



# ARTICLE | THE PROMISE OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT IN SUPPORTING A JUST TRANSITION AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

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To end poverty locally, over 330 communities across Canada have been applying a collective impact approach – establishing multi-sectoral roundtables, doing deep community engagement, and developing poverty reduction plans. Their work over the past 20 years, supported by the Tamarack Institute, has contributed to significant reductions in poverty across the country. What if we adapted and applied this same model to advancing a just and equitable climate transition, by supporting the development of local transition plans in hundreds of communities? Might this help us reach the scale required to get Canada's emissions to net zero while leaving no one behind?

## HOW CANADIAN COMMUNITIES ARE RESPONDING TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

### *The climate emergency and the role of cities and communities*

The urgency of the climate crisis is by now well known. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, released in August 2021, called our present situation “code red for humanity”. It confirmed that the planet is warming faster than expected and that this warming is driving extreme weather on every continent. The threshold of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels will likely be reached between 2030 and 2050, a decade ahead of previous forecasts. In Canada, heat waves, drought, and heavy rainfall are

“The world is on a catastrophic pathway to 2.7-degrees of heating - Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General”

expected to be more severe and frequent. Following the IPCC report, an analysis by the United Nations showed that even if all countries achieve their stated emission reduction targets (based on current pledges), global temperature increases could hit 2.7C by the end of the century.

Alongside the climate crisis, communities are grappling with a host of other challenges too, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, persistent poverty, rising inequalities, lack of affordable housing, and the need for greater equity and justice, to name a few. As Climate Action Network Canada states in its federal election policy priorities, [Real Leadership in the Climate Emergency](#), “Climate is intertwined with every other aspect of our lives: health, jobs, housing, education, social justice, and security. It impacts the well-being of every person, as well as every other species that shares this planet with us.”

Cities and communities are well placed to lead efforts toward a just and equitable climate transition. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities estimates that municipalities have influence over approximately [50% of Canada’s total GHG emissions](#). This is thanks to their frontline role in land-use planning, transportation, the built environment, and waste management. They are more nimble than higher levels of governments and thus can act quickly in response to emerging crises. They are also close to the ground, engaging directly with residents on a regular basis. As we have seen with the [Atmospheric Fund](#) and [LC3](#) among countless other examples, cities are natural incubators for piloting solutions that can then be taken to scale.

There are a range of organizations supporting Canadian communities in their climate efforts. This includes the Federation of Canadian Municipalities which supports municipalities to reduce emissions and initiate local sustainability projects; Climate Caucus, a network of local elected climate leaders with a strong focus on climate justice; Climate Emergency Unit, which works with all levels of government and civil society to mobilize around decarbonization, social justice and equity; and the Climate Reality Project and its Community Climate Hub which helps coordinate local climate initiatives to maximize impact.

### Recognition, commitment, action

Cities and communities have been responding to this growing urgency in numerous ways. They have been declaring emergencies, committing to ambitious climate targets, and taking action to achieve their goals by developing and implementing climate plans.

Over the past couple of years, cities and other levels of government around the world have been declaring [climate emergencies](#). To date, over 2,000 jurisdictions in 35 countries have declared a climate emergency, covering a total population of more than one billion people. In Canada, [over 500 jurisdictions](#) have passed motions to declare a climate emergency, the vast majority of which occurred in 2019. Most of these motions were passed by city councils, but there were also several by regional councils, provinces/territories (the Quebec National Assembly and the Yukon Legislative Assembly), the Canadian House of Commons, and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in the Yukon. The Assembly of First Nations, the national advocacy organization representing the 634 First Nations in Canada, also declared a [First Nations Climate Emergency](#) in 2019.

Cities in Canada and globally are joining the [Race to Zero](#) and committing to take “rigorous and

immediate action to halve global emissions by 2030 and deliver a healthier, fairer, zero carbon world in time”. As of mid-October 2021, over 1,000 cities around the world have joined the Cities Race to Zero, including [21 Canadian municipalities](#) in Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Canada’s three largest metropolitans – Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver – are among those in the race, along with several other mid-size cities (Hamilton, Ottawa, Victoria, and Halifax).

Recognizing the urgency of the crisis and committing to action are necessary first steps, but developing and implementing a robust and comprehensive plan for advancing a just and equitable climate transition is the most crucial step. Communities need to develop and implement plans with concrete actions, as several Canadian cities have already been doing. For example, [Vancouver’s Climate Emergency Action Plan](#) may be Canada’s leading example of a plan that has a level of ambition commensurate with the scale of the challenge. Its targets – halving carbon pollution by 2030 and achieving net zero, or carbon neutrality, by 2050 – are aligned with those put forward by the International Panel on Climate Change to limit warming to 1.5C. It outlines a set of bold actions and policies in the areas of mobility and transportation, building and renovations, and carbon capture, that will enable it to meet its targets, while applying an equity lens throughout.

