



Systems Change In Difficult Times

Impact Report

2020 - 2021

Our Principles



We Think Big

We focus on the big picture. We look at the world through a complexity lens, so we can take meaningful action on addressing root causes of social problems.



We Take Action for Social Justice

We are aware of power and privilege. We critically reflect on our individual and collective role(s) – and the roles of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability – in contributing to, benefitting from, and perpetuating inequities within systems, so we can understand where change is needed, and take relevant action.

We address inequity. We know that not all communities are impacted the same; we focus our efforts on marginalized and vulnerable communities.



We Like to Learn

We learn from each other. We seek out, value, respect, engage and listen to people with multiple perspectives and experiences; we value and draw on different ways of knowing and learning to give us a fulsome understanding of how to address issues and make needed changes.

We are innovative and curious. We try new things and bring wonder and open-mindedness to the work; we innovate, reflect, learn from our efforts, and try again.

We know working for change isn't always easy. We understand that our experiences are part of our unconscious bias. We learn from difficulties and discomfort; we recognize tension within relationships as an opportunity to grow.



We Know We All Need Each Other

We are stronger together. We work collectively and collaboratively across sectors to amplify everyone's contributions to change. We celebrate accomplishments and we build on existing strengths. We generously share resources, capacity, information, connections and learnings to create a culture of collaboration and abundance.

We take time to get to know each other. We build and nurture authentic, trusting, respectful relationships that support effective change efforts.



We Are Intentional

We mind the pace. It takes the time it takes; we are accountable to the work, not the calendar.

We take care in our work. Our actions and policies show care for ourselves, each other, our communities, and our planet.

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On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to share with you our report on the work and impact of Inspiring Communities.

As you know, an investment made by the Province of Nova Scotia to explore different ways of working with residents across sectors resulted in the creation of Inspiring Communities. Through our work, we seek to move beyond “one-size-fits-all” approaches to social change, and forge bold and experimental new ways to shape a better future.

We have embraced new collaborations and initiatives this year, learning fresh ways to work in the midst of a pandemic. With a new online learning community, Wayside, we were pleased to share projects with the Community Sector Council, Engage Nova Scotia, and the East Preston Empowerment Academy.

Challenges, global and local have affected systems at all levels, and in many ways have deepened the need for systems change. We continue to explore how to shift mindsets and influence change in communities. We believe our work is more important than ever. The experience and expertise of our staff stand for positive change in this time of turbulence. This year, we welcomed a new executive director, Louise Adongo, and bid farewell with gratitude to Annika Voltan, whose leadership brought Inspiring Communities so far. With Louise’s guidance, experience and openness to innovation, Inspiring Communities promises to remain at the forefront of social change in Atlantic Canada.

We are very appreciative of our funders and collaborators who see value in working together for real change. We are fortunate to have a dedicated and committed volunteer board supporting and guiding our work.

We look forward to working together to co-create a new set of strategic priorities to lead us forward into 2022 and beyond. We also anticipate a fully vaccinated future when we might once again convene and enjoy community, in person!

Joanne Linzey, Chair

Inspiring Communities is working toward systems change at all levels: organizational; community; and in the broader system, through societal narrative shifts. Our name, *Inspiring Communities*, denotes a verb and an adjective; appropriate since part of the work is doing and another part is describing, or rewriting narratives. Inspiring Communities is what we are, what we do, and who we are inspired by: the communities we work with, learn from and walk beside.

The last year held more than its share of challenges, from the global pandemic and its effects on every aspect of our lives, through the killing of George Floyd, which sparked the eruption of Black Lives Matters protests around the world and “raised” a racial reckoning across sectors (including social sector & systems transformation spaces) in North America, to trauma experienced closer to home. We join our system partners in reflecting on what deep and long-lasting change might be seeded throughout the social innovation sector by this new breadth of anti-racism discourse.



Atlantic Canadians moved through a gamut of emotions and experiences, from anger, anxiety, grief, depression, sadness, through resilience, strength, community compassion and care. The entire region was shaken by the mass shooting in Nova Scotia in April and the disputes through late summer and early fall as Mi'kmaq fishers claimed their right to a moderate livelihood fishery.

As the pandemic saw individuals and families separated from each other, we recognized our interconnectedness in our region: what affects one of us affects us all. Our Atlantic Bubble was the envy of the country for much of 2020, and through the “third wave”. Our mutual commitment to cooperating for the greater good kept impacts here to a minimum.

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic has necessarily shifted a large focus in our work over the last year, but we have continued with other priorities. As you will read, we have:

- ☑ Amplified the impact of first voices, helping policy be informed by lived experience;
- ☑ Continued to build on our strength in evaluation, helping us assess our impact and make our work better;
- ☑ Set the stage to create more learning opportunities in the future, to help the changemakers in communities throughout Atlantic Canada build their skills, capacity and ability to connect their work with others.

In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam puts forward the argument that social capital is the prerequisite for civic engagement, and states that social capital is built through personal connection. “*Social connections are also important for the rules of conduct that they sustain. Networks involve (almost by definition) mutual obligations; they are not interesting as mere ‘contacts.’ Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity...*”(p20)

As was necessary for the establishment of our species millions of years ago, 2020 has shown us once again the importance of community: resilient, meaningful, and intentional relationships. Collaboration and convening are central to our work with, and for, the community, which has grown in importance and reach. We look forward to a near future where, with vaccines and public health measures allowing us to, we can attend to the messy parts of creating social change through in-person, face-to-face connecting. We anticipate a return to actively identifying and connecting with others in the Atlantic region who are making change happen: building equity, improving access to resources, filling gaps in services and finding new ways to address intractable problems.

Pandemic or not, we look forward to connecting with all those who want to make a difference, to co-create a better future for the Atlantic Provinces, Canada and the world.

Join us, won't you?

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Louise".

