Government Sustaining Community Innovation

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Abstract

Supported by national movements like StriveTogether and the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, dozens of communities across the US and Canada are transforming systems to support economic mobility – not just for some but at a community-wide scale. Here we explore roles that governments have played in scaling and sustaining the community innovations that are the roots of these transformational changes. Now more than ever, the government (and all sectors) must persist in leveraging power toward never-before-seen justice – but we are encouraged by how we've seen government-scale local innovation so far.

Introduction

To achieve outcomes at scale, we must transform systems. Programs on their own are insufficient to address the roots of our current inequitable systems.

Today, in the United States and Canada, communities are deep in the work of systems transformation. While social impact organizations are leading this effort, public sector investment and adoption of this work are pivotal to sustaining and scaling community innovations. Two organizations, StriveTogether and the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, are supporting cross-sector partnerships to achieve economic mobility via community-driven approaches.

While both organizations' models were built via the experiences of communities in their specific countries, both organizations consider collaborative, evidence-based decision-making critical as essential for trust, accountability, and improvement. For Tamarack, it is one of the sustainability factors instrumental in building and maintaining collective efforts; for StriveTogether, it is a pillar in the Theory of Action ™, an adaptable framework that supports local communities to develop civic infrastructure that meets the unique needs of their communities, grounded in specific benchmarks shown to enable equitable outcomes across the country.

In both networks, communities have shown that the government plays a critical role in supporting community innovation. By embedding local, community-driven innovations into

government policies, practices, narratives, and funding streams, the innovations that are seeded can find permanence.

Below, shaped by the roles each of us has played in the StriveTogether network and from the roles some of us now play in the Tamarack network, we reflect on how the government has sustained community-wide plans for poverty reduction – and specific evidence-based strategies within those plans.

More than ever, the government (and all sectors) must continue to transform toward justice, but we are buoyed by what we've seen our respective governments have done to scale local innovation.

Government-sustaining community-led planning

Cross-sector, place-based collaboratives are critical drivers of equitable health, education, and economic mobility outcomes. Collaboratives build momentum for action and leverage the potential of local assets and relationships. Significantly, they also provide spaces to test strategies for change while providing data for continuous improvement.

Founded in 2001 to build an understanding of how community change happens and to start with communities to end poverty in Canada, Tamarack's network today spans more than 400 municipalities in Canada and reaches more than two-thirds of Canada's population. Vibrant Calgary, one of the 13 trail-builder communities that informed Tamarack's approach to place-based poverty reduction, shows how municipalities can support the sustainability and effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts. Calgary's poverty reduction strategy Enough For All, is a community-owned strategy that is approved and supported by the City of Calgary and the United Way of Calgary and Area and stewarded by Vibrant Calgary. The community owns poverty reduction and its success, and the municipal government plays a support and sustainability function.

Provincial governments such as New Brunswick, Quebec, and British Columbia have demonstrated that higher orders of government can also support community-led plans. In British Columbia, the province provided five million Canadian dollars to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities. Local BC governments can apply to The Poverty Reduction Planning and Action program to develop and implement community poverty reduction strategies. (In 2022, 70 percent of funding recipients were Tamarack members.) Through this program, the Government of British Columbia is demonstrating the power of supporting place-based action to achieve large-scale action that a provincial government could not achieve on its own.

All of this interacts with the Government of Canada's Poverty Reduction Act so that poverty remains in focus for current and future governments. The communities in the Tamarack network played a critical role in identifying the causes of and solutions to poverty reduction (and Tamarack supported the development of the country's National Poverty Reduction Strategy by hosting dozens of community conversations around the strategy.) This leadership, first from

communities and then from the Federal government, has had a meaningful impact on driving forward poverty reduction efforts in Canada across levels of government. The governments of Prince Edward Island, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, and New Brunswick align their strategies to the national strategy.

StriveTogether is a national network of nearly 70 local communities in the US striving to achieve economic mobility for every child regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code, or circumstance. StriveTogether provides a framework, coaching, and critical resources, but place-based partnerships provide local leadership for specific approaches to developing economic mobility. In the US, city and state governments can enable the successful investment of federal dollars. This type of collaboration focused on outcomes can help transcend divisiveness as well as enable innovation in addressing key issues, from investment to implementation.

For instance, StriveTogether supports the Promise Partnership of Salt Lake, a regional partnership of nine communities, six school districts, and state-level government agencies in Utah. Promise Partnership has implemented policy changes across institutions and sectors to advance outcomes. These policy changes have produced improvements in over 67% of regional outcomes since 2014, and 52% of measured disparity gaps are closing. The use of progressive milestones has helped to improve outcomes in Salt Lake City, Utah, and ultimately led to systems transformation.

Local government leadership and state government support have been critical to the Partnership's success across the Salt Lake region, and in the case of the two communities – the partnership infrastructure has become embedded into the city government itself.
At the state level, agencies across the spectrum from human services, health, education, and workforce development all work closely with and through the Promise Partnership to achieve shared objectives related to poverty reduction. Recognizing the importance of backbone infrastructure to support these cross-sector partnerships, the Utah Legislature created the Partnerships for Student Success Program and invested annually to sustain six partnerships within the Salt Lake region.

Government-sustaining evidence-based interventions

Another StriveTogether network member is Seeding Success, which is working to improve outcomes for every child by improving the way institutions, community organizations, policies, and resources work together to support communities in Shelby County, Tennessee (which includes Memphis). These communities have shown that the catalyst for transforming systems is innovation in a critical area, whether it is investment or implementation. Both Promise Partnership and Seeding Success deployed Outcomes Financing to fund community projects tied to early childhood education objectives; the government only pays for what works. In each community, this resulted in 1,000 additional seats for pre-kindergarten students annually and is leading to improved school readiness outcomes and decreased remedial costs. More importantly, these projects demonstrated the power of investing in programs that are backed with evidence and focusing with rigor on the outcomes to be achieved.

In Canada, the government has responded to urges from local communities to sustain early childhood interventions that provide broad health, education, and economic benefits. For example, in 2011, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC partnered to develop the $10aDay Child Care Plan, a public policy blueprint that built on a cost-benefit analysis carried out at UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership with Generation Squeeze. In 2018, after years of advocacy, a new BC government launched ChildcareBC. Among the investments introduced was the transition of existing programs to a maximum of $10 a Day. As of February 2023, roughly 10% of all licensed spaces in BC are $10aDay spaces. (And families with children in licensed childcare who are not yet enrolled in a $10aDay program are benefiting from new federal funding under the Canada-wide agreements with provinces and territories.) As an interim measure on the way to $10aDay, the publicly funded fee reduction for families in BC with a child in center-based care is $900/month for infants & toddlers and $545/month for 3–5-year-olds. There are similar reductions in licensed family and multi-age care programs.

Community-driven efforts across the United States and Canada demonstrate that those who are closest to and most affected by systems need to be a leading part of redesigning those systems because they understand the issues better than anyone else. These efforts also demonstrate that proven solutions need to be supported by the government by codifying what works into legislation.

The Peter Drucker adage applies here: "What gets measured, gets managed." Understanding the value of data and how to measure the right things to make informed decisions can be surprisingly uncommon because of political division, assumptions about social problems, and the lack of innovation. However, evidence-based decision-making can support apolitical, effective outcomes. In addition, intentionally exposing policymakers and other decision-makers to community work helps communities weather the ebbs and flows of election cycles and political change.