### Limitations of the current approach

While the efforts communities are making to tackle the crisis are crucial, we are far from achieving the scale required to avert catastrophe. A minority of the Canadian cities and communities that declared climate emergencies in 2019 have developed climate action plans since. Many recognize the need but are simply not sure where to begin the daunting task. Many community leaders and organizers understand the importance of taking a community-wide approach to climate mobilization, with leadership and engagement of local governments, the community sector, businesses, and residents, though may not know how to go about it.

Similarly, the interconnections between the ecological, climate, and social (including inequity and inequality, poverty, health and wellbeing) crises we are confronted with have become more apparent in recent years. Communities are realizing that these challenges cannot be solved in isolation, but rather through a lens of [multi-solving](#). Successful climate action plans take this into account, by considering the impact that policies and actions may have across multiple dimensions while at the same time ensuring that concerns around justice and equity are at their core. Climate action plans that focus solely on reducing GHG emissions without taking a more holistic view will only exacerbate other challenges. Yet, while communities are increasingly convinced of the need to address multiple issues at the same time, it can make the task of developing a plan even more intimidating.

Finally, the fact that only a handful of Canadian communities have developed climate action plans (and the number is far smaller if we count only plans that are multi-dimensional and align with what the science is calling for) points to the need for action at a far greater scale. A widespread movement of community-led transition plans is required.

This idea is not a novel one and has already been tested and proven in the poverty reduction space in Canada. The following section dives into the collective impact model and how it has been applied – at

scale – in over 300 Canadian communities to significantly reduce poverty from coast to coast to coast.

## WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM THE SUCCESS COMMUNITIES ACROSS CANADA HAVE HAD IN REDUCING POVERTY?

[Over the past two decades](#), Tamarack has been catalyzing collective action for community change by collaborating with changemakers from across Canada – and globally – to address major social challenges, most notably ending poverty. The lessons learned have helped communities implement their own local solutions and strengthen community leadership to create more vibrant places to live and grow. As Tamarack embarks on building new relationships with community champions at the intersection of place and the climate crisis, it is useful to reflect on the wisdom that communities have shared in working together to shift systems and policies.

### [Harnessing collective assets to drive social change: Lessons from Communities Ending Poverty](#)

In 2002, Vibrant Communities – Cities Reducing Poverty (VC – CRP) began as a pilot experiment in which 13 cities explored whether poverty could be significantly reduced by having community leaders, governments, nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector come together to create a common approach for poverty reduction efforts. Between 2002 and 2012, VC – CRP members learned how to develop: a common agenda (i.e., a poverty reduction strategy), a shared measurement system to report on their impact, financial sustainability, and leadership sustainability. Tamarack supported members on their learning journeys by developing opportunities to connect community members and encourage them to learn from each other, including peer communities of practice, coaching, and summarizing lessons through case studies, tools and guides. More than 200,000 residents benefited from poverty reducing impacts during that period.

Today, VC-CRP has evolved into [Communities Ending Poverty \(CEP\)](#), a collective impact movement that supports 91 members representing 350 communities across Canada in their commitment to develop and implement plans to end poverty. These communities have launched multi-sector leadership roundtables, engaged people with lived/living experiences of poverty, and implemented common visions and plans. Their efforts have contributed to significant reductions in poverty rates nationwide, including a [24 percent reduction](#) between 2015 and 2018, lifting more than 1 million Canadians out of poverty and demonstrating that [social change is possible](#) when collective impact structures are set in place to catalyze action. Communities across Canada are leading the way in reducing poverty in innovative and transformative ways, inspired by the stories of changemakers who have adopted a collective impact model. Introduced in 2016 by former CEP Director Mark Holmgren, some communities incorporated “Game Changer” thinking to their poverty reduction strategy and evaluation work. They focused their work on up to eight high-impact domains that have been proven to have positive and cascading effects toward ending poverty: income and employment, housing, transportation, education, health, early childhood development, food security and financial empowerment. The map on page 5, shown on the following page, presents five spotlight stories of communities focused on these high-impact domains of work.