Louise Adongo, Executive Director

2020

The Year that Brought us a Pandemic

- 30 January 2020: WHO declares the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern
- 11 March 2020: WHO declares COVID 19 a pandemic

In mid-March, the Atlantic Provinces implemented the first of a series of lockdown measures hoping to slow the progression of the pandemic to a level where cases would not overwhelm our medical systems. In spite of a few surges, the Atlantic Provinces have weathered the pandemic well. For much of 2020 we were the envy of Canada, which saw many expats and Maritimers at heart seek to move here. This resulted in an overheated real estate market and a housing crunch.

COVID numbers for our four provinces as of May 26, 2021

	Total # of cases	Total deaths
New Brunswick	2,163	43
Newfoundland & Labrador	1,273	6
Nova Scotia	5,424	79
Prince Edward Island	200	0
Canada	1,368,106	25,361
Worldwide Estimate	169,166,072	3,514,269

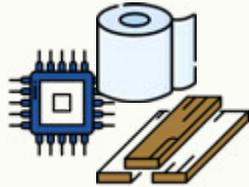


Insecure housing, substance use and domestic abuse were exacerbated.

The COVID-19 Pandemic is not just a health crisis. It has impacted all aspects of life.



Government focused resources & trade efforts on public health



Supply chains were disrupted. People reported shortages of toilet paper, computer chips and lumber.



Many people lost their jobs or were laid off. The federal government introduced the CERB (Canadian Emergency Response Benefit)

Many small businesses were either shut down or experienced a drastic curtailing of activities.



Implementing social distancing and isolation measures caused a profound loss of connection. Families were separated by closed provincial borders. Long-term care patients were denied visitors. People could not gather to celebrate weddings, birthdays or events, nor could they gather to mourn losses.

Mental health became “the other health crisis” as the persistent anxiety of living in pandemic times ground away at people’s resilience. As time has gone by, some people have stopped engaging in healthy coping activities. Schools were closed and students sent home to learn, adding stress to the lives of affected families. No one knows what the long term effects might be socially or academically.

The pandemic has magnified other existing inequities. Women around the world left jobs, either as a result of layoffs or shut downs or simply because they were required for child care in the home as daycares and schools closed. “The rate of reported cases of COVID-19 in First Nations living on reserve is 40 percent higher than the rate in the general Canadian population,” [Cree doctor Marlyn Cook told CTV News in January, 2021](#). In November of 2020, [Njoki N Wane published an article](#) noting that, “by June 2020, an analysis of those infected by the disease in Canada revealed that racialized, and in particular Black people, had higher numbers than the rest of the population (Global News Canada). That report further indicated there was a strong correlation between high COVID-19 rates and low income, types of employment, ethnicity and low levels of education.” Canada does not track race-related data with regard to COVID, but the article presents other ways to quantify this statement.

Just as initial pandemic shock and anxiety were peaking, in April 2020, a man in Portapique, Nova Scotia undertook a two-day mass shooting event that took 22 lives and shocked Atlantic Canada.

Other public tragedies followed: a helicopter crash and a Snow Birds crash took the lives of young, vital people loved by people in this region. In May, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer, sparking Black Lives Matters protests and actions around the world. The US presidential race was political theatre that provoked polarized debate. On January 6, the world watched insurrectionists attack the US capital. The grief, trauma and anxiety layered into tectonic plates of stress.



There were a few positive impacts of COVID. Government, private and public sector have overcome barriers, working together to find innovative solutions and responses, and to support those most impacted. Travel, both international and cross-town commuting, slowed significantly, introducing a temporary drop in greenhouse gases. Innovations to improve working from home have made video meetings and events more engaging, helping improve collaboration across geography and opening the world. With retail ordering and delivery more accessible, people who are less able to leave their homes have found ease. Some people have found more time in their days.

Good and bad, 2020 has marked our region in ways that will continue to show up for years to come.



Inspiring Communities

Inspiring Communities supports the growth and vitality of the field of systems change in Atlantic Canada. We provide a nest for experimentation, develop leadership in the field, and cultivate a culture of learning and evaluation for social change. We are helping shift communities and changemakers, moving our mindset from one of competition and scarcity to one of collaboration and abundance, creating greater equity and wellbeing in Atlantic Canada.

Systems change is a long term endeavour, and changing relationships and mindsets is where it starts. Signs of change will seem slow to appear, but we know the seeds we are planting will bear fruit in the fullness of time. In this report, you will find that some of our longer term projects are beginning to show the first signs of impact. In spite of the ways the pandemic affected us, our communities, and our work, this was a full, abundant year of fostering collaboration, innovation and social change.

Our Vision: Collective Action for Change

Positive social change is happening across the Atlantic Region, based on new voices at the table, capacity to act, and a culture of collaboration and abundance.



Theory of Change

Our Theory of Change guides what we do and gives us a common sense of purpose. We use it as our framework for planning, decision making and assessing our impact. We aim to realize our vision through:

- Providing a **nest** for experimentation for social change initiatives;
- Developing **evaluation capacity** for systems change;
- Generating **learning opportunities**.

Our Community-Led Initiatives

Inspiring Communities offers a nest to social change initiatives by hosting them within our organization, to help increase their chances of long-term success. We connect changemakers to a network of peers, offer thought leadership, learning opportunities and evaluation support, as well as back-end administrative services. Check the following pages for some examples of the impact of these initiatives.



Between the Bridges (BtB)

Between the Bridges works in collaboration with residents, non-profit organizations, the public sector, and businesses using a Collective Impact framework. The shared goal is to identify what needs to change and how they can work together, often in new ways, to generate solutions and take collective action. BtB serves Dartmouth North, primarily the area between the two bridges spanning Halifax Harbour.



Northside Rising (NSR)

NSR creates supports, connections and pathways for Northsiders to be changemakers for a more hopeful, healthy and just community. Northside describes the area of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM) that includes Sydney Mines, North Sydney, and the surrounding rural communities, including Florence and Bras D'Or.



