

Centring equity and place-based approaches in systemic transformation

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A note from the Authors

This paper was co-produced through an international community of practice made up of the CEOs and Co-CEO's of four organisations each supporting place-based transformation in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, and an expert practitioner-scholar from the US. We come together regularly to share our work, finding common ground in many challenges as well as discovering many new ideas and sources of inspiration.

We are:

[Collaboration for Impact](#): Australia

[Tamarack Institute](#): Canada

[Inspiring Communities](#): New Zealand

[Place Matters](#): UK

In this paper we explore what equity means in place-based change and systems transformation. We consider it as one of the most important principles of place-based practice and whilst we practice it differently in the communities we work with as the examples will show, we all see it as both a foundational value and core methodology that needs to be widely adopted by practitioners.

Why is equity so important to systems transformation in place?

Working in place provides a centre of focus and experimentation to imagine, prototype, implement at a scale which can be agile and adaptive. In place we reveal the human impact of change building community-led movements alongside programmes that give real agency to those with most at stake in the change and in a way that builds energy and commitment. For policy makers, place is a bellwether. If the system resists transforming in place, it will be challenged to transform at other levels.

Equity challenges us to consider the inclusion of those most impacted by the systems in need of transformation. Deeply understanding the problem from the perspective of individuals with lived and living experience ensures we design change with integrity and often uncover radical and unforeseen opportunities. In working deeply in small geographies, the often-dramatic inequities that sit within and between local communities are laid bare along with the reality of experiencing that inequity. Working in place gives us better visibility of how the system works or does not work for all the community.

As actors enabling community-led change, we must invest in our own understanding of inequity and understanding our position of privilege and unconscious bias. It means challenging the dominant working culture and consciously creating a way of working that welcomes in people from different cultural backgrounds.

What do we mean by systemic transformation?

In this context, we mean changes to the systems held in a substantive way by governments, employers, anchor organisations and other funders. System transformation should not be just a dream or a destination, it should be an ongoing process. As societies evolve, so do their needs, wants and responsibilities. The most resilient systems are those that can quickly detect and respond to society's needs. It follows that system transformation is not a one-time "project", but rather a philosophy for building and maintaining resilient, sustainable societies that can keep learning, adapting, and transforming in pursuit of increased prosperity¹.

The vast majority, if not all, social inequities that communities care about sit in systems which are often removed from the community experience, for example, the welfare or health systems. It seems challenging for local community experiences to directly change or influence the system so that it is more responsive to their needs and challenges. Decision-makers in the system refer to the community context but seem overwhelmed by the individuality of each community or individual impacted by the system. The system responds by creating rules, policies, and structures which, while they may respond to the challenge overall, often also create unintentional barriers to the specific needs of communities.

The work of place-based change is about challenging the status quo whether that is about ways of working, different policy and funding priorities or different values that inform what we see as fair and equitable. Systems transformation is about all of these, but there is an inherent paradox in place-based system change. It is at a neighbourhood level where we can make the best sense of a system and engage communities as agents of change, but we need people and organisations carrying much bigger spans of control to work meaningfully with us.

What do we mean by equity?

The task of building a consensus for a concept of equity is difficult to achieve. Equity has many vantage points depending on different values, experiences and your racial or class identity. John A. Powell offers a concept of Targeted Universalism or Equity 2.0². His argument is that if we look at equity in terms of "levelling up", our position relative to others, we will always be in competition with each other. He proposes a concept of Targeted Universalism meaning a universal goal that everyone, irrespective of their societal or racial differences and economic position looks to achieve in life whilst recognising that the starting point for that journey and the difficulty of that journey will be different. In our work with communities in places that most often face disadvantage and where cohesion is a barrier to collective action, this concept of Targeted Universalism is an inclusive way of framing the ambition to centre equity while recognizing that the marginalization of entire communities based on race and ethnicity is at the heart of most systemic inequities.