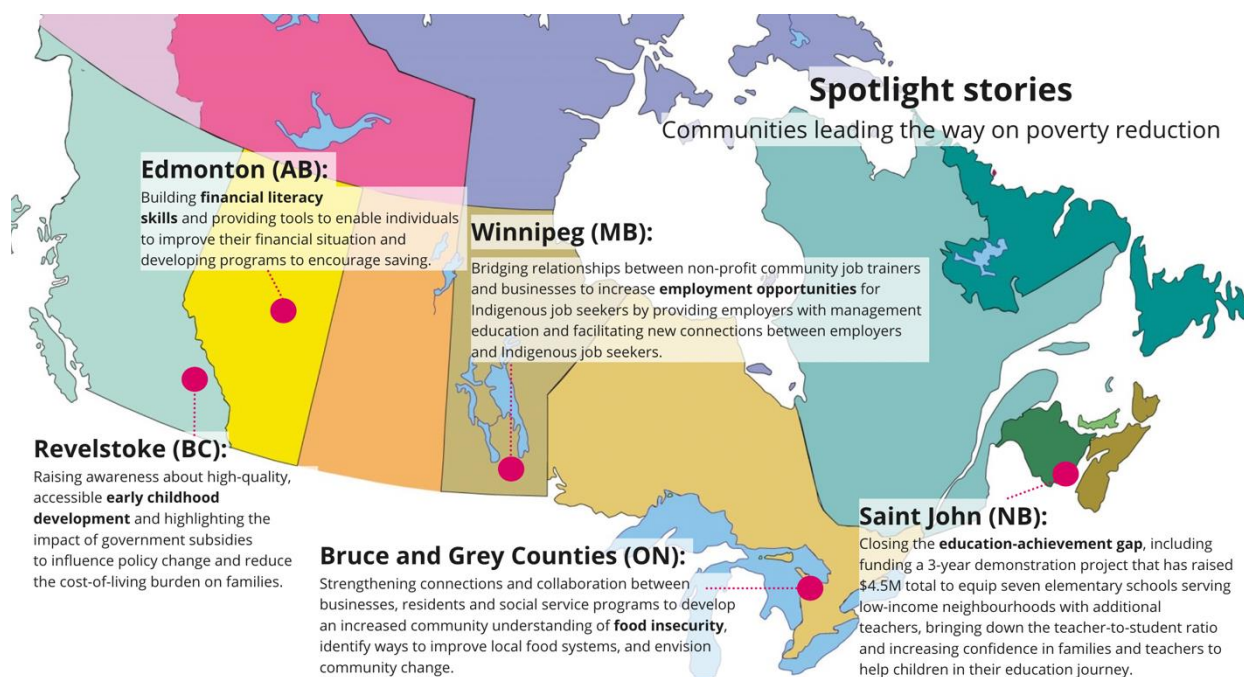


Figure 1. Communities leading the way on poverty reduction. Tamarack Institute.

As Tamarack continues to collaborate with communities to catalyze the conditions for social change, it is critical to reflect on how the collective impact model can support communities in achieving impactful outcomes.

### Understanding the collective impact model and its application in poverty reduction

The [collective impact model](#) has been an essential element in consolidating and scaling poverty reduction efforts, as well as deepening the impact of collaborations among VC-CEP members. CEP's work with communities is grounded in the five conditions for collective impact: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and providing a backbone to move the work forward. CEP's experience of implementing this model provides valuable lessons on connecting, strengthening and amplifying local efforts to advance systems change. Some of the lessons learned along this journey are summarized below, informed by the [stories of CEP members](#) applying the five conditions of collective impact to their work, and the findings of [the 2015-2020 Cities Reducing Poverty Five-Year Impact Summary Report](#) and the [Cities Reducing Poverty: 2020 Impact Report](#).