Turning the Tide (TtT)

Using their framework for change, TtT aims to create an engaged, positive, sharing community through creating connection and supporting communication and navigation. The Digby area consists of the Town of Digby and coastal communities on St. Mary's Bay, Digby Neck and the Islands, to inland villages such as Bear River and Weymouth. Digby was selected by Tamarack Institute in 2020 as one of 13 communities for Communities Building Youth Futures, and so Turning the Tide leads CBYF also.



Nova Scotia Network for Social Change (NSN4SC)

A partnership with NS GovLab, a social innovation lab focused on population aging in Nova Scotia, created the NS Network for Social Change, a network of those working on issues related to aging well.



WeavEast (WE)

A network of people and organizations making positive social change across Atlantic Canada which connects changemakers to help strengthen relationships, reduce fragmentation, amplify each other's work and catalyze collaborative efforts for social change.

As leaders in Developmental Evaluation, Inspiring Communities helps develop the practice through coaching, peer support, and a growing community of practice and provides embedded evaluators in each nested project as well as in other partnership projects. These other projects are:

Every One. Every Day. K'jip'uktuk Halifax

Every One Every Day is a Participatory City initiative bringing North End Halifax neighbours together to design and start projects to benefit them and the community, and advance reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Inspiring Communities is supporting and learning with a new Mi'kmaq evaluator who serves as the embedded evaluator with the initiative.

Poverty Reduction Blueprint

Inspiring Communities is partnering with the Province of Nova Scotia to evaluate projects funded through its Poverty Reduction Blueprint work. The Province funds action-oriented initiatives that test innovative ways of addressing poverty, through three funding streams: community projects, strategic government projects, and social innovation labs.

Choices for Youth

Inspiring Communities provides coaching support for a new evaluator with Choices for Youth, in the practice of developmental evaluation. Choices for Youth, based in St. John's Newfoundland, helps at-risk youth secure stable housing and employment, while working towards family stability and better health.

Learning that Supports Systems Change

Inspiring Communities offers learning opportunities to help cultivate systems leadership skills for changemakers, both internally and throughout the social innovation ecosystem. We do this through collaborations and partnerships.

Through our Wayside Learning Community, Inspiring Communities provides learning and connection for anyone working for the greater good in Atlantic Canada.

Through providing professional development funds and offering learning sessions monthly, Inspiring Communities fosters a culture of learning among staff and initiatives.



Photo by Sydney Troxell from Pexels

Impact Case Study: Food for Thought

In the spring of 2020, when Nova Scotia schools suddenly closed, thousands of students were left without a reliable daily food source. We worked with partners to create the Food for Thought program. Schools identified families who were assigned meal credits, \$10 per day per child, Monday-Friday.

A locally developed online & telephone ordering system allowed families to place orders with participating struggling local restaurants. Families could choose from a limited menu focused on healthy options developed in cooperation with school dietitians.

April 10 - June 30, 2020

IMPACTS

- ✓ Families who rely on school breakfast programs could feed their children during lockdown
- ✓ Stimulated economic growth for rural small business restaurants across Nova Scotia
- ✓ Partners developed a deeper, shared understanding of challenges within communities



students from 36 schools



4 pilot communities → 12 communities



over 35,000 lunches delivered



1148 families registered

This initiative showed several early signs of systems change, including shared decision-making, reaching new shared understandings, adopting innovations, commitments of partners, changes to partner activities, practice changes, shifts in resource allocation, and new collaborations.

PARTNERS

NS Department of Business
NS Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Click2Order online ordering portal
and other partners.

Participants' comments:

"This program ensured the children had a good meal every day. Also in my opinion it showed children that they mattered throughout this time."

"I was laid off due to COVID, it was totally unexpected as I am considered a front line worker. This program was so helpful with food for my children during this time and relieved some stress from me. I can't thank you all enough!"

Systems change is complex. It requires building trusting relationships, working at many levels simultaneously and it takes time for results to blossom.

When we bring together the impacts of our work as a backbone organization with the signs of systems change from our nested initiatives and affiliate projects, we can begin to see our overall impacts. These include impacts at the level of our organization or network, impacts that can be felt by communities at the local level, as well as broader impacts that help build a stronger sector of changemakers and a society more ready for and enabled to change.

When we look at the last year across our network of nested initiatives, projects and collaborations, these intersecting impacts emerge, sometimes at multiple levels:

	Lifted up the voices of people with lived experience, in some cases informing policy		Connected leaders and increased capacity among leaders and in network
	Supported communities in taking collective action in response to the pandemic, specifically addressing:		Increased culture of collaboration
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food Security - Digital Inclusion - Isolation - Health 		Strengthening evaluation capacity
			Shifted outdated narratives
			Building a learning culture

On the next few pages, we offer brief descriptions of the ways these impacts are showing up.

These are highlights of impacts identified by Inspiring Communities’ skilled team of evaluators. Turning the Tide, Northside Rising, Between the Bridges and the Nova Scotia Network for Social Change have all produced individual reports, which contain more rich detail than we have space to capture. If you are intrigued by the work mentioned here, we encourage you to explore those reports as well.





Lifted up the voices of people with lived experiences



People with lived experience know what needs to change, and often, how it needs to change. Their knowledge and wisdom informs and guides our nested initiatives and our work. Each of our nested initiatives in their unique ways and communities are engaged in actively listening to their community members. Below are examples of our initiatives lifting up voices from their community.

“It’s the inclusiveness of Northside Rising of the community and people with lived experience that I find is most valuable. I find that the round table has been extremely inclusive of people with lived experience and you know, taking everything they have to say into what happens... It’s a rarity to find a group that shares the interests of the population that we serve.”

