

POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY? From Service-based to  
Community-Led

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**Abstract**

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are increasingly turning to social innovation as a transformative approach to complex social challenges such as inequality, social exclusion, and poverty. However, there is increasing evidence of external constraints that restrict the ability of NPOs to implement transformative approaches within their current processes. Work remains to be done in identifying the specific interventions, challenges, and impacts of turning to social innovation within current structures. This thesis critically examines the tensions of moving from a service-based NPO model to a community-led structure using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) case study grounded in the transformative paradigm. Focusing on a pilot program within a Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL), the study investigates how a NPO fostered community engagement. This thesis argues that the CSIL's participatory methods were shaped by a complex interplay between grassroots engagement and institutional motives. While the lab created spaces for collaboration among diverse stakeholders, pressures related to funding, legitimacy, and discursive framing influenced how "community" was defined and whose priorities were centered, resulting in both opportunities for inclusion and constraints on deeper transformation. Drawing on critical literature, this study contributes to an evolving conversation on how community-driven initiatives can move from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation through shared visioning, equitable planning, and deep accountability.

*Keywords: nonprofits, social innovation, participatory action research, community engagement*

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**List of Acronyms**

<b>ABCD</b>	Asset-based Community Development
<b>CBE</b>	Community-based Enterprises
<b>CE</b>	Community Economies
<b>CRC</b>	Community Resource Centre
<b>CSIL</b>	Community Social Innovation Lab
<b>NPO</b>	Nonprofit Organization
<b>PAR</b>	Participatory Action Research
<b>PPP</b>	Pilot Program Participants

## Chapter I: Introduction

The war will end.

The leaders will shake hands.

The old woman will keep waiting for her martyred son.

The girl will wait for her beloved husband.

And those children will wait for their hero father.

I don't know who sold our homeland,

But I saw who paid the price.

- *Mahmoud Darwish*

In the battle against social challenges, such as systemic inequality, social exclusion, and poverty, social innovation has gained traction as a promising collaborative and solution-oriented approach for tackling social issues. This is especially pivotal in situations where traditional service models have been inadequate. Promising to disrupt entrenched systems and promote inclusive development, social innovation is increasingly endorsed across nonprofit, public, and philanthropic sectors (Moulaert, 2010). Its emphasis on participatory engagement and inclusion offers community-oriented organizations a pathway for fostering social transformation (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2016).

In this study, social innovation, refers to new strategies and structures that challenge existing power dynamics and create more inclusive, community-led solutions (Westley & Antadze, 2024). Many organizations and institutions adopt this view of social innovation as a framework for reimagining hierarchical governance structures as well as complex power relations (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2016). However, despite its progressive rhetoric, the language and implementation of social innovation often reflect dominant discourses rooted in neoliberal market ideology (Jimenez et al., 2025; Tracey & Stott, 2017). These tensions are particularly evident in the nonprofit sector, where organizations are expected to both respond to grassroots needs and simultaneously navigate internal and external challenges (Burns et al., 2011; Cooke & Kothari, 2007; Cornwall, 2008; Dover & Lawrence, 2012).

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Despite the increasing visibility of social innovation in policy and practice, there remains a critical gap in understanding how nonprofit organizations reconcile the contradictory demands of participatory engagement and institutional legitimacy. This tension is highlighted by structural constraints faced by NPOs, such as funder demands, the pursuit of legitimacy, and time-pressure, eventually resulting in a narrowed definition of community and presumptions about community needs. While innovative participatory approaches offer opportunities for deeper community engagement, nonprofits implementing these changes must compete with systemic barriers that often reinforce existing inequalities rather than dismantle them (Cooke & Kothari, 2007; Cornwall, 2008; Dover & Lawrence, 2012; Gibson & Dombroski, 2020). Therefore, the challenge for NPOs is to both elevate the voices of community members while continuing to advocate on their behalf (Cornwall, 2008, p 282).

This research addresses this tension by examining how innovation discourse and organizational imperatives can both enable and constrain community-led transformation. Framed through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) case study, this thesis explores how a Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL), a project of a local NPO, engages multiple stakeholders (including youth, local residents, organizational staff, subject-matter experts, volunteers, funders, and external organizational partners) in participatory processes of knowledge generation, program design, and community development. As an embedded researcher, I occupy a dual role in the study: both as a participant in the lab's activities and as a critical observer of its practices. My positionality which is shaped by pre-existing relationships within the organization and the community, has informed all stages of the research, from data collection to analysis. This reflexive practice aligns with PAR's commitment to co-produced, situated knowledge.

### **Objective and Research Questions**

The aim of this study is to critically examine how an NPO navigates the tension between participatory ideals and structural constraints during its transition from a traditional, service-based model to a community-led social innovation lab. The case study presented here offers a valuable opportunity to analyze the practical and political dimensions of shifting toward community-driven governance structures and to interrogate how these efforts are shaped by wider institutional forces. By focusing on the methods used to engage diverse stakeholders, the study explores how innovation discourse, funding pressures, and legitimacy shape the design, implementation, and

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perceived impact of community engagement initiatives. Ultimately, the thesis asks: under what conditions can social innovation live up to its transformative promise, and what role can nonprofits play in creating those conditions?

To address the overarching question, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the initiatives taken by the nonprofit to promote community-driven projects?
- What are the challenges faced by the nonprofit in implementing community-driven projects?
- What is the perceived impact on the community from these attempts?

Specifically, this study investigates the ways in which participatory strategies are used to promote community engagement and make space for the inclusion of community knowledge. It also sheds light on the challenges and tensions faced by organizations attempting such shifts, from internal organizational challenges to the pressures of aligning with funder expectations and the depoliticizing effects of market-oriented language (Jimenez et al., 2025; LeRoux, 2009; Spicer et al., 2019).

The analysis is informed by broader debates in critical nonprofit studies, community-based enterprises theory, and social innovation discourse, contributing to a growing body of literature that interrogates the power dynamics embedded in efforts to “empower” communities. By documenting the experiences of one nonprofit’s process of transitioning from a service-based organization to a community-*led* organization, this thesis offers insights into how community engagement can be practiced with authenticity and integrity, and how that can be compromised or constrained by institutional forces. The findings speak to both the opportunities and limitations of participatory approaches in NPO contexts, offering practical and theoretical contributions to advance knowledge on community-led governance in practice.

### **Definition of Terms**

This section defines two contestable terms that sit at the crux of this research: community and social innovation. Community carries multiple interpretations that shift depending on the

context. Social innovation is a loaded term, deployed recently to signal progress while masking the political complexities of innovation.

### *Community*

Community is conceptualized in the literature in a variety of ways, often emphasizing spatial and relational aspects. Bacq, Hertel, & Lumpkin (2022) identify communities of place, identity, fate, interest, and practice, noting frequent overlap between spatial and identity-based communities. Peredo and Chrisman (2006, 2017) define community as an “aggregation of people” who share a geographical location, accompanied by a shared ethnicity or culture, and shaped by “shared relational characteristics”. They further emphasize the concept of “community orientation,” which refers to the extent to which a group balances the rights and well-being of individuals with the collective interests and needs of the community as a whole (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006, 2017).

Bacq et al. (2022) note that communities of place are often most seen with communities of identity (as demonstrated in Peredo & Chrisman (2006, 2017)). In this regard, communities of identity and fate can be conceptualized by their political characteristics. Guo and Musso (2007) reflect on the multi-constituency nature of nonprofits, asserting that the community is not necessarily limited to geographical location or identity, but by sharing in the practice of community decision making and also being able to benefit from it (2007, p.310). Marquis and Battilana (2009) highlight that the boundaries of a local community are not always clearly delineated and may not coincide with political or administrative boundaries (p. 285). Instead, communities can be defined by social interactions, shared cultural elements, and geographic proximity (Marquis & Battilana, 2009). In Marquis & Battilana’s paper, they “regard the community level of analysis as a local level of analysis corresponding to the populations, organizations, and markets located in a geographic territory and sharing, as a result of their common location, elements of local culture, norms, identity, and laws”(Marquis & Battilana, 2009, p. 286).

The focus of the study on a local nonprofit allows for these dimensions to be embraced as the defining structure for understanding community, inclusive of partnerships and organizations across multiple levels. This study also relies on the spatial and political definitions of

communities, in line with Peredo & Chrisman's (2006, 2017) research on the emergence of CBEs in areas with histories of political organizing.

### ***Social Innovation***

Social innovation (SI) is an emergent, disruptive, and largely unpredictable process that arises in response to a crisis, institutional failure to address acute problems, or entirely new societal situations (Klein et al., 2013; Westley et al., 2014). SI seeks to achieve social, economic, and environmental well-being through the development of new social norms, activities, relationships, and outcomes (Chalmers, 2013; Hossein, 2021; Mulgan, 2006; Pol & Ville, 2009). Historically, its origins can be traced back to political contexts such as the French Revolution, where it first emerged as a transformative force for social restructuring (Godin, 2012 as cited by Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012).

From a critical geography Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2013) emphasize the role of social innovation as a site of possibility: embedded within grassroots movements, organizations, and local communities. SI is understood as a transformative process that has the potential to cause profound structural and cultural changes within social systems, disrupt entrenched inequalities, and reconfigure institutional arrangements (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2016; Klein et al., 2013; Westley et al., 2014; Westley & Antadze, 2024). However, these changes rarely occur without significant upheavals and require the active participation of society as a whole (Klein et al., 2013; Westley & Antadze, 2024).

The collaborative nature of social innovation in the context of NPOs can be explored through Toivonen's (2016) conceptual definition of a *Social Innovation Community*:

'An emergent collaborative organization characterized by entrepreneurial projects, loosely shared change-making cultures as well as online/offline spaces; it continuously facilitates informal but productive interactions between relatively diverse actors, most of whom share an interest in social innovation (in a broad sense) and in open collaboration beyond the bounds of any single organization or narrowly defined issue.' (p.63).

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For Peredo et. al (2019) social innovation should not be reduced to creating new markets or products; it is about transforming social relations, addressing marginalization, and strengthening collective well-being. Dacin & Dacin (2019) suggest that *collective social innovation* is when communities, grounded in their local identity and relationships, creatively use their own resources to address needs and opportunities. In this regard, collective social innovation is as much about the way people work together as it is about the results, and it changes how power and resources circulate within the community.