¹ <https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/blog/why-when-and-how-system-transformation>

² <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/equity-2-0-what-is-targeted-universalism-and-how-does-it-address-inequality/>

To explore what it means to work in an equitable way we draw on Sheryl Petty's change management and deep equity primer³. To summarise and paraphrase:

- Equity includes but goes beyond a focus on “diversity” and “inclusion.” Deep Equity focuses on multiple levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic/societal. It is about understanding the root causes of difference to address systemic inequity and heal personal trauma. It is about there being no variation in outcomes based on ability, gender identity, race, Indigeneity, language, or other aspects of our identities.
- We need to understand how to work equitably, looking at our own biases, understanding triggers, being prepared to have challenging conversations and deepen our personal capacity to understand and to act. It is about transforming our individual, organizational, and collective behaviours to focus on reducing disparities and advancing equitable outcomes.
- We need to look at the climate of equity in organisations and as we establish new teams, centre equity in operational processes and systems. StriveTogether working with multiple communities to achieve better cradle-to-career outcomes in the US have embedded equity in their Theory of Action as an example⁴
- Equity involves shifting power to those most impacted by current systems, while still holding the roles of transforming those systems. Are we creating the space for partnership that welcomes those with whom we want to work with? We need to pay attention to dominant habits and ways of working and how these can exclude members of our community.

What do we mean by place-based change?

Place-based change is centred in the context of place and is created with the individuals who are living or working in that place. Place-based change includes the physical or geographical boundaries, the economic and human resource investments driving change, and the interdependencies that arise between people, place, and change. In the context of this paper, we mean transformational and sustained improvement to social outcomes important to and led by people living in a place as principal agents of change.

Tackling changes in place means working with systems and in a systemic way. It means getting to the root causes of what holds communities from making change happen and creating change in the wider system at a local, regional, provincial/state, or even national level. Place-based change is about working deeply in the context of a community to co-design a journey of change that builds on local capacity, builds on the local energy and momentum for change and works at a pace that enables the community to participate equally. Whilst, at the same time, connecting and amplifying the cause and story of that community with those who hold some of the cards in addressing the desired change at levels outside the community.

Place-based change takes time because it requires a series of complex and concurrent changes most often including, leveraging local assets, investing in local people's capacity to lead change, changing the prevailing culture of siloed working across sectors and organisations, and connecting the strengths and assets that exist in all our

³ <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/a-change-management-deep-equity-primer-the-what-why-how-nuance-1373>

⁴ https://www.strivetgether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Theory-of-Action-Brochure_102021_Final.pdf

communities to act together. The patience needed to see population-level impact deters many investors, particularly those in government needing to see change in an election cycle. But, what we are coming to see is that the real prize of this work is the building of social fabric and community agency, the ability of communities to initiate and lead change in many aspects of community life. For example, after investing over several years in building community capacity to work in partnership on significant social challenges through community assemblies, Camden Council in London reported that local people had come together to form new organisations, which alongside existing community organisations, had secured millions in additional grant-based income that accelerated overall impact on local priorities⁵.

Stories of equitable systemic transformation from four countries

Tackling racial inequity through place-based change in Birmingham UK

Black Thrive were founded in Lambeth, London following the death of Sean Rigg while in police custody in 2008 with a mission to tackle racial injustice around mental health and wellbeing for the Black community of African and Caribbean descent. Their ambition is to challenge the systemic causes of inequality through cultivating Black leadership. They build local coalitions with other community organisations in place to enable grassroots led change and inform the work through a Research Institute and Observatory that focuses on gathering insights that inform understanding of the Black experience.

The Black Thrive experience offers some important insights about this question of why systemic change needs to be centred on place and equity. First, place-based working is about building connection, empowerment and agency. In their work in Birmingham for example, Sandra Griffiths from Catalysts4Change - a member of the Thriving Futures Collective created by Black Thrive told us:

"We spent a year listening and building connections with the people and organisations who were on the same journey and then convened a community assembly of over 100 people to talk about what we should focus on"

At the end of this conversation a number of shared priorities for action were emerging and through a Community Assembly the team brought together the Black community with those in the system holding decision-making power. The Assembly was organised as an open conversation between Black residents, Black-led community organisations and public sector commissioners and curated with music and Black poets creating a space that reflected Black cultural norms and through which there was an implicit shifting of the power dynamic and an invitation to non-Black participants to see the community through a Black lens. Non-Black participants talked about having participated in conversations they had never had the opportunity to engage in before and coming away with a very different perspective on policy and commissioning priorities.

