Tamarack: Unlocking the Power of Community Innovation

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Abstract

To generate the results that communities urgently need to tackle today's social challenges will require more than simply making incremental changes to our current approaches. Working harder alone is not enough. The breakthroughs that are required will only be found with new approaches that are commensurate to the scale of our current opportunities. Community Innovation has become imperative to effectively address our society's most significant issues. This article explores the principles, characteristics, and benefits of community innovation.

TAMARACK AND COMMUNITY INNOVATION

For more than 20 years, Tamarack has advanced social innovation in Canada and beyond. Our vision is to be "a connected force for community change, building the capacity of changemakers in cities and communities, within Canada, and around the world." We do this by catalyzing collective action with diverse leaders to solve major community challenges. Our belief is that when we are effective in strengthening our collective capacity to engage citizens and lead collaboratively, our work contributes to the building of peace and the creation of a more equitable society.

We are a network of 50,000 learners from around the globe who contribute to, and benefit from, Tamarack's resources, webinars with knowledge experts, learning opportunities, as well as customized coaching and consulting efforts. The work of the individuals and organizations in our learning network spans an array of issues and sectors and operates at local, regional, provincial/state, national, and international scales.

Tamarack is renowned for our capacity to translate the theory of social innovation and community change into action. Earlier this year, this capacity was recognized by the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship which awarded the Tamarack Institute with its inaugural Collective Social Innovation Award. The new award category recognizes novel modes of collaboration and the importance of communities and community members in achieving large-scale systemic change.

THE TAMARACK APPROACH TO SOCIAL INNOVATION

We recognize community innovation – a place-based form of social innovation – as one of five interconnected skill sets that are needed to effectively mobilize and successfully implement community and systems change and impact. These five skillsets are:

1. **Collaboration:** How can we mobilize knowledge and wisdom from across sectors for community and systems impact?
2. **Community Engagement**: How can we engage community members to create and realize bold visions for the future?
3. **Collective Leadership:** How can we bring the right people together in constructive ways?
4. **Community Innovation:** How can we create, test, and scale new approaches?
5. **Evaluating Impact**: How can we identify and amplify what works?

COMMUNITY INNOVATION | THE APPLICATION OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN PLACE

Both community innovation and social innovation are important approaches that can contribute to solving complex social and environmental challenges. Community innovation refers to the process of identifying and addressing problems or opportunities within a community through collaborative, creative, and participatory efforts. It focuses on developing solutions that are rooted in the unique needs, values, and contexts of a particular community. It is a community-driven approach that is likely to lead to solutions that are more effective, sustainable, and context-specific. Involving community members in the innovation process also builds social capital, trust, and a sense of ownership for the solutions developed.

Social innovation, on the other hand, focuses on developing solutions that have the potential to create systemic change on a larger scale. It often involves cross-sectoral collaboration and new technologies or business models. It can transform social and environmental issues by creating new social norms, behaviors, and ways of doing things.

Ultimately, the two approaches have a symbiotic relationship: community innovation can inform and guide social innovation, and social innovation can support and scale community-led solutions.

WHY A PLACE-BASED APPROACH?

As dynamic 'living labs,' communities offer the perfect container for innovation. Tamarack's experience with community change has led us to understand that to be effective, innovation requires an appreciation of both the issue one is hoping to address as well as a deep understanding of the unique characteristics of the community – the place and the people within it – where the innovation will be implemented. Innovations that have proven successful in one community can, at best, serve as a source of inspiration for another but must be adapted and

modified to maximize the strengths and assets of the community where they hope to be replicated.

We intentionally focus our work at the community scale because we have learned that:

- It is easier to rebuild and strengthen connections, trust, and relationships between diverse people who live in the same geographic area.
- Community-wide efforts offer immediate and meaningful opportunities for leadership by persons with lived experience and inclusive approaches.
- There is a greater chance of addressing integrated economic, social, and environmental issues in practical ways at the scale of the community.
- People are typically more willing to commit to long-term efforts to make a change when it is "their" community.
- Place-based efforts allow for greater flexibility, innovation, and responses that fit the unique nature of distinct communities.

There are several current factors that are growing the sense of urgency to find place-based solutions to address the complex challenges communities are facing today. These include:

1. **Growing recognition of the importance of local context:** Global challenges like climate change, income inequality, and health disparities are making it increasingly clear that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Place-based solutions allow for more context-specific interventions that can be more effective in addressing complex challenges.
2. **The COVID-19 pandemic:** The pandemic has affected communities in different ways, and effective responses have required local knowledge, context-specific solutions, and community engagement. Place-based solutions have been used to address issues such as food insecurity, access to healthcare, and economic recovery, highlighting the importance of community-led responses.
3. **Growing awareness of the importance of social and environmental sustainability:** There is growing recognition of the importance of social and environmental sustainability, and place-based solutions that involve leadership and contribution from the whole community are showing promise in their ability to build more sustainable communities. By taking a place-based approach, a diverse network of community leaders can collaborate to develop solutions that reflect local priorities, leverage local assets tailored to local needs, reduce the environmental footprint of communities, and promote social and economic sustainability.
4. **The need for cross-sectoral collaboration:** Place-based solutions make it easier for different sectors, including government, business, and civil society, to collaborate on shared priorities. Cross-sector collaboration is essential when addressing complex issues because rarely can one sector, working alone, successfully affect change. Operating at the scale of a community makes it much easier for cross-sector collaboration to flourish and develop the kinds of comprehensive solutions needed to generate impact.