This conceptualization is relevant to the context of this research, which in part examines the collaborative process of a nonprofit organization in its community social innovation efforts. Here, social innovation is not confined to a single organization or initiative but unfolds across networks of actors, including nonprofits, public and private partners, and community members, all engaged in co-creating solutions to complex social challenges. This framing also supports the study's focus on how nonprofit actors navigate and influence these dynamics while striving to democratize social change processes.

### **Summary**

This section provided an overview of the study, highlighting the challenges faced by nonprofits in transitioning to community-based social innovation while navigating external constraints. It begins from the central problem that while social innovation is framed as participatory and empowering, in practice it can reproduce power asymmetries, prioritize external legitimacy, and marginalize local knowledge.

This study is situated in the broader debates of nonprofit governance, neoliberal restructuring, and the role of nonprofits in society as civic intermediaries. Within this context, the thesis explores how a nonprofit organization's transition into a community social innovation lab illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of participatory innovation.

The research questions that guide the study are:

- What are the initiatives taken by the nonprofit to promote community-driven projects?

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- What are the challenges faced by the nonprofit in implementing community-driven projects?
- What is the perceived impact on the community from these attempts?

Guided by principles from community-based enterprises (CBE), community economies (CE), and asset-based community development (ABCD), the research applies a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology grounded in the transformative paradigm. This approach centers co-production of knowledge, reflection, and relational accountability, making it well-suited to examine the tensions between stated participatory ideals and actual organizational practices.

By addressing these questions, the thesis aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about how nonprofits can move from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation, resisting depoliticization, and fostering genuine community-led governance in practice.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

This chapter situates the case study within two intersecting bodies of scholarship: critical nonprofit studies, which examine organizational legitimacy, accountability, and the pressures of marketization; and social innovation, which explores innovation and participatory methods as transformative but susceptible to co-option by neoliberal market ideology. By integrating these bodies of literature, this literature review identifies the structural and institutional dynamics that shape the processes of community engagement and community-led innovation.

### **Critical Nonprofit Studies**

The emergence of nonprofit organizations in recent decades represents a significant evolution in addressing societal needs, often arising from gaps left by market mechanisms and state provisions. This rapid growth can be attributed to three interconnected forces, as identified by Salamon (1994): grassroots organizing, the influence of public/private institutions, and evolving government policies. Grassroots efforts are exemplified by the rise of activists and community groups, while public/private institutions, such as churches, have actively advocated for social justice. Furthermore, government policies, notably those enacted during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, supported the voluntary sector as a means of reducing public expenditure (Salamon, 1994, p. 114).

However, understanding the global formation of nonprofit associations is more complex than a simple economic model or a detailed historical account can capture, as such approaches often lack generalizability. To address this, Salamon and Anheier (1998) propose a "social origins" model, which accounts for the diverse ideological pillars and funding models upon which nonprofits worldwide are built. For instance, in liberal regimes like the United States and the United Kingdom, private philanthropy tends to be higher, supporting a greater number of service-providing nonprofits. Conversely, social democracies such as Sweden and Italy feature fewer nonprofits, where they primarily serve advocacy roles due to the prevalence of government-funded social supports (Salamon & Anheier, 1998, p. 243). Therefore, to gain a holistic understanding of a nonprofit, historical, economic, social, and political underlying factors must be considered.

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As non-governmental organizations, NPOs serve as intermediaries shaping civil society through collective and action (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012). However, Salamon (1994) argues that despite promoting agency and mutual aid, they remain structured organizations. This is evident in the vast literature that attempts to categorize nonprofits under common structures. Nonprofits have been explored in the context of voluntary organizations (Chao Guo & Musso, 2007; Salamon, 1994), hybrid organizations (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Hoffman et al., 2010), social enterprises (Hertel et al., 2019; Mair & Martí, 2006) , and social entrepreneurship ventures (Austin et al., 2006; Westley et al., 2014). These organizational and management views support the idea that nonprofits may have multiple goals, beyond economic ones (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2016; Peredo, 2001; Somerville & McElwee, 2011) . NPOs have also been described as the incubator for many social movements in various sectors which reflects their ability to create positive social value (Kluver, 2014; Salamon, 1994; Schneider, 2008).

### **The Marketization of Nonprofits**

Nonprofit organizations operate within a complex ecosystem influenced by funding mechanisms, policy frameworks, and societal needs (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Rubin, 1995). The shift from existing hierarchical models to participatory structures requires transformation at an organizational level in both structure and procedures to redefine power dynamics and create hope in the communities they serve (Rubin, 1995; Shier et al., 2019).

The influence of funders on NPOs is not understated in the literature. Bush (1992) argues that nonprofits should remain mission-driven rather than succumb to marketization and funder pressure pressures. Similarly, in the seminal paper describing the “moral legitimacy” perspective behind social enterprises, and nonprofits specifically, Dart (2004) argues that social enterprises adopt a pro-market ideology that legitimizes their pursuit of commercialization and revenue generation. Eikenberry and Kluver (2004) elaborate further, arguing that the marketization of nonprofits through social entrepreneurship pathways has led to several risks to civil society such as: compromise of mission-related activities that aren’t profitable, recruitment of board members with ties to businesses rather than community, focus on the bottom line, and a lesser need to rely on

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traditional stakeholders and networks since they have other means of revenue generation (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004, p. 135).

Authors contend that support from the business sector is rarely altruistic and generally comes with an expectation of influence over policies and direction of the receiving organization (Bush, 1992; Guo et al., 2014; Rubin, 1995). Nonprofits may take direction from board members who are prominent members of the local business environment and advocate for running things business-like (Bush, 1992, p. 296). Furthermore, operating in a business-like manner allows nonprofits to create demand and become more entrepreneurial and customer oriented (Bush, 1992; Lim et al., 2024). However, the effects of NPOs becoming more business-like have implications for organizational processes, including a shift from community-building and advocacy towards service delivery, and an adaptation of neoliberal language (Dart, 2004; Maier et al., 2016).

Many nonprofit organizations (NPOs) face significant external and internal constraints that can impact their mission and operations. The struggle with limited resources and managerial inefficiency, makes them susceptible to competition and transactional relationships with other organizations (J. A. Alexander & Weiner, 1998; Bush, 1992). In fact, the funding structures and board hierarchies of many NPOs have been criticized for reinforcing power disparities between organizations and the communities they serve (Berrone et al., 2016; Westley & Antadze, 2024), further contributing to a cycle of organizational, and thereby community, dependency for operation and funding (Boyd et al., 2008; Hessin, 2018; Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993). This financial reliance can further lead to an "advocacy chill," where NPOs become hesitant to critique governments due to fears of jeopardizing much-needed funding (Phillips, 2006, p. 26). Such constraints can limit the multi-purposed origins of nonprofits and shrink the space available for authentic civic engagement (Evans et al., 2005; Phillips, 2006).

To navigate these difficulties, cooperation and forming coalitions with other organizations are recognized as effective strategies (Bush, 1992; Lauffer, 1983 as cited by Bush, 1992). Such collaborations allow NPOs to advance their missions while maintaining support and recognizing shared objectives. It allows for accomplishing the organization's mission while maintaining support and helps nonprofits see they are fighting the same mission. Bush (1992) observes that nonprofit leaders, acting as risk-averse entrepreneurs, often prioritize low-risk initiatives to ensure

continued funding rather than venturing into innovative but uncertain programs. To counter the dominance imposed by funders, Rubin (1995) suggests three approaches: first, insisting on conditions that prioritize a community empowerment agenda; second, intentionally creating counterpressure through networks and alliances, sometimes described as "veiled advocacy"; and third, maintaining ideological steadfastness through strong commitment from organizational leaders (p. 151).

### **Social Innovation in Nonprofits**

Social innovation refers to new strategies, concepts, and organizational forms that address social needs more effectively than existing solutions (Mulgan et al., 2007). They address issues at the institutional or systems-level, so they hold more potential for transformative and rippling effects (Moulaert, 2010; Shier et al., 2019; Westley & Antadze, 2024). Within the nonprofit sector, social innovation is driven by collaborative networks, co-creation with stakeholders, and adaptive leadership (Westley et al., 2013). The transition toward democratic nonprofit models aligns with social innovation principles by fostering community participation in decision-making (Moore & Westley, 2011). Research highlights the importance of leadership that cultivates shared vision and distributed decision-making as key enablers of nonprofit innovation (Phills et al., 2008). For example, Lim et al. (2024) suggest that nonprofit learning and innovation efforts contribute to the success of community engagement efforts, which include “promoting a sense of community, bringing people of diverse backgrounds together, and bonding through a shared sense of belonging” (Lim et al., 2024, p. 223).

Shier and Handy (2015) highlight that examining social change through the lens of social innovation reveals the diverse ways in which direct service nonprofits contribute to transformation within their communities and for those they serve. As told by respondents from their study, social change is not limited to advocacy efforts but is also driven by deliberate change initiatives implemented across multiple areas, ranging from individual service users and specific programs to organizational structures, community networks, and broader socio-political contexts (Shier & Handy, 2015, p. 2601). This perspective underscores the proactive role that direct service nonprofits play in fostering change, positioning them as agents of transformation rather than

reactionary agencies responding to inequitable policy environments (Hardina, 2006; Shier & Handy, 2015).

### **Participation in Nonprofits**

Participation in NPOs is a complex and contentious task, often shaped by power relations, inclusions, and exclusions (Cornwall, 2008). In the context of social innovation, the main objective of community participation in social innovation is not merely to include community members, but to transfer power and affect policy changes (Novy & Leubolt, 2005, p. 2031). The success of these measures therefore ultimately depends on addressing these power dynamics in the context where they are practiced (Cornwall, 2008).

Reestablishing nonprofits as political pillars in their communities fundamentally require the establishment of strong ties to community members and advancing participant voices from the ground up (J. Alexander & Fernandez, 2021; Chao Guo & Musso, 2007; Haugh & O'Carroll, 2019). This approach to social innovation is not limited to external actors only; in fact, Hulgård & Shajahan (2013) emphasize ensuring the active involvement of the relevant communities in governance and knowledge generation through collaboration at multiple levels (2013, p. 97). This also includes intraorganizational strategies, as highlighted by Shier et al. (2019), who identify key practices such as incorporating decision making at all levels, staff training, and transformation of hiring practices (such as hiring people who “push boundaries”) as the imperative variables for effective social innovation.