-Community Partner

People with lived and living experience of substance use

Northside Rising supported people who use drugs (PWUD) from across CBRM as they established the Cape Breton Association of People Empowering Drug Users (CAPED), the first independent voice for people in Cape Breton with lived and living experience (PWLLE) in substance use. The development of CAPED followed a priority of the Northside Rising Substance Use Roundtable to ensure that PWLLE would be fully included in efforts to develop solutions to the challenges associated with substance use. [Learn more about Northside’s work with PWUD here.](#)

One impact of this work has been changes in the activities of our government partners. Based on discussions facilitated by Northside Rising, roundtable members connected to Nova Scotia Health Authority:

- helped ensure that primary care nurses and nurse practitioners would receive training in harm reduction
- shared insights about realities faced by PWUD with family physicians
- engaged first voice participants in sharing their insights at conferences and other settings
- drew on first voice input to inform the province’s decision to establish an Overdose Prevention Site in the Sydney area and to consider design issues for the successful implementation of that initiative.

Bringing lived experience to influence policy

The Nova Scotia Network for Social Change (NSN4SC) project and NS GovLab focused on nurturing relationships with folks working to support older Nova Scotians within African Nova Scotian, Urban Indigenous and rural/remote communities. The Nova Scotia Network for Social Change’s connections with seniors in Black and Indigenous communities have been influential. NSN4SC and NS GovLab have shared their learnings from working with their community members to influence the Department of Senior’s policy work and the Deputy Minister’s working group on Aging Well related to digital equity and inclusion for older racialized Nova Scotians.

Dartmouth North residents

In Dartmouth, the work of Between the Bridges is influenced by its Residents’ Roundtable, which was created to provide the experience and insights of community members on ideas and initiatives being suggested and implemented around priority social issues. Meeting monthly in person prior to the pandemic, members are now comfortable and confident convening virtually. The group developed convening skills to plan and host a community conversation on the 2020 municipal election.



Photo: Jesselyn Nesbitt. Digby's Youth Space with hand painted murals. Artist Tiffany Barrett helped transform the space. Inset is the mural that ruffled feathers.

Digby area youth

In Digby, Turning the Tide recognized that youth felt less connected to their communities. They established several youth-led and youth-engaged groups to plan, implement, and provide a youth perspective on various projects. One project was establishing the Digby Area Youth Space, DAYS, in partnership with the Digby Area Recreation Commission. An existing, little-used space was transformed by the participants into a place where youth feel welcome to connect with friends, engage in social activities, and participate in learning sessions they themselves coordinate and implement.

There are signs that the community is listening. When there were rumblings that local residents might not agree with a mural youth had decided to install in the space, municipal and town officials supported the youth perspective.

Participatory budgeting guided by weavers

WeavEast started 2020 with a call for community projects. Collectively, the network determined the priorities for and method of awarding the funding for these in an active participatory democracy framework. This aligned with a WeavEast goal “to move power to the periphery.”

“We live in a great little town here in Digby. I believe that it is so important for young people to have the opportunity to participate and integrate into the community they live in and to look for opportunities to contribute in their own way with their own strengths.”

- Community member

CAPED

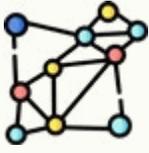
represents 3500 PWUD in CBRM

(clients of the Sharp Advice Needle Exchange)

WeavEast

distributed \$74,900 in seed grants

to changemakers in the Atlantic Canada social innovation ecosystem.



Connected Leaders & Increased Capacity Among Leaders and in Network

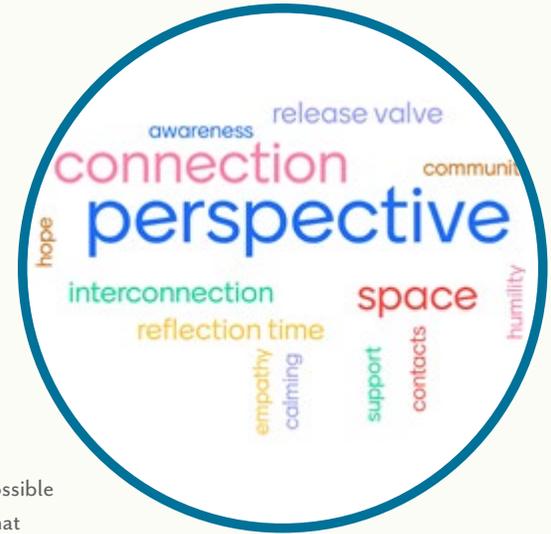


Weaving Connections Among Systems Leaders

Inspiring Communities reached out to systems leaders across Atlantic Canada to offer support and facilitate connections during the lockdown phase of the pandemic, and in the aftermath of the mass shooting that took place in April. In weekly sessions, participants supported each other, brainstormed resource-sharing and problem-solving, discussed the system changes they were seeing, and talked about the kind of leadership needed in uncertain times.

WeavEast backbone staff reached out to the network to identify possible cross-Atlantic areas of common concern or existing partnerships that could be fostered and amplified through WeavEast’s unique position. Four areas emerged: food security, youth employment, social labs, and anti-racism.

Backbone staff offered support that was needed, from coordination to meeting facilitation.



Systems Leaders’ reflections about the meaning of the online convenings.

“My ‘why’ of being here is I feel there is lots of potential and space for this sort of work in our community and people who want to do it. This program is allowing space for that potential.”

-Northside Changemaker Program participant

Convening in a pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the province began advocating that people isolate, the Inspiring Communities network as a whole recognized the peril and challenge to communities of letting networks of connections lapse. Systems change relies on such connections.

With a commitment to meaningful convenings, at all levels, our organization and initiatives began recreating our important networks virtually. Some new groups had been planned before COVID, as necessary structures to achieve the work, so now the planned methods of meeting shifted.

Between the Bridges pulled together the Dartmouth North Organizations (DNO).

Northside Rising created the Northside Community Coalition, a space for active community members who play leadership roles of various kinds, some holding formal positions in organizations, and many contributing informally as volunteers, community connectors, or ‘go to’ members in their respective networks. The Northside Community Coalition has been initiated as ‘a shared space where people with hope and heart for the Northside can connect, learn and create together.’