⁵ Georgia Gould - Leader of Camden Council speaking at the Stronger Things Conference May 2023

A Black-led research team were able to re-interpret existing data as well as present new information that invited new perspectives. As Lela Kogbara from Black Thrive told us: “the problem wasn’t that services lacked data on Black people, local people were continually filling out surveys and attending focus groups. The problem is that they could not see what the data was telling them”. Without seeing the data through the lived experience of Black People the wrong interpretations were being put on the data and Black people felt unheard and uncared for.

What we have learned from this story of change in relation to our question *why place and equity is critical to systems change* is first, that there is a latent energy, passion and resources within communities to lead change if they are equal partners in the change and that where there is agency to act. The dominant ways in which governments at all levels tend to work, don’t create the opportunities for deeper engagement and understanding to act with equity. We need to create new spaces for dialogue, participation and action and trust that align to the cultural norms of the community. Equally, because systems collect and interpret data according to their framing of the questions that need to be answered, they risk missing what is important to know and taking the wrong decisions from the data they do have. To work with the messiness and complexity of how and why particular challenges exist, we must see it through the diverse experiences of our communities and that can only happen in the places people feel they belong to.

Communities Ending Poverty in Canada

Over the past 20 years, the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement has been supporting a network of communities focused on reducing and ending poverty in Canada. The movement launched in 2001 involving 13 place-based efforts as an ‘action-learning experiment’. There were three core partners which supported this experiment: The McConnell Foundation, which provided funding for the experiment, the Tamarack Institute acting as the convener and capacity-builder of the network and the Caledon Institute documenting the systems and policy shifts occurring across the network.

Over a 10-year period, the convening partners and the place-based partners worked in concert to learn, leverage change, and grow the awareness and impact of the role of communities in reducing and ending poverty. By the end of the 10-year action-learning experiment, more than 290,000 individuals and families living in poverty were moved through their journey out of poverty.

The power of the place-based network grew in scope and scale over the second 10 years from 13 communities to a network of more than 90 regions and 400 communities. The impact and contributions of these place-based efforts has been significant. Many communities have witnessed a net decrease in poverty rates and increased community engagement and support for ending poverty. Across the network, which now represents 58% of Canada’s population, policy shifts have occurred in the areas of living wage, affordable transportation, and income supports, amongst others. The network has influenced provincial poverty strategies, and more recently, the Government of Canada poverty reduction plan.

The system is transforming. Each of the actors in the system is influenced by the other. The pressure of 400 communities collectively focusing on ending poverty in Canada is powerful. This network and other community-based actors bring pressure to

decision-makers in government, philanthropy, and business. The net result of actors working in concert is a significant decrease in poverty across Canada with more than 2 million people being lifted out of poverty and a poverty rate which has declined from 16.7% in 2001 to 7.4 % as reported by Statistics Canada in 2021.⁶

Deep Collaboration across Australia

Place-based change in Australia has transformative potential when equity of First Nations Australians is centred in the way we think and act. It is one of the ways we have shifted power dynamics and structures that have resulted from more than 200 years of colonisation. Through the process of [Deep Collaboration](#) across the 'middle space' Australians are addressing collective traumas, re-imagining and creating a shared future that is more equitable and just. Middle space means the spaces between – the spaces where there is potential for new patterns of behaviour to emerge. They refer to the spaces between First Nations and other multicultural Australians, between government, business, philanthropy, services and communities; and between local, regional and national systems across traditional boundaries of sector, issue and scale (local to national).