Shier et al. (2019) go on to underscore that they are “overlapping and mutually reinforcing conditions” which contribute to their effectiveness (p. 187). The true power of social innovation is in its process of addressing fundamental needs and improving social interactions through empowering processes (Moulaert, 2010). Ultimately, the goal of these strategies is to alter the circumstances of marginalization and powerlessness through networking and cooperation (Hulgård & Shajahan, 2013, p. 100).

### **Forms of Community Development and their Implications**

Development scholars Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan (2012), offer an analysis of different forms of community development which help illuminate differing views of development

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for improving community well-being: imposed, directed, and self-help. *Imposed* forms focus on the development of physical and or technological infrastructure, which would typically be completed by governments (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012, p. 298). *Directed* forms of community development, however, involve some community participation but are primarily guided by external stakeholders, focusing on either structural or interactional improvements. In the directed form, a local organization or municipality, for example, would offer the opportunity for local residents to participate by providing feedback or ideas on the improvement of a physical space (2012, p 299).

Finally, *self-help* forms are community-led, emphasizing grassroots participation, relationship building, and empowerment, leading to higher levels of learning, innovation, and sustainability (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012, p. 298).

The authors suggest that all types of improvements are essential for comprehensive community development, as they address different but complementary aspects of a community's well-being. However, the authors note that imposed and directed forms of community development fail to empower local residents for sustained action (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012). As stated by Westley and Antadze (2024), the exclusion of a significant portion of the population from fundamental economic and ecological services makes society as a whole more vulnerable to crises and less resilient. Westley and Antadze view disenfranchised populations as a “key source of diversity and important resource for social innovation” (Westley & Antadze, 2024, p. 6). Social innovation is a key mechanism in the inclusion of vulnerable populations back into the fabric of the community as active agents in their well-being rather than recipients of services (Sen, 1981, as cited in Westley and Antadze, 2024, p.5). Moreover, it is essential to view communities as capable of solving their own problems (Mulgan, 2006).

While Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan’s (2012) typology distinguishes clearly between imposed, directed, and self-help models, nonprofits can operate across all three forms. In practice, their position between state, market, and community allows them to facilitate *self-help* approaches through grassroots engagement and capacity building, but funding dependencies and institutional pressures can also situate them in *directed* or even *imposed* roles. This tension is particularly

pronounced when nonprofits are tasked with implementing externally designed programs under tight performance metrics, which can limit authentic participation and reinforce top-down decision-making. Understanding where a nonprofit's activities fall within this spectrum is therefore critical to assessing its role in community empowerment.

### **The Role of Non-Profits in Community Empowerment**

Nonprofits have the potential to enact socially transformative strategies that would contribute to increasing local capacity through participatory methods of engagement and civic action. Active participation and engagement of citizens is a key characteristic in democracies, ensuring that services and initiatives reflect local needs and priorities (R. Putnam, 1993; R. D. Putnam, 2000). Indeed, scholars emphasize that community agency is fundamental for cultivating local capacities, fostering resilience, and community development (Hardina, 2006; Haugh & O'Carroll, 2019; Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993). It requires building and sustaining connections across different social, economic, political, and cultural spheres, which work to unify the often-fragmented power of residents (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2016; Peredo and Chrisman 2006, 2017, Westley et al., 2014). However, dependency on philanthropic and government funding often limits nonprofits' ability to shift power to communities (J. Alexander et al., 1999; Bush, 1992; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). Furthermore, nonprofit professionals may struggle with balancing operational efficiency and participatory governance (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012).

Through their study, Alexandre et al. (1999) assert that nonprofits were places of active citizenship. However, the effect of neoliberalism and marketization of the sector is reflected in the depoliticization of nonprofits through austerity measures. Nonprofits are depleted through the shift from service delivery and advocacy to managerial and administrative concerns such as fundraising, grant writing and outcome measurement, which makes the intangible aspects of NPOs, tenuous (J. Alexander et al., 1999, p. 462). Rather than being able to educate and advocate, they are having to meet individual client demand instead of whole community needs. Resource dependency is cutting their capacity, fiscal resources, and staffing (Alexandre et al. 1999).

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Several authors recognize the critical role of nonprofits in society, citing the various roles they play for various communities and their distinction as a safe haven (Bush, 1992; Hossein, 2021; Leroux, 2007; Schneider, 2008). Bush (1992) writes:

“Organizations like nonprofits tie the individual into his or her community and help to reestablish the interconnectedness of citizens with one another. They help mitigate the diminished capacity of family, neighborhood, church, and other social institutions to perform critical socializing and humanizing functions. As such, they are to be cherished and protected from becoming little more than alternative forms of purely functional economic activity. Without such institutions as alternatives, economic activity itself becomes baseless, and individual life lacks critical defining purpose—a fate I prefer to avoid” (p. 404)

Chatterton et. al (2007) underscore the importance of this by explaining that such spaces offer an opportunity for difficult but transformational conversations and mutual learning; rather than fear them, they should be embraced for their potential to connect us to our human nature. It is in the spatial, political, and interactional dimensions of communities pursuing social innovation that the opportunities for confrontation and compromise between various actors emerge, leading to the development of new processes and initiatives ripe for social transformation (Klein et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the literature on nonprofits, social innovation, and community development underscored the significance of participatory governance in enhancing nonprofit effectiveness and legitimacy. While barriers to transitioning to community-led models persist, adaptive leadership, social innovation, and strategic approaches can facilitate meaningful change. Together, these insights suggest that the quality of participation in nonprofit-led SI initiatives depends on the interplay between institutional pressures, governance structures, and the discursive framing of innovation. This interplay provides the analytical lens through which the case study is examined.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed critical literature in nonprofit management and social innovation. It examined the marketization, social innovation, and participation in the context of nonprofits. Scholarship on the role of nonprofits in community development and empowerment are also

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explored. Overall, the literature review provides the foundation for understanding the opportunities and tensions that nonprofits face in their pursuit of community-driven social innovation.

### **Chapter III: Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research relies on principles from community-based enterprises, community economies, and asset-based community development (ABCD). This combination of theories allows for the exploration of alternative means of community development that are built on the foundations of self-determination. These perspectives, when combined, offer a comprehensive lens for understanding how local resources can be effectively utilized and redirected to serve collective well-being and empower communities from within. The following section discusses these theories in detail and their relevance to the study.

#### **Community-based Enterprises and Community Economies**

Literature on community economies and alternative forms of enterprises or governance structures are often viewed on a systems-level approach to overcoming inequality (Gibson-Graham, 2007; Peredo et al., 2018; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). These alternative forms of organizing and organizations are built on embedded economy principles that consider social, environmental, and economic contexts and assign autonomy in decision making to the communities suffering the consequences of the imposed neoliberal policies (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006, 2017). Peredo and Chrisman (2006) advance the argument that communities should not be treated as exogenous to the enterprise but rather, endogenous and embedded in the enterprise, forming a community-based enterprise (CBE). CBE's as defined by Peredo and Chrisman (2006) highlight the agency of local communities navigating business ventures collectively, with the primary goals being social, cultural, political and environmental. In this case, the community are self-organized and acts as active participants, owners, employees, and beneficiaries of the entrepreneurial venture, jointly producing and governing. The key aspects of CBEs are in their geographically-situated and defined community, their pursuit of multiple goals, and their structure of inclusive and democratic governance (Buratti et al., 2022; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Somerville & McElwee, 2011).

In the case of CBEs, entrepreneurship is the vehicle by which communities remain autonomous by maintaining their own self-governance structure, pursuing their own locally driven goals, and mobilizing local resources, which include tangible and intangible resources. It is a viable, community-driven strategy in overcoming environmental, economic, and social inequality

challenges (Bacq et al., 2022; Casper-Futterman & DeFilippis, 2017; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). The production of novel products and processes for CBEs is socially innovative in nature, helping provide a useful frame of reference for imagining new possibilities of funding and governance in non-profit structures that would allow for full autonomy of the local communities in governance and participation. Moreover, the complexity of social entrepreneurship, which involves dynamics such as emergence, self-organization, non-linearity, uncertainty, adaptation, and engagement across multiple scales, underscores the need for a holistic analysis rather than a compartmentalized approach (Westley et al., 2014).

Some of these key aspects of CBEs are discussed in community development and management literature that examines the differing forms of community enterprises from a place-based perspective. For example, Westley et al. (2014) document the emergence of a bottom-up pathway for a community organization that started at the grassroots level to tackle local issues and problems but has successfully connected these efforts to policy and systemic level changes (Westley et al., 2014, p. 251).

Similarly, the PLACE framework, as seen in the example of community revitalization of FOGO Island, is based on promoting community leaders, linking divergent perspectives, amplify local capacities and assets, convey compelling stories, and engage both/and thinking (Slawinski, 2023). Recognizing the particularity and contingency of local experiences, culture, environment, and needs, respecting differences and otherness within and between localities, and cultivating local strengths to create diverse and sustainable economies are all part of the holistic strategy and multiplicity in goals to achieve the best possible outcome for the community. These views promote the idea that communities can be active subjects of their economic experiences, fostering social relationships, and developing alternative economic practices that are not solely dependent on capitalist frameworks (Peredo & Chrisman, 2017).

### **Asset-Based Community Development**

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a sustainable community development methodology pioneered by John Kretzmann and John McKnight in 1993, focuses on uplifting communities by recognizing and leveraging their inherent strengths and assets. These assets encompass a diverse range of resources found within the community, challenging the traditional model of community development that centers on identifying deficiencies, problems, and needs.

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Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argue that the traditional approach presents a negative view of communities and their inhabitants, leading to internalized negative behaviours. Furthermore, the needs-based approach denies the wisdom of communities, positioning them as needy clients rather than capable citizens, which exacerbates societal issues.

The “strengths perspective” gained prominence in academic social work literature during the late 1980s and early 1990s, even though its foundational principles have historical roots (Jong & Miller, 1995; Kennedy, 2022; Saleebey, 1996). At its core, this perspective affirms that every individual possesses inherent strengths and resources, both within themselves and in their surroundings (Jong & Miller, 1995; Saleebey, 1996). Like ABCD, this perspective emphasizes positive narrative generation and fostering autonomy and agency in clients rather than practitioners. In contrast, needs-based community development models have often subjected communities to external judgments, leading to presumptions about their needs, unmet requirements, and recurring dependence on external funding (Boyd et al., 2008; Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993).