Northside Rising also created the Northside Virtual Coffeehouse, which launched with a series called Pandemic Perspectives. The appetite for candid, public conversation space around challenging issues pushed the NSR team to evolve the model and carry it forward.

Developing skills with and through technology

COVID meant that changemakers had to rely more on technology than ever before. Through Wayside, Inspiring Communities aimed to provide important learning opportunities for changemakers in the system. Starting in late fall, *The Art of Collaboration* course was offered, followed by *A Foundation Course in Mindfulness. Public and Professional Speaking*, offered by the East Preston Empowerment Academy, built confidence in a mostly-African-Nova-Scotian cohort of learners. A regular “Wayside Playspaces” gathering gave an opportunity to connect and regard technology in a new way, apart from the workday grind, while also learning new skills.

Northside builds changemaker capacity

Northside Rising offered the Northside Changemakers Program via Wayside starting in January 2021. Free for participants, the program offered a participation stipend and provided seed funding for projects.

Ten learning sessions address key topics related to the work of making change: generating ideas; mobilizing and facilitating community action; managing projects; and fostering the values and relationships that build strong, inclusive communities. Personalized coaching supports individuals with their personal learning and project planning. Ten diverse and dynamic individuals are participating in the inaugural version of the program. While the interests of participants vary widely – from growing local food to supporting mental health, from addressing housing needs to expanding the use of the arts for personal and social development – they have already begun to achieve together one of the main goals of the program: creating a network of mutual support for local changemakers.

Community Connection Grants in Digby

Turning the Tide has taken a different approach, offering Community Connection Grants to invest in strengthening communities. The Grants Committee, made up of community members, has reviewed 28 proposals to date, endorsing 22. The projects run the full gamut of community building initiatives: community garden, greenhouse, a climbing wall, a community soup kitchen, and a tiny free library are some examples of projects that involve community members working together. One grant went to a resident who partnered with SchoolsPlus to buy food for school programs using coupons and store points. Using \$100 of the grant funds for coupons, the recipient reported that she managed to combine sales, coupons, and store points to purchase food items worth \$460 for \$58. The food was then distributed to five area schools to support food programs for students and their families.

Decolonizing, and educating against racism and oppression

Nova Scotia Network for Social Change and NS GovLab recognized that individual and collective education would help embed equity, anti-oppression, anti-racism, and decolonial principles in every aspect of their work. NSN4SC and NS GovLab team offered 10 learning sessions to partners including leading or co-leading three specialized sessions within the IC network through May, June and July of 2020. They also offered educational opportunities to the broader NSN4SC membership, facilitating sessions with Department of Seniors staff and partners, plus a session for Provincial government staff.

The first of the sessions offered within the IC network were aimed at exploring the colonial narratives and racist, ableist and ageist narratives. Participatory research was conducted in collaboration with other partners working with aging populations, creating an ideas map to be used as a teaching tool.

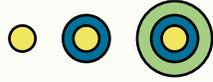
A way to connect with folks in the social innovation network. it often feels fairly closed off and i wasn't sure where to start to connect a bit more, so this open event was helpful as an easy starting point.

-Feedback from the Wayside Playspaces evaluation survey





Increased culture of collaboration



All their work has been done with such respect and sensitivity. They've really done a great job at building a credibility base. You've really seen that in the way that they've been able to respond to COVID and have helped other community groups respond to COVID, because of the credibility they've built.

-Community Partner, BtB

Increased collaboration among initiatives

Being part of the Inspiring Communities network has led to an increase in the culture of collaboration across our nested initiatives. Each initiative is based in its own community and context, and has its own focus area. Communities have been able to learn about and adopt ideas from other communities because we help to make connections among organizations.

Backbone teams of the collective impact nested initiatives meet regularly with IC's core team to exchange information, experiences, ideas, and contacts. They have developed common principles, policies and procedures. This collaboration culture extends to strong relationships with external partners.

Trust opens the door to collaboration

Our longest-term community initiative, Between the Bridges, is finding that the foundations of long term change are the trust, safety and processes that they have established through the first couple of years. These have allowed the diversity of residents and cross-sectoral organizations to come together, identify the purpose and focus of their time together, with clarity and accountability on who is doing what and getting things done. You can see this reflected in the outputs thus far from the BtB Network.

Shared agendas and catalyzed action

Northside Rising has provided the backbone support needed to enhance collaboration, build trusting relationships, and embed a culture of evaluation across shared agendas. In the process it has brought partners together around a variety of initiatives, both those it is leading such as the Substance Use Roundtable, Northside Community Coalition and the Northside Changemakers Program, and those initiated by others, such as an arts-based mental health project and a mental health training initiative for first responders.

The growing capacity of the backbone team to engage community, foster collaboration and catalyze action has also attracted attention from agencies based outside of the Northside.

- The Cape Breton Regional Municipality approached Northside Rising to help facilitate community engagement on a mainstreet renewal initiative being supported by the provincial government
- Cape Breton University invited Northside Rising to join a poverty reduction working group organizing a conference with a mental health and addictions focus.

The relationships being developed with such partners are opening doors to other collaborative initiatives that support Northside renewal.

Collaborating on food systems issues across the region

WeavEast has coordinated and shared work that addresses regional system issues. Backbone staff offered what was needed from coordination to meeting facilitation. The food security conversation coordinated by WeavEast resulted in tangible and ongoing outcomes including a vision document: [Atlantic Canadian Food Systems: A Vision for a Just Recovery](#). Continuing into 2021, this group plans to meet and organize a campaign to get signatories and build momentum with local-decision makers.



At its quarterly retreat, the NSR Backbone Team reviewed progress and plans for the next steps.



Supported communities in taking collective action in response to the pandemic



Sometimes our focus on the long term work of systems change must shift in response to emergent and urgent needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has definitely been a defining moment for the world, and our communities' requirements have changed, and continue to change, in response to it. As a network, we supported communities in taking collective action in response to the pandemic, specifically addressing concerns around food security, digital inclusion, isolation, and health.