THE BENEFITS OF A COMMUNITY INNOVATION APPROACH

Developing and implementing a community innovation is an ambitious undertaking and requires a fundamentally different mindset and set of skills than what is needed to successfully implement a proven program or initiative. Impact and outcomes are not guaranteed, often require multiple iterations, and cannot always be assured to follow a predictable timeline. Despite these challenges, innovations rooted in the community have many benefits. These include:

1) **Local Knowledge and Expertise:** A place-based approach recognizes the unique strengths, challenges, and assets of a specific community and leverages local knowledge and expertise to address issues in an effective and sustainable way.
2) **Increased community engagement:** By engaging community members in the innovation process, we can foster a sense of ownership and investment in the solutions developed. This can lead to increased engagement and participation in community initiatives.
3) **Greater creativity and innovation:** By tapping into the collective knowledge and expertise of community members, we can generate more creative and innovative solutions that are responsive to the unique needs of the community.
4) **Stronger Communities:** A place-based approach promotes collaboration, trust, and social capital, helping to build stronger and more resilient communities.
5) **Improved outcomes:** By developing solutions tailored to the community's specific needs and contexts, we can create more effective and sustainable outcomes that lead to lasting change.
6) **Increased collaboration and partnership:** Community innovation can foster collaboration and partnership between community members, organizations, and stakeholders, leading to greater sharing of resources and expertise and more comprehensive and effective solutions.
7) **Greater social and environmental impact**: By addressing local challenges in a more effective and sustainable way, we can create a positive social and environmental impact that benefits the entire community.

GETTING STARTED: CREATING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

By creating a culture of innovation, communities become more resilient in times of unexpected challenges and can better mobilize to seize promising opportunities. They can proactively build their capacity to tackle complex challenges and create more sustainable and resilient solutions. This can lead to a stronger, more vibrant community that is better equipped to respond to the evolving needs of its members. Here are some ideas that we learned from people in our network who are using community innovation to address complex problems:

1. **Experiment and take risks:** Encourage community members to experiment with new ideas and approaches. Provide intentional, accessible space for them to take risks, try new things, and offer reflections about their experiences.

2. **Foster collaboration:** Encourage collaboration among community members and organizations to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources, and best practices. Encourage networking and the creation of partnerships to support innovation.
3. **Provide resources and support:** Provide funding, mentorship, and other resources to support community members in developing and implementing innovative solutions. Provide training and support to build capacity in innovation methodologies and other relevant skills.
4. **Celebrate successes:** Celebrate and recognize successful innovations within the community. Share these successes widely to inspire others and build momentum for further innovation. Recognize participants for their contributions in the ways that they help shape new approaches.
5. **Foster a culture of learning:** Encourage a culture of learning and continuous improvement by providing opportunities for feedback, reflection, and evaluation. Encourage everyone involved to "fail forward" and celebrate the group's willingness to try new things.

10 EMERGING TRENDS IN COMMUNITY INNOVATION

Community innovation itself is evolving in response to the changing dynamics of communities and also as innovators share their learnings and insights, collaborate, and accelerate their collective knowledge. Below are ten emerging trends shaping the future of this field of practice.

1. Increasing focus on equity and inclusion, with a recognition that community innovation must prioritize the voices and needs of marginalized groups and people with lived/living experience.
2. Greater use of technology and data in community innovation, including tools like online platforms, social media, and data analytics, to facilitate community engagement, participation, idea generation, and decision-making.
3. A shift towards more collaborative and participatory approaches to community innovation, with a greater emphasis on co-design and co-creation.
4. A greater emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration and partnerships, as community innovation increasingly involves a wide range of stakeholders, including government, non-profits, businesses, philanthropy, and academia.
5. A growing recognition of the importance of community-led solutions, with a greater emphasis on grassroots initiatives and community-driven change.
6. Greater attention to the role of the built environment in community innovation, including the importance of designing public spaces and infrastructure that support community well-being and social connection.
7. A greater emphasis on sustainability and resilience in community innovation, with a recognition of the need to address issues like climate change, resource depletion, and natural disasters.
8. Greater use of design thinking and other innovation methodologies in community innovation, with a focus on human-centered and iterative approaches to problem-solving.

9. An expanding emphasis on social entrepreneurship and community-based business models as a way to drive social and economic development.
10. A recognition of the need for ongoing evaluation and learning in community innovation, with a focus on measuring impact, adapting to changing circumstances, and sharing best practices and lessons learned across different communities and sectors.

As we look to the future, Tamarack is guided by our 2030 Plan, which remains unwavering in our foundational belief that communities have a central role in responding to the intertwined challenges of climate change, racism, polarization, pandemics, and income inequality.