ABCD is a holistic model that believes communities can drive their own local development by mobilizing often invisible or disregarded assets. These resources include local institutions, businesses, parks, community members’ skills, relationships, and network connections (Cunningham et al., 2022; Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). ABCD emphasizes the role of social capital in mobilizing community assets by highlighting the importance of building relationships between community members at all levels, from neighbourhoods to institutions (Ennis & West, 2010; Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). This central focus of ABCD on relationship building considers both internal community connections and external relationships. By leveraging external relationships, communities can access additional resources and partnerships, which can include attracting funding or other forms of support (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Partnership and civic engagement are fundamental pillars of ABCD (Blickem et al., 2018; Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993). Furthermore, social interaction is seen to be fundamental to the existence, structure, and development of communities, playing a key role in resource management, relationship building,

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problem-solving, empowerment, and overall well-being (Lim et al., 2024; Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012).

Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan (2012) posit that “a community's existence, structure, and functioning are possible through local social relationships emerging from the interaction of its residents” (2012, p. 295). ABCD promotes this community capacity building by enhancing the existing skills and capabilities of community members. Community agency plays a critical role in shaping local power structures by enabling residents to mobilize, collaborate, and address shared concerns collectively, developing community power. This collective strength empowers individuals to challenge dominant power structures, engage in negotiations with influential groups, and participate actively in decision-making (Hardina, 2006; Kluver, 2014; Peredo et al., 2018). Through training programs and educational initiatives, individuals and communities can be empowered to engage in entrepreneurial activities and locally organize to improve their socio-economic positions (Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). The sustainability of ABCD lies in its adaptability to different contexts since it is developed *with* the community. By involving civil society and community members in the projects, ABCD demonstrates a participatory approach to development (Broadley, 2021).

### **Summary**

This chapter draws on Community-Based Enterprises (CBE), Community Economies (CE), and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) to examine how nonprofits can support democratic and community-led transitions. It positions nonprofits as intermediaries, navigating tensions between funder constraints and grassroots empowerment. From CBE and CE, it adopts the principle that communities are not resource-poor but possess existing capacities and relationships that can be mobilized for innovation. ABCD emphasizes the recognition and use of community assets, both tangible and intangible, as a foundation for participatory, sustainable development. These approaches provide a lens to assess the areas where the pilot program fostered genuine community governance or reproduced traditional power hierarchies.

## **Chapter IV: Methodology and Methods**

### **Overview**

This chapter outlines the methodological choices guiding the study and the rationale for each. It begins by situating the research within the transformative paradigm, a critical and empowering framework that emphasizes social justice, equity, and the interrogation of power relations within society. The following section introduces Participatory Action Research (PAR), which aligns with principles of the transformative paradigm through its emphasis on collaboration, reflexivity, and the co-production of knowledge by involving community members as partners in the research process. The study is designed as a qualitative case study of a Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL), providing an in-depth investigation of a bounded phenomenon. Through the integration of multiple data sources, such as field notes, reflexive journal entries, organizational documents, program materials, surveys, informal interviews, online articles, and observations, detailed perspectives and nuance are gathered. The chapter proceeds by detailing the research paradigm and philosophical underpinnings, followed by the chosen methodology and its principles, then the research design and context of the study, the data collection and analysis procedures, and lastly, the ethical considerations and limitations that shaped the study.

### **Research Paradigm and Philosophical Underpinnings: Transformative Paradigm**

This study is grounded in the transformative paradigm, a social justice oriented framework that foregrounds equity, the redistribution of power, and the dismantling of systemic inequities in community-based research (Leavy, 2023; Mertens, 2007, 2010). By explicitly committing to change, a transformative lens not only uncovers structural inequities but also guides the research design toward collaborative, action-oriented outcomes.

Ontologically, the transformative paradigm acknowledges the multiple realities that exist while contextualizing them within social, political, economic, ethnic, racial and disability values focusing on the interactive link between researcher and partners (i.e. participants) (Mertens, 2007, p. 216). Epistemologically, it rejects the notion of knowledge as neutral and is reflective of the power and social relationships with society (Baum et al., 2006; Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2007,

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2010). This orientation aligns with the view that research should be a deliberate response to inequity in society, allowing for the production of knowledge and action that contribute to social transformation (Mertens, 2010, p. 470).

It combines the values of action, community participation, and reflexivity which form the base of critical theories such as critical race theory, feminist theory, Indigenous theory, and action research (Leavy, 2023, p. 245). In these theories, research “subjects” are instead *partners* in the entire research process (Hu & Stoecker, 2024; Leavy, 2023).

Therefore, part of the focus in transformative paradigm is to create an action agenda that is intended to change the lives of participants, amplifying their voices and empowering them for sustainable changes. It is an emancipatory framework aimed at removing social and institutional structures that are limiting to participants by addressing issues of power in knowledge creation and mobilization (Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) as cited in Duea et al., 2022 p. 1).

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks<sup>1</sup> argues the following:

by reinforcing the idea that there is a split between theory and practice, or by creating such a split, both groups deny the power of liberatory education for critical consciousness, thereby perpetuating conditions that reinforce our collective exploitation and repression. (p. 199)

Transformative frameworks often rely on action research that is implemented in a cyclical or iterative model; hence, including community members in the process from the beginning to the end is considered to be a fundamental tenet (Merton, 2007) to reframing and restructuring the intended social processes (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2002). “Only through such praxis – in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously – can the act of help become free of distortion in which the helper dominates the help” (Freire, 1971, as cited in hooks, 1994, p.54). In this thesis, the transformative paradigm provides the philosophical grounding for examining how a nonprofit navigates the tension between participatory ideals and institutional constraints during its transition to a community-led social innovation lab.

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks deliberately styled her pen name in all lowercase.

To operationalize these principles, this study adopts Participatory Action Research (PAR) as its primary methodological approach.

### **Methodological Approach: Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is both a methodology and set of principles that align closely with the transformative paradigm, combining inquiry with action to advance social justice (Baum et al., 2006; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2002; Leavy, 2023; Mertens, 2010). PAR is grounded in collaboration, co-production of knowledge, and collective ownership of research outcomes. It engages participants to uncover the needs and concerns of those involved; it is participatory through its direct engagement of community knowledge in its processes; and, it's action-oriented in that it supports or enhances strategic action that leads to social transformation (Burns et al., 2011). Embedded in the core of PAR, is people's right to self-determination and meaningful participation (Attwood, 1997 as cited in MacDonald, 2012, p. 36).

The cyclical nature of PAR: planning, actioning, observing, then replanning, etc. (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2002), results more opportunities for participants to influence decision-making at each stage, and maintains alignment to community goals (Burns et al., 2011). Vaughn & Jacquez (2020) illustrate this through Participation Choice Points – where they suggest that at each stage in the research process (Research Design, Data Collection, Analysis, Dissemination, Act, Partner), there is a choice to involve participants through: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower (p.6). These decisions could be made at every level to ensure that knowledge production and action are democratic and collaborative (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 8). allowing for the study of power structures that uphold social inequalities (Mertens, 2010, p. 472). Other literature on PAR outlines the diversity of methods that can be utilized as long as research partners agree on the priorities that serve the interested parties and desired impact (Burns et al., 2011; Duea et al., 2022; MacDonald, 2012; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

In the context of the CSIL, PAR offers several advantages. First, it supports capacity building of the organization and participants, by creating a space to develop skills, networks, and relationships that extend beyond the scope of this project. Secondly, it provides a flexible, process-oriented approach suited to the evolving nature of the pilot program, the timelines, and the complex

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realities of participants. Finally, it fosters an environment for critical reflection and examination of the organizational and systemic conditions that shape participation and engagement. For the focus of this study, the pilot program, PAR principles were applied in this case at various stages in the research process. The table below outlines the key principles and the relevant application.

**Table 1** *PAR Principles and Relevant Application in the Study.*

<b>PAR Principle</b>	<b>Application in this study</b>
Transformative Paradigm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study was co-framed around the principles of inclusive participation and shifting power dynamics.</li> </ul>
Embedded researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher recognizes their shifting role as researcher, practitioner, student, facilitator.</li> <li>• Researcher recognizes their privilege.</li> </ul>
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization staff and researcher collaborated on the development research questions.</li> <li>• Co-production of main frameworks and approaches (ABCD, CBE, and CE).</li> </ul>
Co-production of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners in the research contributed to the data used in this study.</li> <li>• Data collection was interactive and co-produced.</li> <li>• All data valued equally in the research.</li> </ul>
Collective ownership of outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research analysis and outcomes are shared between partners.</li> </ul>
Cyclical nature of action and reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pilot program was collaboratively planned through the interactions of several research partners</li> <li>• Actions (activities and next steps) were experimented with at different stages and adjusted as necessary.</li> <li>• Reflections were iteratively completed together and separately at different stages of the process allowing for critical reflection and analysis.</li> </ul>

PAR can serve more than just as a means of informing policy or enhancing service delivery; instead, it can be utilized as a powerful tool for liberation, radical social transformation, and the promotion of solidarity with those who defend public services or resist neoliberal cuts and privatization (Chatterton, Paul et al., 2007, p. 218) In this thesis, PAR is not only used to document and analyze the CSIL's processes, but also contribute to ongoing conversations within the organization about how community engagement can be practiced with authenticity and integrity in the face of mounting external pressures.

### **Case Study Design and Scope**

A case study design was selected for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded social phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Case studies are particularly suitable for situations where the researcher seeks to capture the micro and macro-level complexities in processes, relationships, and contextual factors (Swanborn, 2010 as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Yin (2009) distinguishes between cases as concrete entities (e.g., an organization) and cases as specific processes (e.g., a program or change initiative).

Given this study's focus on how a nonprofit organization navigates the tension between participatory ideals and structural constraints in an initiative that it undertakes, a case study was found to be suitable. In this sense, a case study offers the necessary depth and contextual sensitivity to explore both the organizational and relational dynamics that are present in the process. The project's bounds as defined by the limited time frame, location, and organizational context, create an ideal setting for examining community engagement processes in depth.