Digital inclusion, food security, health and coordinating resources in Dartmouth North

The Between the Bridges Network has been actively working to support community members of Dartmouth North affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between the Bridges virtually convened regular meetings, inviting more than 45 organizations that serve Dartmouth North, creating the Dartmouth North Organizations (DNO). The meetings offered groups the opportunity to pool resources, avoid duplication and amplify each others' work.

Immediately after the first lockdown in March 2020, Between the Bridges moved to provide home internet access and computers to a handful of BtB Network members who could not afford them. Early meetings of the DNO made it clear that the challenge of supporting people in need when they can't get online was being experienced by all the organizations in the community. Supported by BtB, several network members developed the GEO Project: Getting Everyone Online, providing free home internet and devices to households experiencing digital exclusion.

As some food bank patrons were unable to visit the food bank, Between the Bridges was asked to convene three Dartmouth North food banks, the Public Good Society & Feed Nova Scotia. Together they created a food-delivery system that served homebound clients of local food banks. Before long, another partnership was also created to include GF options in the food deliveries.

Leveraging their community networks and connections, Between the Bridges supported community health services and COVID-19 testing sites. They facilitated rapid communication between pop-up testing organizers and HRM facilities to secure a location, and also advised on plain language wording for posters and flyers to reduce barriers.

Responding to the social isolation experienced by residents, Between the Bridges has been hosting weekly Zoom Socials, including trivia.

Learn more about Inspiring Communities' COVID response program that helped feed school children in the case study on page 10.

GEO project results

- 40 home internet accounts provided
- 50 computers + accessories delivered
- 7 organizations as referral partners

GEO Nova Scotia created to connect up to 500 households across NS in 2021

“The coordination of the food delivery system has allowed us to reach clients ... in a more efficient and a more effective way. And each food bank was assisting the other food bank to reach a maximum number of clients in a maximum efficient way.”

- Community Sector Leader, Dartmouth

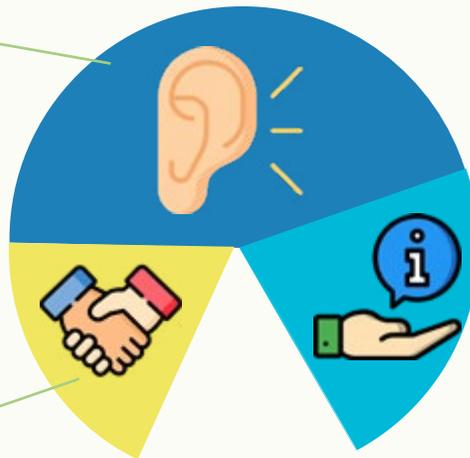
Ambassadors reach out and help in Digby

In the same spirit, Turning the Tide enlisted their Community Ambassadors to connect with residents and help them cope with COVID restrictions. Between April to July, seven Community Ambassadors connected with 194 people in their local areas, helping them access resources and assistance and providing a comforting listening ear.

What community ambassadors in Digby helped with:

45% needed a listening ear; people were worried, stressed, and needed to talk to someone.

15% big and little steps to help people address a very wide range of problems
- finding someone to do yard work,
helping with internet problems,
organizing community activities,
assembling and delivering goody bags for seniors and children etc.



22% information and referrals on everything from grocery delivery to COVID-19 information, child care options, and medical alert service.



"In the meantime, I found her a young gentleman to mow her yard."

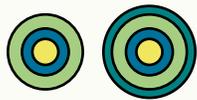
"No work, no money, no rent money, no money for her power bill, no money for her cell phone."

"She needed bunk beds for her children; I found some bunk beds for her."

- Community Ambassadors on reaching out to residents during COVID, Digby



Shifted the Narrative



There are a set of stories that we live within, and sometimes changing them is one of the hardest impacts to make. In 2020, it seemed like world events were conspiring to shift the narratives by which we live. As Leonard Cohen sang, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Changing these stories is high-level systems change, and seeing this kind of impact is promising. Shifting narratives is also a subtle undercurrent in many of the other projects we’ve mentioned: for instance, Digby’s youth are challenging a perception that youth require direction from adults. Between the Bridges has rewritten a standing ‘truth’ that in their community that organizations tend to work in isolation, staying “in their own lanes” by showing collaboration is possible.

Weaving a new story

In the spring of 2020 the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests disrupted the continuity of dominant narratives. The Narrative Project began hosting an online space that invited alternative stories to shine through the cracks—stories that inspired, nourished, challenged and provoked.

The Photovoice methodology saw youth capture images depicting their feelings around what it means to be a “changemaker” in the Atlantic Youth Weavers (AYW) Photovoice Project. The project highlighted their experiences and reflections related to community and global change, social innovation, the sustainable development goals, and the importance of bridging experiences and communities as we move toward a ‘new normal.’ AYW also critically explored diverse and intersectional perspectives, as the youth applied (and continue to apply) Photovoice project learnings to advocate for their vision.

The Narrative Project
333
unique registrants
58
average attendance
per session



Youth from around the region contributed photos and their reflections

Northside, home of hope and agency

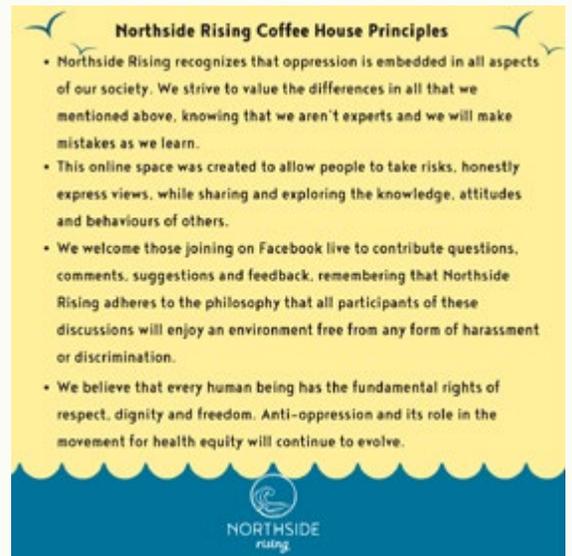
“The most important contribution to date is the feeling of hope that comes in when they speak about it; the changing of a mindset. It is hope and knowing there is support for the community coming together, and that we can fix our communities ourselves; that understanding and mentality is wonderful.”

