climate Transitions](#) (CCT) learning network offer another snapshot of Tamarack's Field Catalyst

Intermediary role and contribution to large-scale community and systems-level change. The CCT network launched in 2021 with the goal of supporting “100 communities across Canada that are committed to developing transition plans locally.” (Schnurr, Our Learner Brochure 2021, 4) This support emphasizes connecting communities through a collaborative infrastructure, strengthening community impact by developing and nourishing networks and relationships, as well as building capacity and connection between local peers and amplifying the individual and collective impact of this work via storytelling, publications, and events.

Tamarack’s Field Catalyst Role has enabled Community Climate Transitions to achieve significant gains in its first year and a half. These impacts include:

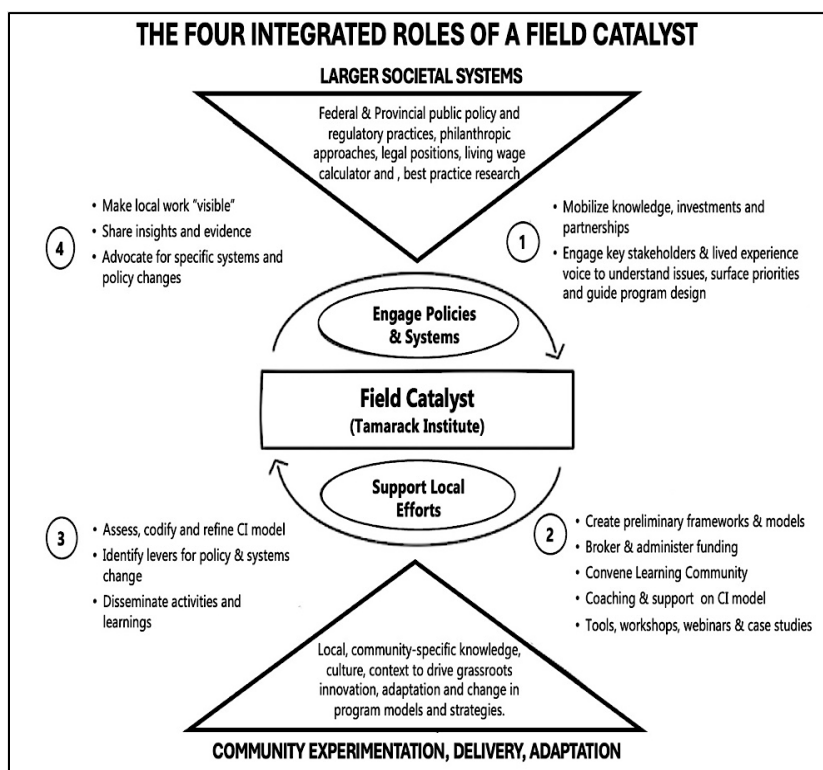
- Engaged an initial cohort of 19 trailblazing communities from six provinces in a 10-month learning cohort;
- Building awareness and knowledge about the whole-community approach to support a just climate transition;
- Furthering dialogue and thinking about the intersection between climate change and other pressing social issues and the possibility that a “multisolving” approach can support a more holistic response (Multisolving Institute 2022)
- Strengthening relationships with existing organizations and networks doing adjacent work in climate action at various scales to foster an ecosystem of trusted partnerships;
- Documenting and disseminating stories to profile local actions and build an ever-growing movement for change;
- Adding an additional 30 new communities to the network in 2023, half of which are French-speaking; and
- Securing a multi-year grant from the Definity Insurance Foundation that will offer bursaries to support local efforts, provide seed funding to promising local climate solutions using a member-led, participatory grant-making model, and establish a National Advisory Council.

THE FOUR INTEGRATED ROLES OF THE FIELD CATALYST INTERMEDIARY

Field Catalyst Intermediaries play four integrated roles which they navigate in a continuous, iterative way to accelerate the dissemination, replication, and adaptation of promising community innovations. The contributions of a Field Catalyst Intermediary strengthen the likelihood that these innovations simultaneously affect both the local conditions *and* the systemic barriers that changemakers are working to address. Field Catalyst Intermediaries are instrumental in linking promising local innovations with effective provincial, federal, and international strategies to create a multifaceted approach that simultaneously strengthens local efforts and advances systems-level transformation to achieve higher-impact, more sustainable social change. These four integrated roles are:

1. **Understand The Field and Engage System** – The first value-added function of Field Catalyst Intermediaries focuses on better understanding what is happening at a systems level regarding the issue. This includes identifying emerging patterns, tracking trends, conducting research, and engaging and building interest with system actors. In the case of

Communities Ending Poverty (CEP), Tamarack researched the best living wage strategies, and developed partnerships with leaders in the field, including activists, living wage employers, policy groups, and political leaders. We also mobilized technical expertise and resources for local Living Wage prototypes in four major cities. In the early work of the Community Climate Transitions, this first role of the Field Catalyst has included proactive relationship building within the climate transition ecosystem, publishing articles and case studies, and hosting a national gathering to bring together actors operating in a diversity of sectors across a variety of scales.



Adapted from: [*Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*](#) by Michael Quinn Patton (Patton 2011)

- Strengthen The Capacity of Local Community Initiatives** – This Field Catalyst role involves strengthening the capacity of local place-based change initiatives. This can include activities such as providing grants, facilitating peer learning, hosting learning opportunities as well as providing technical assistance and coaching.

In the case of the Living Wage effort, Tamarack’s activities within this role included curating a community of practice for Living Wage community innovators across the country to share their experiences, navigate shared challenges, develop practices, build partnerships, and coordinate advocacy efforts to help create a national Living Wage calculator that provided a consistent methodology to determine the Living Wage rate across an array of local contexts.