The case study in this research is the pilot program of the Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL) initiative implemented by CatalystOrg, a nonprofit organization within the Community Resource Centre (CRC) in a Canadian city. The case is analyzed by examining the organizational process of designing and implementing participatory engagement activities during the lab's transition from the traditional, service-based model to a community-led structure. The pilot program was their first initiative as a CSIL which was first launched in April 2024 and ran for three months, until June 2024. The data collected spans the time from January 2024 until July 2024 which includes planning, implementation, and evaluation of the CSIL pilot project and its community engagement activities.

To fully understand the process and dynamics at play in the CSIL pilot, it is necessary to situate it within the broader context under which it was conceived and implemented. The pilot did not emerge in isolation; rather, it was the product of many intertwined community changes and evolving priorities on multiple levels. The first level view is of the Community Resource Centre (CRC), a community organization now overseeing a community hub with 30 other organizations

under its purview. The second level is of CatalystOrg: a nonprofit that operates under CRC as part of the larger pillar of poverty reduction. Before CatalystOrg became a CSIL, its specific focus was providing employment and entrepreneurship services, particularly for youth. The CSIL, the focal point of this study, represents a deliberate shift from a service-based model to a community-driven model. The following section provides background on each of these levels, beginning with CRC as the overall institutional setting, followed by CatalystOrg as the organizational base, and concluding with the establishment of the CSIL.

### **Background and Context: Community Resource Centre (CRC) and the Community-Based Social Innovation Lab (CSIL)**

The Community Resource Centre (CRC) is an integrated community hub, located inside a former local high school, in a Canadian city. The high school was closed in 2017 by the residing school board due to low enrollment; a decision that was met with significant public opposition (Miller, 2017b). Community advocates, particularly from the surrounding neighbourhoods of the area, argued that the closure was an act of systemic racism, pointing to the area's high proportion of racialized and low-income residents and the city's long history of underinvestment (Miller, 2017a).

Following the school's closure in June 2017, community advocates, including CRC and another organization, successfully lobbied for the building's transformation into a multi-tenant community hub, with CRC as its lead operations manager. Today, it houses over 30 nonprofit organizations and social enterprises, enabling co-location of services such as food security programs, employment resources, health screenings, education and training opportunities, and recreational activities (CRC, 2024). The transformation from highschool to community hub reclaims a site of loss and reorients it toward community benefit, positioning it as a critical asset for local empowerment and building resilience.

The business plan put forth by CRC in 2018 describes the hub's management structure as divided into three sections, which helps balance the needs of individual organizations with the use of shared facilities: individual organizations, operation of common areas and functions, and coordination team. For individual organizations, each partner manages their own staff, programs,

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and budgets; operations of common areas and functions include the coordinating the use of shared space to maximize access and services; lastly, the hub coordination team is made up of one individual from each residing organization and coordinates the delivery of services to clients through building strong partnerships together. The close proximity of organizations to each other as well as the management structure fosters collaboration, resource sharing, joint-programming, and cross-referral between organizations.

The integration of numerous services under the hub is particularly beneficial in the area, considering the significant socio-economic barriers faced by many of its residents. It increases access for residents and beneficiaries of services to more services without additional costs for transportation or loss of working time, helping CRC towards its mission of poverty reduction (CRC, 2024). The “Poverty Reduction Pillar” addresses poverty through a combination of immediate assistance and long-term empowerment strategies. CatalystOrg is one of six organizations under this pillar; other services included are an emergency food bank, exchange programs, and community gardening to name a few.

### ***CatalystOrg***

Established in 2018 under CRC’s *Poverty Reduction Pillar* and youth strategy initiative, CatalystOrg was created to provide low-income youth with resources, training, and opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship (CRC, 2018). Its early programming focused on skill development, networking opportunities, and hands-on experiences, with a strong emphasis on creating pathways to economic self-sufficiency (CRC, 2018). Since then, programming and collaborations at CatalystOrg has continued to grow, often morphing with other partners and services inside and outside the hub. This has allowed CatalystOrg to offer an increasingly diverse range of services and programs.

By 2023, CatalystOrg’s portfolio included micro-credential and accreditation programs, online market for product sales, event space and state-of-the-art equipment rental, AI programming for seniors, amongst many others. The organization also facilitated internships and placements with five local partners, each offering 180-300 hours of training for youth. These initiatives serve over 700 community members annually and are deeply interconnected to other organizations and

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partners, creating a strong network base. A full list of programs and services provided by CatalystOrg is available in the Appendix.

### ***Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL)***

In March 2024, CatalystOrg was awarded a grant from a national foundation (for an undisclosed amount) to establish a Community Social Innovation Lab. The lab's main objective is to foster local talent and engage the community for the development of "small-scale social impact projects that are aimed at addressing pressing social issues and fostering stronger, more resilient, and flourishing communities" (Canadian Innovation Space, 2024). The focus of the lab is to improve the quality of life and well-being of the community through "innovation, creativity, collaboration, and cohesion." As put by the Innovator-in-Residence, the inspiration behind the centre is to create a space in the neighbourhood, a neighbourhood known to be amongst the most low-income in the area, that could be a place of gathering, connection, and social transformation.

The transition of CatalystOrg from an employment and entrepreneurship hub to a Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL) in 2024 is not an abrupt departure from its previous activities but rather, an evolution. The CSIL extends CRC's leadership as a collaboration-based organization and aims to create a space where community members can lead small-scale, high-impact projects that address pressing local issues, in alignment with the goal of community well-being and poverty reduction. The hub's location and network provide an ideal environment for community members to connect with each other, access resources, and build partnerships. As a physical and social space, the CRC has several features that make it an ideal setting for a Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL):

1. Established trust with the community considering the history of the local highschool and the transformation to a hub.
2. Physical proximity to other organizational partners.
3. Access to shared resources such as facilities and networks.
4. Experience with cross-sector partnerships and project collaborations.

*Researcher Entry and Positionality*

This thesis is the product of 6 months of community action research (January 2024–June 2024) with a Community-based Social Innovation Lab (CSIL), established within CatalystOrg.

My involvement in the CSIL pilot emerged through my academic research program and was facilitated by my supervisor, who had an established relationship with CatalystOrg. I was first introduced to CatalystOrg and CRC through an undergraduate course field visit, which led me to write an undergraduate paper in fall 2022. This assignment sparked my interest in the organization, which led to my registering as a volunteer for 12 months, prior to embarking on this research study.

In keeping with a PAR approach, my role evolved over time. In 2024, I integrated my ongoing work supporting the community center into a community-based project as part of a seminar. In conversation with the CatalystOrg’s Director and Social Innovator in Residence, and in consultation with my thesis supervisor, we decided that I would be able to serve the organization in my multiple roles of volunteer, student, and researcher, to ultimately develop a Theory of Change. Initially, I participated in an observational capacity, attending events, meetings, and informal gatherings to understand the rhythms and dynamics of the space. As trust developed with staff, I was invited to contribute to specific activities such as helping with email communications, brainstorming programming ideas, and helping with research. This iterative and evolving process reflects PAR’s principle that roles and levels of participation are shaped collaboratively rather than imposed, including with my self as an observer, participant-researcher, and volunteer.

At the end of March 2024, the organization expressed interest in receiving support for its first (pilot) program as a CSIL. The negotiation between myself as researcher and the CSIL involved a mutually beneficial agreement where, as researcher, I would meet with participants in the program, provide advice and training, support the lead, attend events, research and provide resources, and help develop the program. In exchange, I would be given access to artifacts related to the current program or previous programs as necessary, be able to take notes on my observations, make journal entries, as well as conduct interviews and collect survey data from participants.

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My positionality is informed by these roles and as well as my experience working with social service nonprofits, refugees, and recently arrived immigrants, and vulnerable populations. As someone navigating a new space, and from a position more closely aligned with a research contributor rather than employee or community member, I approached the project with curiosity and recognition of my insider-outsider status. This dual perspective allowed me to examine the CSIL's process while also being reflexive of how my power and privilege influenced relationships.

In line with transformative and PAR principles, reciprocity was central to the project approach: I supported various tasks toward developing an implementation plan and theoretical framework, including developing a survey, providing a research review on other community lab experiences, developing report templates, programming feedback, and ideas for community participation. This reflexive stance is central to the integrity of the study. My interpretations are shaped by my relationships in the field, and I remain mindful that the knowledge generated here is co-produced with the people and organizations who generously allowed me into their processes.

### *Participant Selection and Roles*

In line with the collaborative and dynamic approach of PAR, the CSIL pilot program engaged a wide range of stakeholders. The selection of participants was primarily purposive, chosen for their specific roles and insights relevant to the pilot program. While the primary focus was on youth and community members in the specific locality, the program's development and delivery relied on the coordinated efforts of organizational staff, volunteers, external partners, and funders. To ensure clarity in understanding the roles and perspectives represented in this study, the following table outlines the main stakeholder groups, their functions within the CSIL pilot, and the rationale for their inclusion in the research.

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**Table 2** *Participant Groups and Their Roles in the CSIL Pilot Program*

<b>Participant Group</b>	<b>Who They Are</b>	<b>Role in the CSIL Pilot</b>	<b>Rationale for Inclusion</b>
Organization Staff	Director of CatalystOrg, Innovator-in-Residence &, Project Officer.	Strategic planning, program design, partnership building, coordination of pilot activities.	Central decision-makers with direct responsibility for shaping and delivering the CSIL's objectives.
Pilot Program Participants (Youth)	Local youth hired through program intake.	Co-creators of small-scale social impact projects, provided feedback on programming.	Direct beneficiaries; perspectives essential to evaluating impact and relevance.
Community Members	Local residents (including non-youth participants) engaged through events and outreach.	participated in community engagement sessions, provided feedback on initiatives.	Ground zero for ensuring programming reflects local needs.
Subject Matter Experts	Invited advisors with expertise in social innovation, entrepreneurship, technology or specific project topics.	Contributed specialized knowledge to support participant learning and project development.	Held an active role in contributing to project outcomes.
Volunteers	Community volunteers supporting logistics, event facilitation, or administrative tasks.	Assisted with program delivery, supported participant engagement.	Supported the role of the CSIL at events.
External Organizational Partners	Other non-profits, social enterprises, and civic groups within the community resource centre and beyond.	Collaborated on events, resource-sharing, and participant referrals.	Strengthened cross-organizational connections, contributed resources and networks.
Funders	National, provincial, and municipal funding bodies.	Provided financial support, set some programmatic expectations.	Influenced program scope and sustainability considerations, required accountability.