-Community participant

From the outset of its work, Northside Rising has been seeking to understand the challenges and the opportunities facing Northside residents. On the one hand, this has meant identifying key issues of interest to local people; on the other, understanding dynamics that either help or hinder the community’s development. In the spring of 2020, Northside Rising formulated a ‘[framework for change](#)’ that could hold both aspects of its work. It envisions the Northside as “a community of changemakers, with an abundance of hope and a sense of agency, working together to affect positive change,” and identifies three roles for Northside Rising: creating supportive social infrastructure; mobilizing community; and writing an empowering narrative of community life.

After a review panel of local residents enthusiastically supported these ideas, work began to put them into action.

- The Invictus research project is developing a baseline understanding of the state of hope and agency on the Northside.
- The [Northside Changemakers Program](#) is creating an opportunity for local changemakers to build their skills and initiate new projects. Stories of local changemakers have been shared on social media.
- The [Northside Virtual Coffeehouse](#) is creating a space for more people to learn about local issues and consider their involvement.
- The Northside Community Coalition is providing a space where local leaders can connect and support one another to achieve positive change.

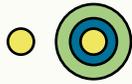


In the process, hundreds of people are being encouraged to think about hope and agency as a key facet of community life – What gives us hope? What gets in the way? How do we strengthen the sense of hope and agency on the Northside?





Strengthening Evaluation Capacity



Evaluation and learning are woven throughout our work. Inspiring Communities is a leader in Developmental Evaluation (DE) in Nova Scotia. Increasingly, we are viewed as a resource for evaluation, and organizations are reaching out for support with their evaluation work. Therefore, we have focused on increasing:

- capacity for Developmental Evaluation among evaluators, through a DE Community of Practice, Learning Circle for new evaluators, and direct mentoring by the IC evaluation team; and
- receptivity for DE in the province and beyond.

Impacts we have seen include:

- A growing DE Community of Practice meets bi-monthly to share tools & resources, and includes 24 evaluators from community organizations, government, and the private sector in this region.
- Initiatives engage in systematic tracking of activities and results, a practice fostered by provided evaluation tracking & reporting tools.

Inspiring Communities supports evaluators working with other organizations through meetings, mentorship, education and being included in events and communications among the Inspiring Communities network. We also offer evaluation services for the government's Poverty Reduction Blueprint.

Finding themes in poverty reduction work

With the Poverty Reduction Blueprint work, developmental evaluation has enabled government partners to hear from those impacted by government policies and programs. This citizen-centered approach is well aligned with the direction the government would like to take.

The Poverty Reduction Blueprint Evaluation has identified “promising practices”, practices or characteristics that emerged as integral to the success of several poverty reduction practices. These practices emerged as themes during community conversations, focus groups and other first-voice interactions. A list of these has been shared across government departments as a tool for accountability and reporting.

Within government there is an increasing appetite and gravitation towards the learnings that come from first person experiences and qualitative research. Our partners express appreciation that developmental evaluation allows a capturing of wisdom that is intangible through quantitative approaches.

“Working with an organization like IC - that already has the tools and skills to engage first voice in a meaningful, culturally sensitive and relational approach - has been very important in being able to bring that first voice forward to government decision makers.”

- Government partner working in poverty reduction.

“Initially, a few years ago, we were always asked ‘so, what did you do? What are the numbers? Has poverty been alleviated?’ Now there is more willingness and interest in hearing the stories and in hearing that first voice.”

- Government partner working in poverty reduction



[Click to download the report.](#)

“Developmental Evaluation provides the necessary approach to stay connected and grounded with what is important: asking ourselves, why and how all throughout the research project. It is important to have a third party to ask the questions to assist us to be conscious at every stage of impact.”

- CFY/NL-WIC project lead.

Working on reconciliation through principles-based evaluating

To conduct the evaluation of the Participatory Cities project Every One Every Day (EOED), Inspiring Communities hired a Mi'kmaw woman. She is working as a member of the Inspiring Communities Evaluation Team, where she is supported in building her evaluation knowledge and practice, and she is helping others to understand evaluation from a Mi'kmaw worldview.

With the EOED initiative, Inspiring Communities brought a principles-focused evaluation approach, which allowed the project team to evaluate the way they are working together toward reconciliation, and not just the things they accomplish together.

To create a set of principles that would incorporate both Euro-Canadian thought and Indigenous knowledge, an Elder with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre first shared the Seven Grandfather/Grandmother Teachings from her Anishinaabe tradition. Then the Strategic Working Group members worked with the project evaluator through a process that drew on the evaluator's knowledge of the Mi'kmaw Seven Sacred teachings to create a set of principles that appreciates both Euro-Canadian and Indigenous worldviews. These principles were created using the teaching introduced by Elder Albert Marshall of Eskasoni of “Two-eyed Seeing”, or in Mi'kmaw, “Etuaptmumk”. This process of principle development served as not only an exchange of knowledge and an example of collaborative government, but also a step in the advancement of reconciliation.

Reaching Newfoundland through evaluation

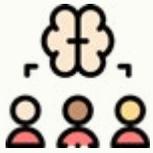
Choices for Youth is a project in Newfoundland with which we are connected through the evaluator. Through adopting the evaluator as an extended part of the Inspiring Communities team, we have been able to share knowledge and build capacity in St. John's and demonstrate the effectiveness of Developmental Evaluation to a new set of communities.