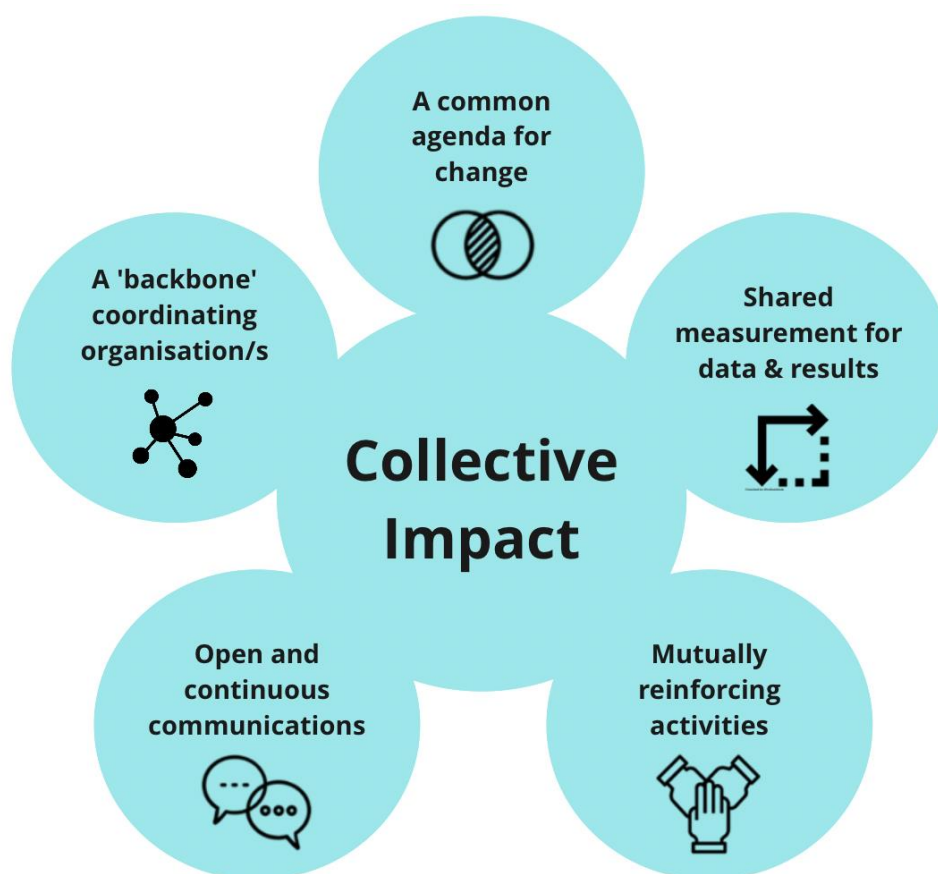
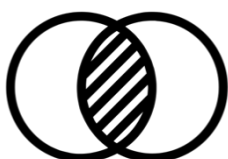
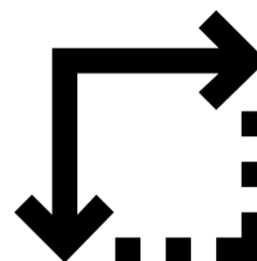


Figure 2. Five conditions of Collective Impact. Tamarack Institute.



Building a **common agenda** for social change requires communities to find common ground despite differing values, interests and positions. To do so, developing local leadership is essential to agree on the root causes of a problem, build a shared vision of the future, determine the core strategies and pathways to drive change forward, and develop a broader movement for change. Communities like Sault Ste. Marie adopt a collective impact approach to bring together local organizations in roundtable discussions, develop a theory of change, and identify the key objectives and actions that support their overarching goal.

CEP has become a leading resource in Canada for place-based poverty reduction theory and practice, contributing to the advancement of **shared measurement**. Having a common set of measures to track progress and evaluate performance helps gauge whether collaboratives are moving in the right direction towards their long-term goals. It also enables communities and partners to celebrate successes and understand how their contributions are making a difference, helps sustain funder and partner investments, and can inspire others to join the cause. Dufferin County in Ontario implemented a shared



measurement approach which enabled participants to appreciate their respective contributions, learn from each other, and continuously improve measures and outcomes.

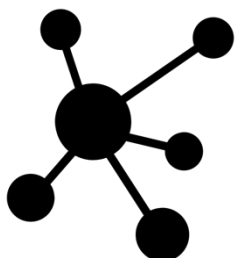


Enabling mutually reinforcing activities is about coordinating different actions within a network through a cohesive plan that takes into consideration the multiple dimensions of poverty. **Mutually reinforcing activities** facilitate resource distribution and allow communities to make realistic assessments of where local actors have resources (e.g., knowledge, networks, relationships) to make a difference. For example, in Edmonton, financial literacy education support is not only encouraging saving among residents, but is also helping participants use such funds to invest in their professional development to find a better job. Identifying and pursuing high-impact domains can be an effective way to help communities develop cohesive action plans to meet their goals, generate positive outcomes that have cascading effects, and encourage mutually reinforcing activities.

**Continuous communication** and meaningful engagement with partners foster trust and deepen the working relationship to have tough, productive conversations and to sustain alignment at multiple scales. Such efforts can take multiple forms, from coaching, policy papers, and group learning activities, to group check-ins that allow for participants to confirm that they are meeting group objectives. In Saint John, New Brunswick, members are provided with timely and appropriate information to assure mutual objectives and create common motivation.