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The director of the Centre was recently promoted to a higher-level managerial position with CRC, which required her to shift her focus to coordination between the various partner organizations within the hub. She has been working at CatalystOrg for 5 years and has created and led programs that provide employment opportunities for the youth through internships at different organizations. Her work at CatalystOrg has been instrumental in creating the internship opportunities for youth, connecting organizational partners, and advocating for the community.

The innovator-in-residence role is to build community connections. He is the most senior with experience in innovation and program design. He runs an AI art program for seniors as well as a session called *Ideas, Welcome*, that welcomes anyone with an idea to come and chat over a coffee. He also uses these get togethers as opportunities to gauge interest in upcoming programming or ideas.

The project officer role is specifically dedicated to running the pilot program and other operational activities. She is a recently graduated student, who had recently partaken in a program for grassroots organizing with a different organization focused on political movements. Her experience in that program provided her with training and experience to create a workshop with a social benefit with a group of youth.

Pilot Program Participants were recruited through CatalystOrg's existing networks, social media outreach, and word-of-mouth referrals from partner organizations. Priority was given to individuals who:

- Had limited prior access to leadership or project development opportunities.
- Were interested in addressing social, cultural, or economic issues affecting their community.
- Could commit to the full three-month duration of the pilot.

Each participant was expected to contribute to a team-based project, attend scheduled workshops, and participate in planning sessions and public events. They were also encouraged to document their experiences through reports and reflections, which became part of the program's qualitative data.

## POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

In addition to organizational staff and pilot program participants (youth), the pilot leveraged relationships with local community members, subject matter experts, volunteers, external organizational partners, and funders, to offer specialized skills, resources, and perspectives during workshops or project consultations.

Throughout the study, I adopted a researcher-practitioner role, engaging with many groups of participants in different capacities, always with the aim of fostering collaborative knowledge generation and supporting the organization's transformative goals. My role was heavily focused on two groups: the organizational staff, including the Director, Innovator-in-Residence, and Project Officer; and the Pilot Program Participants who were the youth hired by the organization for the pilot program. My engagement with other groups was limited in scope, however, as this study takes a systemic view of the nonprofit ecosystem, their role and influence help to provide context and insight of the outcomes. Table 2 provides a summary of my role as a researcher and the level of engagement with all research partners.

My engagement with the Organizational Staff was that of a collaborative researcher and support worker. I worked alongside the Innovator in Residence, the Director, and the Project Officer, providing advice, sharing research findings, and supporting the development of an implementation plan and a Theory of Change. This involved regular weekly or bi-weekly meetings for planning, brainstorming, and reflecting on the program's progression. My previous experience in non-profit work facilitated a deep understanding and rapport with these partners, enabling rich discussions and access to nuanced organizational perspectives.

My engagement with the Pilot Program Participants was primarily as a facilitator and observer, acting as an assistant to the lead project officer and providing training or resources as needed. While aware of my academic position, I consciously mitigated any perceived power imbalances by prioritizing active listening, asking clarifying questions rather than offering opinions, and engaging in informal conversations rather than formal interviews. This approach allowed me to gather authentic, uninhibited insights into their experiences with the pilot program and the CSIL, ensuring their voices were central to the qualitative data. They served as interviewees and informal feedback providers, offering direct insights into the program's lived experience.

## POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

My engagement with the Subject Matter Experts and External Organizational Partners was moderate. Our interactions were facilitated by the Organizational Staff and Pilot Program Participants (primary research partners) in online meetings and during events. Most of the insights gathered from these groups is second-hand, through the primary research partners. My engagement with volunteers and community members was facilitated through primary research partners where interactions were either coincidental or at events. Finally, there was no direct interactions with the funders and information was received through organizational leadership.

**Table 3** *Researcher’s Role and Level of Engagement of Research Partners*

<b>Participant Group</b>	<b>Nature of Relationship of Researcher and Partner</b>	<b>Research contributions</b>	<b>Level of Engagement</b>
Organization Staff	Direct collaboration through planning meetings, site visits, and ongoing communication.	Co-designed research activities, provided organizational context, and co-interpreted emerging findings.	High – direct collaboration
Pilot Program Participants (PPPs) /Youth	Direct collaboration through participatory workshops, informal conversations, and observation during program sessions.	Facilitated discussions, gathered feedback, and co-created projects.	High – direct collaboration
Community Members	Informal engagement at community events, markets, and visits at the site.	Gathered contextual insights on community priorities and perceptions of CSIL.	Low
Subject Matter Experts	Interactions during events, coordination mostly done via organizational staff and program participants; occasional joint meetings.	Provided feedback and mentorship to pilot program participants,	Moderate – direct and indirect collaboration
Volunteers	Interactions during program delivery and events, as well as visits at the site.	Provided insight on CSIL activities and their perspectives on implementation challenges.	Low
External Organizational Partners	Interactions during events, coordination mostly done via organizational staff and program participants; occasional joint meetings.	Provided insight on partnership dynamics and resource-sharing practices, as well as overall nonprofit sector dynamics.	Moderate – direct and indirect collaboration

POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Funders	Limited direct contact; interactions mediated through organizational leadership.	Provided Insights on funding priorities and expectations.	Low – no direct collaboration
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**Data Collection Methods**

Data collection occurred over a six-month period of field engagement, which included weekly or biweekly meetings with the host organization, in both virtual and in-person formats. The first three months focused on collaborative planning and the co-design of the pilot program. The subsequent three months centered on implementation and engagement with youth participants.

The data collection process followed a collaborative and cyclical approach, consistent with PAR principles. In line with this, several data sources were co-generated with organizational staff and pilot program participants. Throughout this period, I attended project meetings, workshops, and events, recording observations and reflections in field notes. These included detailed documentation of discussions, decision-making processes, and participant interactions.

Primary and secondary data sources were combined to capture the lived experience of participants as well as the structural context where the CSIL pilot program was implemented. Primary data consisted largely of qualitative data gathered through field notes, participant observation, and co-produced documents and reports, as well as one participant survey, resulting in approximately 150 pages of textual data for analysis. Secondary data was used to supplement the study and included internal documents, web content such as blog posts and articles, and white papers that were relevant to the program’s development; they were approximately 108 pages. These materials formed the basis for subsequent thematic analysis. The tables below provide a summary of both primary (Table 3) and secondary (Table 4) sources, identifying the source, format, volume, and collection period for each.

POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

**Table 4** *Primary data sources*

<b>Type of Data</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Volume</b>	<b>Collection Period</b>
Field notes	Researcher	participant and non-participant observations in meetings, workshops, and public events.	Field journal	30 pages	January 2024 – July 2024
Meeting Notes	Pilot program participants, organizational staff, Researcher	weekly/biweekly organizational meetings and pilot program planning sessions (structured and informal).	Field journal, Word	20 pages	January 2024 – July 2024
Observations	Researcher, Organizational Staff	During workshops, events, launch	Field journal, Word	6 pages	January 2024 – July 2024
Planning and event Material	Organizational Staff, Pilot Program Participants, Researcher	program planning documents, reports, and outputs from program activities, or workshop handouts.	PDFs, PPT, Word, Print, Handwritten, Digital	64 pages	February 2024 – July 2024
Survey data	Pilot Program Participants	Collecting feedback on events and program.	Excel, Word	3 pages	June 2024 – July 2024
Reflective journals	Researcher	documenting observations, interpretations, and reflexive notes on power dynamics, processes.	Handwritten and digital	27 pages	January 2024 – July 2024

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**Table 5** *Secondary data sources*

<b>Type of Data</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Volume</b>	<b>Collection Period</b>
Organizational Documents	Internal reports	Reports that speak to funding and organization programming.	PDF, Word	10 pages	January 2024 – July 2024
Online articles, web pages, and publicity materials	CRC, CatalystOrg, local newspaper	Material related to the hub and contextual material.	Digital	37 pages	May 2024 – July 2024
Whitepapers	Various Community Service and Nonprofit Organizations	Documents describing frameworks and strategies for nonprofit community engagement and innovation.	PDF	61 pages	January 2024 – May 2024

## POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Informal interviews were conducted during and after meetings, often in conversational settings, to explore participant experiences and emerging challenges and recorded as field notes. No recordings were made. This method reduced the power distance and allowed for the collection of data in a more authentic and less rehearsed way. This was particularly important when working with some of the youth participants, who frequently asked about my research and whether there would be interviews. At later meetings, I was able to follow up with more precise questions after having the chance to reflect and allow the process to occur. I frequently encouraged my colleagues to ask me questions or ask for my help in any aspect of the project, which I felt helped them be more open with me about their concerns and frustrations. I preferred not to use a voice recorder or video record any meetings or interactions, finding them intimidating and structured. Throughout data collection, the researcher engaged in feedback loops, confirming interpretations in follow-up conversations, cross-checking facts, and incorporating participant clarifications to reduce bias.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) as its primary analytical framework. This approach was selected for its epistemological alignment with the research, particularly the PAR approach, which emphasizes reflection and action objectives. In accordance with the reflexive methodology, a predetermined codebook was intentionally avoided to enable thematic patterns to surface naturally from the dataset. The coding process maintained flexibility in its application, with code units ranging from full sentences to extended passages as needed to preserve contextual meaning and semantic content.

### ***Coding and Theming***

RTA goes beyond the explicit content of the data to identify underlying assumptions, ideas, or ideologies based on the researcher's knowledge. This approach is more in line with PAR methodologies as RTA sees the researcher's perspective as a resource for knowledge production, inevitably shaping the knowledge produced. This means that subjective interpretation is not seen as a threat to credibility but as central to it (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

All materials were systematically transcribed and organized within NVivo qualitative analysis software, with data categorized chronologically by entry date and thematically by source

type. Through iterative cycles of coding and reflection, the analysis remained anchored in participants' own meaning-making frameworks while allowing for theoretically informed interpretation of the collected narratives.

### *Collaborative Analysis*

The participation of the organization as my research partners allowed for their perspectives to shape the results of the study. My analysis of the field notes, meeting notes, archival documents, observations, journals, and so on focused on answering the research questions with the data that was available.