In place-based change efforts, working across and within this middle space with the principle of equity is about redesigning change processes as collective efforts that ultimately work for the people who live in those specific communities, over the interests of organisations, institutions and specific sectors. We know that this requires practices and social infrastructure that enable people and institutions to challenge the status quo of how social change efforts generally happen.

In Australia there are already more than 90 communities that are organising the social infrastructure locally to create population-level changes through collaborations that centre community leadership, a shared vision and community-identified priorities. We are seeing the impact of government partnering with community-led systems change initiatives as they adapt their practice to share data, move beyond the role of funder to be partners and learners in collaborative governance, and create promising innovations such as shared decision-making frameworks between government and communities.

For example, in the Stronger Places, Stronger People (SPSP) initiative, governments, philanthropic organisations, businesses and service providers are starting to align their resources to community priorities. These shifts in practice from all partners, and a willingness to collaborate in local level middle spaces, are contributing to positive impacts for individuals and families. For example, in Maranguka, Bourke established a daily check-in on youth offending and family violence and there has been a 50% reduction of juveniles charged over a five-year period. Through Burnie Works, a multi-pronged focus on collaboration across education and employment systems has seen year 12 school completion increase by 30% over nine years⁷.

In February 2023, The Hon Jim Chalmers MP, Treasurer of Australia, called for *“communities [to] have the genuine input, local leadership, resources and authority to define*

⁶ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/05/canadas-poverty-rate-remains-below-pre-pandemic-levels.html>

⁷ SPSP Early Evidence Report of Community-Led Change, <https://platformc.org/publications/spsp-early-evidence-report-community-led-change>

a new and better future". This growing commitment to place-based and community-led initiatives, from government and the philanthropic sector in Australia, provides significant potential for these collaborations to be designed and resourced in a way that strengthens the middle space for social and ecological change.

To leverage and scale the middle spaces being created locally, we must also intentionally design social infrastructure at the national level and ensure this is adequately resourced – in the same way we see national-level innovation infrastructure resourced in business and science. Collaboration for Impact, University of Queensland and the Australia New Zealand School of Government (Nexus Centre Foundation Partner consortium) has partnered with the Australian Government and others across the ecosystem to design and establish a National Centre for Place-based Collaboration (Nexus Centre).

The opportunity is to design and establish national infrastructure that enables place-based change by addressing: barriers to learning and collaboration where scales, sectors and issues intersect; competition that causes siloes and fragmentation of efforts; limited use of data; and, varied levels of knowledge and capability for collaborative place-based work at the scale required for systemic change. This calls for approaching the development of the national level infrastructure in a way that grows the middle space. To create an ecosystem where people and institutions have the capabilities, resources and incentives to collaborate across the middle space for more equitable systems locally and nationally. It is here in this Deep Collaboration, that our shared future emerges.

Paddling Together in Whananaki, Aotearoa New Zealand

At the heart of equity is power, with inequities in relationships and ways of working also inherent in systems at community levels too. Sometimes power is held and maintained because of the assumptions people have of each other and the dominant narratives that have elevated one (Western) world view over another (indigenous) for too many years. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, colonisation continues to underpin and impact on equity. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the Crown and the indigenous people of Aotearoa framed expectations around self-determination, governance and equity for tangata whenua (Māori people of New Zealand) that have yet to be realised. However, progress is being made.

Place-based change is a core vehicle for enabling transformation. Starting with what locals care most about and want to focus on to meet their aspirations is key. This approach requires those in central or public sector systems to step out of their power and provide enabling support rather than working to a pre-conceived plan. Collaborative and systemic working and thinking also makes it more realistic for communities to engage deeply with a programme rather than respond to a fragmented and disconnected series of programmes.

In Whananaki, a small rural coastal community in Northland, work has been underway for the last few years to set aside decades of 'us and them' mindsets to bring the best of both Māori and Pākehā (non-Māori/Western) world views together for the betterment of their place. Five years ago, one side of the valley rarely talked and worked together with the other side but thanks to government supported investment in community-led planning, a new vision and approach to achieve a culturally connected caring community is now well underway.