*“By supporting provincial and territorial governments to develop plans, and by supporting strong communications with cities and communities reducing poverty who also have plans, we are able to elevate learning about what works.” - Paul Born, [2015-2020 Cities Reducing Poverty Five-Year Impact](#)*



Having a platform for **backbone support** brings together poverty reduction leaders from across Canada to learn from one another and test ideas, such as the development of poverty reduction plans, and reporting on outcomes. These efforts require a dedicated staff investing time to curate and disseminate knowledge and provide support as needed. For example, in Winnipeg, staff from their Poverty Reduction Council serve as the backbone organization. Their functions include providing outreach to stakeholders, convening meetings, strategizing and planning, carrying out developmental evaluation, and building community awareness.

## COLLECTIVE IMPACT: A PROMISING MODEL FOR JUST AND EQUITABLE COMMUNITY CLIMATE TRANSITIONS

Like poverty, the climate crisis is not an issue that can be solved by any one actor or a small group of actors working in isolation. It requires collaboration across sectors that is guided by a shared vision and a common purpose. The five conditions of collective impact provide a useful framework for nurturing collaboration in an accelerated way. The conditions build on one another in an integrated manner, helping develop authentic community engagement that is grounded in trust. In this way, the collective impact model can lay the necessary foundations for communities to build a shared aspiration for the future and take bold action to address the climate emergency.

*“A focus on a community aspiration can have an even more powerful impact when creating a broader movement for change. This requires participants to develop outcomes that are based on community values sufficiently ambitious that they cannot be realized through business as usual.”*

- Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver, [Collective Impact 3.0](#)

Imagine if, by 2025, hundreds of communities across Canada had developed and were implementing local transition plans for halving their emissions by 2030 and getting to zero by 2050 while advancing equity and justice. Could Canada reach its emission reduction targets while leaving no one behind?

Communities Ending Poverty’s experience offers insight into how we might achieve this level of scale. As was the case during the early days of Canada’s poverty reduction efforts, a set of pioneering communities – both large and small – would likely need to lead the way. These communities would work quickly to establish multi-sectoral leadership roundtables, engage the community on a shared aspiration and vision, develop action plans, implement those plans, and report on results. The initial trailblazers would inspire others to follow suit, creating ripple effects that amount to systems-level change.

Each community’s plan would reflect the unique context in which they are operating, including the main sources of GHG emissions (which differ from one community to the next), the climate targets they set, and the type of measures they decide to pursue. As with the high-impact domains of poverty reduction, communities should be encouraged to advance a climate transition through a multi-solving approach that recognizes the multiple dimensions of the climate crisis.

Similar to the CEP model, communities advancing a climate transition could receive backbone support from a dedicated team to develop mutually reinforcing activities guided by a common agenda and shared measurement systems, and to access networks that help strengthen local efforts. The platform for backbone support would also serve as a connective tissue, bringing together transition leaders from across the country to share knowledge and learn from one another’s experience. Connecting leaders in this way could help amplify voices that are heard less, so they can play a central role in driving the



transition. CEP's experience has shown that this is possible, when adequate collaborative infrastructure is available for communities to engage with.

In the face of our planetary crisis, the lessons drawn from the collective impact model in poverty reduction provide a roadmap for communities to bridge silos through collaboration and develop the necessary social infrastructure to articulate and pursue a bold, just vision for our collective future. The success of having 350 communities working together to end poverty through collective impact demonstrates that achieving impact at the necessary scale is possible. The next question is: Can this scale be reached quickly enough to avert ecological collapse? We certainly cannot wait 20 years, which is the time it took for CEP to achieve its current reach. Fortunately, the model has now been tested in the poverty reduction space, paving the way for a much faster application when it comes to accelerating a climate transition. If this approach can be implemented at the speed and scale that is required, communities across the country may be able to help Canada shed its reputation as a "[climate laggard](#)" and demonstrate global leadership in tackling the climate crisis.

*"We see global warming not as an inevitability but as an invitation to build, innovate, and effect change, a pathway that awakens creativity, compassion, and genius. This is not a liberal agenda, nor is it a conservative one. This is the human agenda." - Paul Hawken, [Drawdown](#)*

Postscript note to readers: In June 2021, Tamarack launched Community Climate Transitions to test the hypothesis that applying the collective impact model can accelerate a just and equitable climate transition. To learn more, visit: <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/communityclimatetransitions>

Funded by the Government of Canada's Sustainable Development Goals Funding Program.

Canada

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