### **Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity**

Engaging in community-based research necessitates a critical examination of the researcher's positionality and the inherent power dynamics embedded within knowledge production. It is vital to acknowledge the privileged lens through which research is often conducted and analyzed, particularly when addressing communities and the organizations that serve them. Historical research practices, often rooted in imperial and colonial methodologies, have contributed to the disenfranchisement of communities through knowledge exploitation (Smith, 1999). Consequently, a conscious and critical reflection on both the theoretical frameworks applied and the language employed in research in order to recognize inherent bias, is essential. Maintaining dialogue, accountability, and reflexivity with my research partners will guide me throughout the process.

As Smith (1999) argues, traditional research methodologies often operate from a positivist stance, assuming the researcher to be an objective outsider who can observe without being implicated in the research context (1999, p.137). However, critical approaches, including feminist and Indigenous research methodologies, have significantly advanced the acceptance of "insider" research in qualitative inquiry (Smith, 1999, p. 137). These perspectives highlight that the researcher is never truly neutral and that their positionality profoundly shapes the research process and findings, as such, there is a, "constant need for reflexivity...[and a need for researchers] to

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have ways of thinking critically about processes, their relationships, and the quality and richness of their data” (Smith, 1999, p.137).

This study embodies an insider research approach, given my direct engagement and collaborative role within the non-profit organization. While offering unique access and rapport, this positionality necessitates a constant and deep commitment to evaluating my positionality and biases. The relationships between researchers, practitioners, and communities are intrinsically shaped by systemic and institutional power dynamics, where local knowledge and methodologies have historically struggled to gain rightful recognition and value within academic spheres, thus perpetuating historical barriers to their inclusion. In acknowledging my role as a researcher-academic in a vulnerable space, I need to be conscious of how my words, actions, and behaviours will impact the community to mitigate negative effects as much as possible. This underscores the importance of building robust, research-based support systems and nurturing strong relationships with community partners (Smith, 1999).

Recognizing these dynamics, this research is grounded in the conviction that sustainable transformation and empowerment must originate within the community itself. Therefore, my role as a researcher is to amplify community-led initiatives and voices, thereby supporting their self-determination. This requires careful consideration of how communities are theorized, particularly those to which the researcher does not belong, and a commitment to leveraging a privileged academic position to advocate for system-level changes. Directly collaborating with communities and organizations dedicated to overcoming systemic barriers is a vital pathway for this. By fostering partnerships with activists, community practitioners, and local leaders, research can actively contribute to dismantling long-standing barriers to equitable knowledge sharing and mobilization, and empowerment.

### ***Consent & Confidentiality***

Prior to the collection of any data, access to the community and the organization's participants was formally approved in advance through the community organization's established channels. All individuals involved in the study were fully informed about the research's purpose, their rights as participants, and the scope of their involvement, as well as my role as a master's student. Participants provided their full consent before any data was collected. Measures to ensure

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confidentiality included anonymizing data where appropriate, securely storing all research materials, and ensuring that no individual participant nor the organization, could be identified in any reporting of the findings. This ensured that the research adhered to the highest ethical standards while respecting the autonomy and privacy of all participants and protecting the community and the organization.

Before commencing work with the community, I completed a series of mandatory trainings as requested by the organization and obtained authorization from the organization to use the collected data for my thesis. These included AccessForward's Integrated Accessibility Standards and Regulations; Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development's Worker Health and Safety Awareness; Government of Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Plus; Ontario Human Rights Commission's Human Rights Code and Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act; and a Vulnerable Sector Check through my local police service. Additionally, my supervisor and I completed and obtained the University of Ottawa *TCPS2 CORE-2022: Course on Research Ethics* certificate of completion. These trainings shaped my research practice by reinforcing awareness of accessibility, safety, equity, and human rights considerations, aligning with the transformative paradigm's focus on social justice.

### ***Power & Positionality***

My role as a researcher-practitioner involved conscious efforts to mitigate bias and privilege. As noted, I found myself needing to adjust my approach when colleagues perceived me as an "academic researcher" or subject matter expert. Strategies included asking more questions than offering opinions and positioning myself as an assistant rather than an expert. This allowed me to be more of an observer and gained access to information I might otherwise have missed. Conducting interviews in casual conversations helped reduce power distance and facilitated more authentic data collection. I also actively encouraged colleagues to ask me questions or request my help, which fostered openness about their concerns and frustrations. The decision not to use voice or video recorders also contributed to a less intimidating environment, enabling more informal and validating interactions.

***Trustworthiness and Rigor***

Throughout the analytical process, methodological rigor was maintained through systematic annotation practices. Detailed memos were documented to address instances of coding ambiguity or conceptual vagueness that were later revisited. Following initial coding, the dataset underwent comprehensive review and recursive recoding to ensure analytical consistency and sustained focus on the core research questions. This iterative coding process, characteristic of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), provided multiple opportunities for researcher reflection and deep engagement with the data, ultimately strengthening the thematic categorization and interpretation. This approach aligned with Clarke and Braun's (2021) emphasis on capturing "participants' lived experiences, sense-making, views, needs, practices" (p. 338) through flexible, data-responsive coding practices. The participation of the organization as my research partners allowed for their perspectives to shape the results of the study as they were engaged throughout the process. Through conversations with organization staff, I was able to validate my results.

An audit trail was implicitly maintained through the systematic transcription and organization of all qualitative data within NVivo software, categorized chronologically and by source type. The documentation of detailed memos and reflective notes addressed coding ambiguities and conceptual vagueness, contributing to dependability. The iterative coding process, with recursive recoding, ensured analytical consistency. The collaborative nature of the research, with ongoing consultation with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Peredo, and engagement with community partners, also contributed to confirmability.

**Limitations**

This thesis provides a thick description of the case study, detailing the specific context of the Community-Based Social Innovation Lab, its emergence from a local nonprofit, and its operational environment within a repurposed high school in a Canadian city. As a single case study, this case inherently has limitations regarding the generalizability of its findings to other non-profit organizations or social innovation labs. Specifically, the context of the pilot program, emergence, and success factors means that the results may not be directly transferable without careful consideration of contextual differences.

## POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Furthermore, my positionality as both a researcher and an active supporter of the community center, while aligning with the PAR methodology, introduced potential for subjective interpretation and bias. Efforts were made to mitigate this through reflexive journaling, conscious adjustment of interaction styles to reduce perceived power dynamics, and a commitment to understanding participants' perspectives rather than imposing my own. However, complete objectivity is not achievable in qualitative research, particularly within a transformative paradigm that acknowledges the researcher's influence on knowledge production.

The engagement persisted over 18 months, with six months specifically focused on the pilot program, allowed for deep immersion in the organizational context and observation of processes firsthand. The use of multiple data sources, such as the informal interviews, observations, journals, and archival documents, contributed to triangulation, thus enhancing the credibility of the findings. That being said, the time also presented a constraint on the depth and breadth of longitudinal observation. While sufficient for the aims of this master's thesis, a longer engagement might have revealed further evolving dynamics.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented an overview of the methodological approach and methods that this study relied on. This study was grounded in the transformative paradigm, which emphasizes research as a vehicle for social change and prioritizes the perspectives of marginalized communities. Within this paradigm, the project employed Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a method. PAR is a collaborative approach that engages participants as research partners and co-creators of knowledge. This method fosters reflection, dialogue, and collective problem-solving. In practice, this meant embedding the researcher within the nonprofit's pilot program, documenting processes through journals, observations, and amongst many others, and creating spaces for participants to articulate their experiences. The method also allowed for capturing the contradictions between the nonprofit's stated participatory ideals and the realities of implementation, making it well-suited for interrogating issues of power, legitimacy, and community engagement.

## Chapter V. Research Findings and Analyses

### Overview

This section presents thematically organized findings of the study to reflect the central dynamics shaping the transition of CatalystOrg from a service-based employment and entrepreneurship model to a Community Social Innovation Lab (CSIL). The themes emerged inductively through the analysis of six months of data collection and are informed by the principles of PAR.

The study was structured around three guiding research questions:

1. What are the initiatives taken by the nonprofit to promote community-driven projects?
2. What are the challenges faced by the nonprofit in implementing community-driven projects?
3. What is the perceived impact on the community from these attempts?

Contrary to regular nonprofit programs that govern through a service-based model, this program attempted to shift decision-making power to the community by focusing on bottom-up processes. In the same vein, this study followed a transformative epistemology to co-produce the premises of the study with the research partners. The working premises that guided this research are:

1. Community-based social innovation, if it is to be truly community-based, needs to come from the local community itself.
2. There are challenges in the genuine engagement of the local community that need to be overcome through different actions taken by the nonprofit, and,
3. It's the nonprofit's responsibility as the agent of change to effect change through the empowerment of the local community.

These premises are based on the theoretical foundations of community-based enterprises (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006), community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006), and asset-based community development (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). These theories take into consideration the social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, and relational forces that play a role in

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community development initiatives. They also consider systemic barriers that interfere with the empowerment of communities at the local level. Lastly, these theories consider the uniqueness of each community and as such, this study does not attempt to generalize findings from this study to other communities.

The themes that emerged from the data center around the following:

1. structural barriers to participation.
2. community engagement and inclusion;
3. pursuit for organizational legitimacy;
4. knowledge hierarchies; and,
5. asset mobilization.

A summary of emergent themes from this analysis are presented in Table 4.

The following sections explain the analysis starting with the Program Design (5.2) which explains what the CSIL is, its purpose, and the design of the pilot program. The next section provides the thematic analysis (5.3).

### **Program Design: CSIL Overview and Structure**

One of the benefits of operating under CRC as a community hub is that it allows initiatives to be structurally linked, often sharing staff, participants, and goals. CatalystOrg's approach combines innovation and entrepreneurship with a deep commitment to the local ward and social equality, seeing entrepreneurship as a pathway to self-determination.

Structurally, the organizational staff from CatalystOrg remained the same in the CSIL: the Director, Innovator-in-Residence, Project Officer, and a rotating group of volunteers and interns. For the CSIL pilot, the Director's role shifted due to her promotion to a higher-level coordination position within CRC, reducing her day-to-day involvement in CatalystOrg operations. The Innovator-in-Residence led community outreach, running sessions like *Ideas Welcome*, which are informal coffee chats for sharing and testing ideas, and building relationships with potential collaborators. The Project Officer, a recent graduate with grassroots organizing experience, managed the pilot's workshops, logistics, and participant coordination.