Their mission “Te Hoe o te Waka” – all the paddles working together to move the waka (canoe) swiftly in the right direction. As Whananaki Community-led Development leader Pam Armstrong explains “we started by setting the vision as no one really understood the layers that existed in the community.” While it’s taken some time, landowners, farmers, elders, young people, residents and the local hapū (sub tribe) are now working together on a number of solid cultural, social, environmental and economic initiatives for Whananaki”.

Weaving both mātauranga Māori (Māori values, principles, approaches and knowledge) together with community-led development principles has enabled a collaborative place-based approach to grow. A number of initiatives have flourished including the development of the local marae (cultural meeting place) and adjoining community hub, environmental restoration projects and youth-led social enterprises. Key to local progress has been a focus on learning and adapting rather than rigidly sticking to set plans and timeframes. Building skills and capacity for local people to lead has been critical. Whereas previously external contractors were engaged to clear waterways, their role was changed to instead train locals to undertake these tasks and more. This has seen expertise remain and build within the community and support development of new walkways and a community nursery– with full time jobs created in the process.

But perhaps one of the most telling markers of change are the words of Pam Armstrong’s mother who has lived in the valley her whole life - “Whananaki has always its own rhythm, but for the first time I can see and feel our community in rhythm together.”

See and hear more of Whananaki’s story [here](#)

How do we embed Equity and Place in Systemic Transformation?

Systemic transformation will achieve only limited impact if it fails to embed equity as a key principle. Many, if not all current systems, are inherently inequitable and based on hierarchical and colonial practices. To effectively transform systems, reckoning the inherent inequity in systems is a critical first step.

Prototyping systems change in place can create a unique opportunity to test, adjust and understand the impact of the system transformation. The Communities Ending Poverty example provides a unique case of place-based approaches working collectively to influence multiple systems to both respond and engage in systems transformation. There is a symbiotic relationship which evolves between the place-based approaches and the system responses.

In a recent article published in the Social Innovation Journal, authors Attygalle, Cabaj and Pei⁸, describe this interconnected relationship in more detail.

Our argument is that systems transformation led at a place-level, with communities having agency over the change is the only viable way for shifting the dial on complex social problems with different casualties. We need radical devolution of

⁸ <https://socialinnovationsjournal.com/index.php/sij/article/view/5584/4535>

power and responsibility to communities, backed by access to sources of support that will help steward the process of change without taking back power. We need to embrace the reality of uncertainty in this work and allow journeys of change to be different, whilst connecting those doing the work with each other to leverage their experience and insights.

Achieving Results in Systemic Transformation: The Next Steps

Recognising that the way we practice place-based change differs across our countries, below are what we see as the shared priorities for achieving equitable systemic transformation through place-based working.

1. **Embed equity as a foundational principle in system transformation** and reckon with the inequity and racism that exists in many current systems.
2. **Give communities the resources and the responsibility to make change happen directly** over the long term, creating systems of accountability and transparency that demonstrate value and impact and invest in building the capacity of communities to deliver change so there is a catalytic effect.
3. **Invest in a system of support and professional development that builds individual and collective capacity to accelerate the scale of place-based change.** Create the tools, frameworks and methods that helps teams build on the shoulders of experience and retain the value of the hard-won knowledge for future work, connecting the learning so we are leveraging from our knowledge and experience.
4. **True transformation with an equity lens needs patience and longevity and those who fund and deliver this work need to recognise this.** We need a diversity of financial instruments from non-repayable grant finance to social investors getting a return based on savings in the system from better use of public funding and blended versions of both.
5. **Invest in building a national infrastructure that enables and accelerates place-based change at the same scale as innovation infrastructure for business and science.** To create an ecosystem where people, communities, business and institutions can build and access the learning, capabilities, relationships, resources and incentives to collaborate for more equitable systems locally and nationally.

If you would like to explore the themes raised in this paper with the authors, please get in touch via info@placematters.co.uk

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