In the case of Community Climate Transitions, this second Field Catalyst role has included the development and delivery of a 10-month learning curriculum with the 19 local communities who are members of the initial learning cohort, hosting communities of practice for cohort members and hosting free webinars for anyone interested in learning more about this issue.

- 3. Make The Work of Local Initiatives More Visible, Coherent, And Robust** – This is the third role that Field Catalysts contribute to transformational change efforts. They notice emerging patterns and help make the results and learnings of local innovation and change efforts visible and coherent both to the communities themselves as well as to other key stakeholders. This involves working with local communities to track, codify, and communicate their diverse practices as they emerge, as well as helping to identify and disseminate promising innovations and strategies. This makes local change efforts simpler, more efficient, and more effective.

In the case of the Living Wage work in Canada, Tamarack made local work more visible, coherent, and robust by working with a network of partners to build a standard and consistent way to calculate a living wage that was sensitive to local contexts. Once the calculator was built, Tamarack promoted awareness and use of the calculator through a website and web-based resources that raised public awareness and strengthened its credibility/legitimacy. This, in turn, made it easier for communities to identify their local living wage amounts and recruit living wage employers.

The Community Climate Transitions Learning Network made the work of local communities more visible, coherent, and robust by publishing and sharing articles, resources, and case studies to profile promising examples of community innovation and documenting the progress and impact of members' collective work in local communities to its broader network of learners and partners.

- 4. Nudge Systems to Catalyze Systems Change** – The first three roles of Field Catalyst Intermediaries lay the groundwork for their fourth valued-added contribution to community innovation and change: the nudging of systems towards transformation. This work includes the engagement of a broader and more diverse group of system actors whose contributions add momentum to local change efforts. The achievements of local change efforts are shared in a compelling narrative that demonstrates the need for systemic change, profiles promising innovations, illustrates that meaningful change *is* possible, and provides clear, tangible recommendations for action to make progress and sustain momentum in addressing a complex social issue. (Cheuy, Weaver and Cabaj 2022)

In the case of Canada's Living Wage strategy, Tamarack's contributions to nudge systems transformation included connecting with and engaging Living Wage movements in the UK and Australia as well as working with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Maytree, and Canada Without Poverty to further align and strengthen policy and advocacy for Canada's growing living wage movement.

Tamarack has woven together the four integrated roles of the Field Catalyst Intermediary and leveraged trusted relationships with stakeholders across diverse sectors and scales to achieve consistent, measurable impact on complex issues. This has resulted in the development, implementation, and successful adoption of promising community innovations to address key dimensions of poverty and accelerated the implementation of community-based strategies in support of just and equitable climate transitions. It has also fueled the growth and effectiveness of national movements that are improving incomes for people and meaningfully contributing to the reduction of poverty in Canada; fostering a sense of belonging and civic leadership in communities; supporting youth in successful journeys to adulthood, and innovating to ensure a just, equitable climate transition.

CONCLUSION

To effectively navigate today's increasingly turbulent times, we must increase our collective capacity to tackle the complex, interconnected social and environmental issues confronting communities. Field Catalyst Intermediaries are gaining recognition for their essential contributions to advancing social change. They enhance the ability of communities to confront these challenges by more quickly identifying, elevating and scaling promising community innovations and creating enabling environments and infrastructure to nurture more community innovation.

Field Catalyst Intermediaries are themselves a social innovation. In 2023, the [Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship](#) added a new category to its annual Social Innovation awards, one for [Collective Social Innovation](#). They describe those in this category as “cross-sector leaders who lead or facilitate a group or network of organizations committed to addressing a bigger problem than what an individual organization can take on, in particular towards social inequalities, excluded and marginalized groups, and vulnerable ecosystems; is distinct from scaling a programmatic intervention and is best suited to achieving large-scale systemic change.” (Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship 2023) In this inaugural year, the Foundation selected Tamarack Institute, a Field Catalyst Intermediary, as one of its chosen awardees for 2023. In this inaugural year, the Foundation selected Tamarack Institute, a Field Catalyst Intermediary, as one of its chosen awardees for 2023.

Social Ventures Australia recently interviewed eight Field Intermediaries as part of a research report to better appreciate the nature of their work, their contributions to social change efforts, and how they can be sustained. They noted that these Intermediaries hold a unique sector or system-level perspective that enables them to identify challenging issues in their fields and work to achieve sustained social change. They noted that the work of Field Catalyst Intermediaries requires a good understanding of the dynamics within the system along with the ability to see and hold tensions between the interests, knowledge, and power of diverse stakeholders affected

by the issue. This requires them to be “continuously agile and/or opportunistic” in how they achieve long-term impact. (Roxon 2022)

Field Catalyst Intermediaries are proactive and constantly navigate through continuous, iterative cycles of change in response to the dynamic and ever-changing realities of the community. They have a keen ability to recognize strategic opportunities, identify promising innovations, translate and disseminate promising strategies into practical actions, and convene system players to build – and maintain – a commitment to action over several years. Their impact on individuals, communities, and society can be far-reaching and transformative.

However, our collective understanding of Field Catalyst Intermediaries and their contribution to the work of social innovation is still developing. There is a need to build greater awareness and recognition of Field Catalyst Intermediaries along with a better understanding of the roles, capabilities, and contributions they make to support community innovations to become more robust and ultimately lead to transformative change at both the local and systems levels. Your comments, questions, and insights are needed to help co-create this greater understanding. We welcome your input to refine thinking about what we believe is an essential contributor to the work of successfully nurturing community innovations and strengthening their capacity to transform systems and advance positive change.

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