The DE process allowed the Choices for Youth team clarity, perspective, and insight into decision making with various forms of data and research. The team was able to see failures in the process as learning successes and opportunities to pivot. It also allowed for trust building within the communities where youth were consulted by providing the assurance that their first voice would be captured, as well with the community leaders that facilitated the consultations who were given opportunities to continue the dialogue.

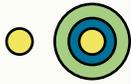
Case Study

In September 2020, researcher Andrea Redmond wrote an as-yet unpublished case study about Inspiring Communities called *An appreciative inquiry case study of evaluation practice in a non-profit organization: Discovering the factors of sustained practice.*

An important recurring point raised by almost all participants was the awareness of and appreciation for having space and time for learning and for failure. The following comment was expressed similarly by other participants: “When working on things, the emphasis is on shaping the direction of the work, and being okay with failure or things going wrong and making the time for reflection and resetting direction for the piece of work.” Aligned with this notion of having safe space is the idea of evaluation information being used positively, not punitively, to help mine the full experience of the initiatives, “to value the things that don't work out”. Participants also expressed a common organizational value of openness and staff being comfortable with the uncomfortable. As one person noted, people are supported to say, “I don't know, don't know how to approach this.”



Building a Culture of Learning



Inspiring Communities has built a strong culture of learning among core staff and the collective impact initiatives. This is in part due to evaluation, but also to an organizational policy that supports learning and development through providing PD funds and monthly learning sessions. This culture of learning creates a space of curiosity, creativity, experimentation, and safety for taking risks and trying new things. It allows teams to share ‘mistakes’, reflect on what they’ve learned, and adapt their practice going forward. As a result of IC’s focus on learning:

- All initiatives have engaged in reflective practices to support ongoing learning, and they adapt, and redirect efforts as needed as a result of reflections
- Learning is inherent at tables where different groups come together to share and discuss sector-specific content to help deepen understanding about specific topics
- Intentional reflection and learning is modeled
- Staff are equipped with better knowledge and understanding around diversity and equity, settler education, antiracism, and grief and loss.



Partnerships

Collaboration is integral to all our work. In addition to these partners listed, we would like to extend warmest gratitude to all the organizations, government departments and companies whose involvement, support and interest have helped further our work and that of our initiatives.

Community Sector Council - Nova Scotia

We partnered with the CSC-NS to survey community sector organizations to determine their ongoing capacity requirements in light of the pandemic.

Digby Area Recreation Centre

The Digby Area Youth Space is a partnership with the Digby Area Recreation Centre.

East Preston Empowerment Academy

Wayside partnered to present the Public and Professional Speaking Course.

Engage Nova Scotia

Wayside partnered to host The Meet-Up, part of Engage's Quality of Life work.

How We Thrive

Partnered with WeavEast in hosting the Narrative Project.

Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, Halifax Partnership and Participatory Canada

Every One. Every Day. Wije'winen was a partnership with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, Halifax Partnership and Participatory Canada – an initiative co-funded by the McConnell Foundation and Employment and Social Development Canada as part of the Government of Canada's Investment Readiness Program, and in partnership with Participatory City Foundation, UK.

Nova Scotia Government

The Province of Nova Scotia is an integral partner in our collective impact initiatives, Turning the Tide, Between the Bridges and Northside Rising. We also partner with the Province of Nova Scotia to evaluate projects funded through its Poverty Reduction Blueprint work. Finally, our co-located partnership with NS Govlab supports the Nova Scotia Network for Social Change.

Office Partners

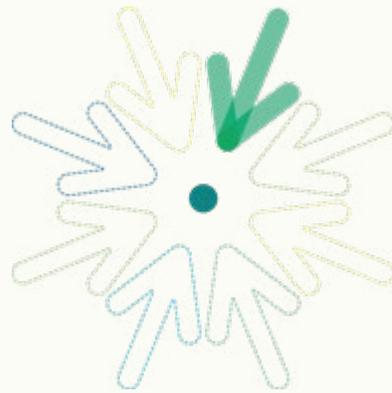
We are proud to co-locate in our Grafton Street office with Community Links, NS GovLab and ONSIDE. This relationship creates conditions for both intentional relationship building and creative collisions.

Social Innovation Canada

National partners in building the Canadian Social Innovation ecosystem

Tamarack Institute

Turning the Tide partnered with Tamarack Institute in the Community Building Youth Futures initiative in Digby.



What's Next

With our new Executive Director now on board, the next year will be a key one in Inspiring Communities' development. We are developing strategic direction through strategic planning, determining how best to move forward longer-term while also executing our current fiscal operational plan. We will continue developing capacity for, and amplifying existing, equity-based systems change work in Atlantic Canada.

Over the next year, we aim to:

- Validate our vision and approach through engaging with our communities, partners, peers and collaborators, and affirm our commitment to our strategic directions.
- Build and strengthen our partnerships across the region and across sectors, with a conscious effort to be proactively inclusive. These relationships provide the scaffolding to increase and amplify collaborative community change efforts.
- Refocus our efforts on supporting and amplifying the voices of changemakers through weaving the Atlantic Canadian Changemakers network.
- Work with our communities, collaborators and partners to scale up and fortify capacity for systems change across the region.
- Continue to learn, reflect, and share our insights with the changemaking community, to nourish our practice and fuel trust.



Abbreviations Used

BtB - Between the Bridges

DAYS - Digby Area Youth Space

DE - Developmental Evaluation

DNO - Dartmouth North Organizations

EOED - Every One. Every Day. Participatory Cities project

GEO - Getting Everyone Online

IC - Inspiring Communities

NS GovLab - Nova Scotia GovLab

NSN4SC - Nova Scotia Network for Social Change

NSR - Northside Rising

PWLLE - people with lived and living experience

PWUD - people who use drugs

ToC - Theory of Change

TtT - Turning the Tide

WE - WeavEast

WS - Wayside

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