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Past reports from CRC's annual reports show CatalystOrg as a responsive, community-embedded space. CatalystOrg targeted youth and residents facing barriers to traditional employment, education, and leadership opportunities and creates programs to support their skill development. Staff members, many with extensive work experience in the neighbourhood as demonstrated by their bios, were well-placed to engage participants with authenticity and care, offering not just programs but a sense of belonging. This relational approach, combined with CRC's infrastructure and partnerships that are evident in daily interactions, created fertile ground for launching CSIL as an experiment in community-led innovation.

Consistent with PAR, my role as a partner and participant in the study was discussed with the organization staff. Through our meetings, we established where they needed the most support was to create guidelines for participation on both a Pilot Program level and CSIL level. These requirements would entail defining participation and how it is done, establishing metrics for success, identifying resources for training, and using ABCD to map and identify community assets and resources.

### ***Purpose of CSIL***

The idea of the CSIL emerged from the desire to move beyond traditional service-delivery, toward a model grounded in community leadership and collaboration. During early conversations about the objectives of the CSIL, the organization staff emphasized that despite a high-level of engagement in the programming offered at CatalystOrg, there was a lack of local community input and interest in their own. The organization staff wanted to create an environment to foster community engagement and allow local voices and local leadership to emerge. In early meetings, the director stated that one of the goals of community social innovation for them is:

*to use a bottom-up approach of designing and responding to community needs by leveraging their (the local community's) talent, knowledge, and resources (Director, meeting notes)*

Similarly, the innovator-in-residence explained that:

*The local school board was coming around to the idea that CRC as important for community well-being. The tide is turning. They are seeing innovation and creativity as a force for social transformation. (Innovator-in-Residence)*

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In this light, the transition to CSIL was envisioned as a way to shift power to participants, experiment with alternative governance, and create a space for community-driven problem solving to take place.

Some of the core components of the CSIL as described by organization staff in meetings were:

- Create project cycles that run for 3–6-month duration.
- Collaboration between multiple sectors: civil, private, public, academic.
- Bring “do-ers” in – community leaders who will take ownership of projects.
- Create a platform for connections and different methods of community engagement.
- Create a participatory system.

### ***Pilot Program Design***

Following the grant awarded by a national foundation to establish a Community-based Social Innovation Lab (CSIL), CatalystOrg was required to demonstrate that it was actively engaging in social innovation work. The grant’s expectations, namely, to foster community-driven projects rooted in creativity, collaboration, and social impact, came with specific timelines and deliverables. While the grant amount is undisclosed, the duration of the funding is two years. In this time, the director emphasized that the CSIL must demonstrate its success with the funding and positive social outcomes.

My journal captures my first reaction and fear to this pressure:

*I can't shake the feeling that we are playing by their rules, that our work is being shaped by what will please them rather than by what the community actually needs. And if that's the case, are we building something transformational? Or just something fundable?*  
(journal)

With limited time to fully design a long-term strategy for the lab’s operations, and under pressure to show early results, the director made the executive decision to launch a 12-week pilot program. This initiative, centered on youth leadership and community engagement, was developed as a practical way to activate the lab's mandate within the constraints of existing resources and

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capacities. The director suggested focusing on youth participants since CatalystOrg in its former mandate, was heavily engaged in youth programming. In this sense, the director sought to use current available assets, knowledge, and experience in order progress the project forward.

This choice to focus on youth was also grounded by the director's genuine concern for maintaining the youth skill development aspect of CatalystOrg (in its former mission) as a vital asset in the community. The director noted that the opportunities provided for youth through the employment and entrepreneurship were a valuable aspect of the current youth engagement and jeopardizing those programs might have an adverse effect on the local youth.

### *Purpose*

In many ways, the pilot was both a response to institutional pressure and a testing ground for the broader ambitions of the CSIL. The Pilot Program of the CSIL aimed to:

- Foster youth-led social innovation, especially initiatives that respond to local needs.
- Offer employment experience and leadership opportunities to young people aged 18–30.
- Serve as a prototype for co-governance at CatalystOrg, positioning the organization to move closer to its values of shared leadership and collaboration.
- Demonstrate to funders CatalystOrg's capacity to deliver community-driven initiatives within a short timeframe.

The tension between satisfying funder requirements and reimagining community participation and governance created several limitations that shaped the pilot. These tensions are discussed later.

### *Guidelines*

The pilot was designed to be participatory and accessible:

- Four youth positions were created, each paid for 25 hours/week for 12 weeks, with funding support, referred to as Pilot Program Participants (PPPs)
- No educational requirements were imposed, following advice from my supervisor Dr. Ana Maria Peredo, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity.

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- Demonstrated interest in addressing social, cultural, or economic issues affecting their community.
- A project officer, who had previously participated in a similar initiative, was assigned to guide the team.
- Project criteria were to create a small-scale project with social impact, such as beautifying a space or addressing food security, that fits within the allotted budget provided.

### *Number of People Involved*

- 4 youth pilot program participants, aged 18–30.
- 3 organizational staff participants, including: 1 project officer, with prior experience, 1 director, overseeing the initiative and involved in major decisions, and 1 innovator-in-residence, mentoring and guiding the participants.
- Myself, as a researcher and program facilitator.
- 20-30 event attendees, including volunteers, community members, and local residents.
- 6 External organizational partners and subject matter experts.

The pilot program participants, organizational staff, and I formed the core team, with the broader groups of organizational partners, volunteers, funders, subject matter experts, and local community involved sporadically through limited interactions. A screenshot of the plan for the pilot program for the first 4 weeks is provided in Figure 1. Names have been redacted from the ‘Resource’ column.

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**Figure 1** Screenshot of first 4 weeks of Pilot Program Participants' schedule.

		Date	Activity	Resource	Description
		05-Apr	Kick off		HR and Scope
Week 1	1	08-Apr	Background		Economies/community
	2	09-Apr	Objectives + budget		in person:
	3	10-Apr	Ideation/Project definition		in person:
	4	11-Apr	Project Management		in person:
	5	12-Apr	Roles/Project planning		in person:
Week 2	1	15-Apr	KPI + Measurement		in person:
	2	16-Apr	Buffer/Resource identification		
	3	17-Apr	Training (5hr/day)		Community engagement/consultation
	4	18-Apr	Training (5hr/day)		Specific about project
	5	19-Apr	Training (5hr/day)		Specific about project
Week 3	1	22-Apr	Training (5hr/day)		in person:
	2	23-Apr	Planning community consultation		
	3	24-Apr	Meeting with Community		
	4	25-Apr	Analysis and report preparation		
	5	26-Apr	Report		Check in/Plan for next week
Week 4	1	29-Apr	Implementation suggestions		
	2	30-Apr	Planning partner meeting		Deck/Structure
	3	01-May	Meeting with Partner 1		
	4	02-May	Implementation/preparation report		
	5	03-May	Report		Check in/Plan for next week

### Emergent Themes

The following section presents the emerging themes from the study, drawing on data collected over the 6 months of my engagement with the organization. The goal of this section is to illustrate how the nonprofit's transition towards community-driven innovation model unfolded in practice, and how this process was experienced by research partners such as the organization staff, pilot program participants, and myself. The findings are organization into five interrelated themes that emerged from analysis:

1. Structural Barriers to Participation (5.3.1): this section examines the organizational and institutional constraints that shaped the pilot program's participation outcomes.
2. Community Engagement and Inclusion (5.3.2): this section explores the activities used to build relationships as well as the limitations of these efforts.
3. Organizational Legitimacy (5.3.3): this section analyzes how the pilot program sought credibility from funders and the local community.
4. Knowledge Hierarchies (5.3.4): this section highlights whose knowledge was valued and the institutional priorities that dictated knowledge mobilization.
5. Asset Mobilization (5.3.5): this section demonstrates how both tangible and intangible assets were leveraged in the pilot program while outlining tensions in what was considered an asset.

## POWER TO COMMUNITIES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Each subsection begins by outlining the highlights that emerged in under the key themes, specifically highlighting how the organization represents itself and its intended approaches. These themes reflect the aspirations or self-articulated goals of the organization. This is followed by a critical synthesis that examines how these goals played out in practice, both using participant perspectives and the researchers' observations, offering concrete examples where limitations or contradictions emerged between intention and implementation. This analysis seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of what it means to “do” community-driven work within nonprofit infrastructures.

### **Structural Barriers to Participation**

The pilot program was heavily influenced by external constraints that shaped how the pilot was implemented. External constraints such as funder-imposed timelines, budget restrictions, and institutional expectations, were cited repeatedly by research partners as limiting factors. The requirement to launch by a fixed date compressed planning time, curtailed community consultation, and pushed the program toward a youth-led format that could be more easily managed within the constraints. Budget rules limited investments in mentorship and sustained facilitation, further constraining the depth of engagement possible.

### ***Fostering Pilot Program Participant Engagement and Leadership: Opportunities and Challenges in Transferring Power.***

A core design feature of the pilot program was the intention to foster participant leadership and engagement. From the beginning, pilot program participants (youth) were encouraged to take the lead in shaping the initiative's direction. The organizational staff and I gave a presentation on the program design and explained the objective of the program. Pilot program participants were invited to develop a project plan grounded in their own values and goals, and to propose project ideas that reflected their interests and perspectives. Central to early orientation sessions was the following:

*Communication with youth about mobilizing youth for social transformation:*

*Be part of something bigger.*

*Be part of change.*

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*Tap into youth activism.*

*Bring youth activists to agents of change.*

*Give them tools to create what they need.*

*Let it be bottom up.*

*Let youth choose what they want to do and how to approach it. (Organization Staff, Meeting Notes)*

This approach sought to move away from top-down program delivery and toward a model in which emerging leaders could influence both the process and the outcomes. Through the early ideation phases, organization staff sought to understand the youth's aspirations and understanding of community:

*“We will start with community visioning for youth – what are their aspirations? How do they see themselves as part of the community?” (Meeting notes)*

As well as foster a community-oriented mindset:

*Community impact -> how do you make community impact*

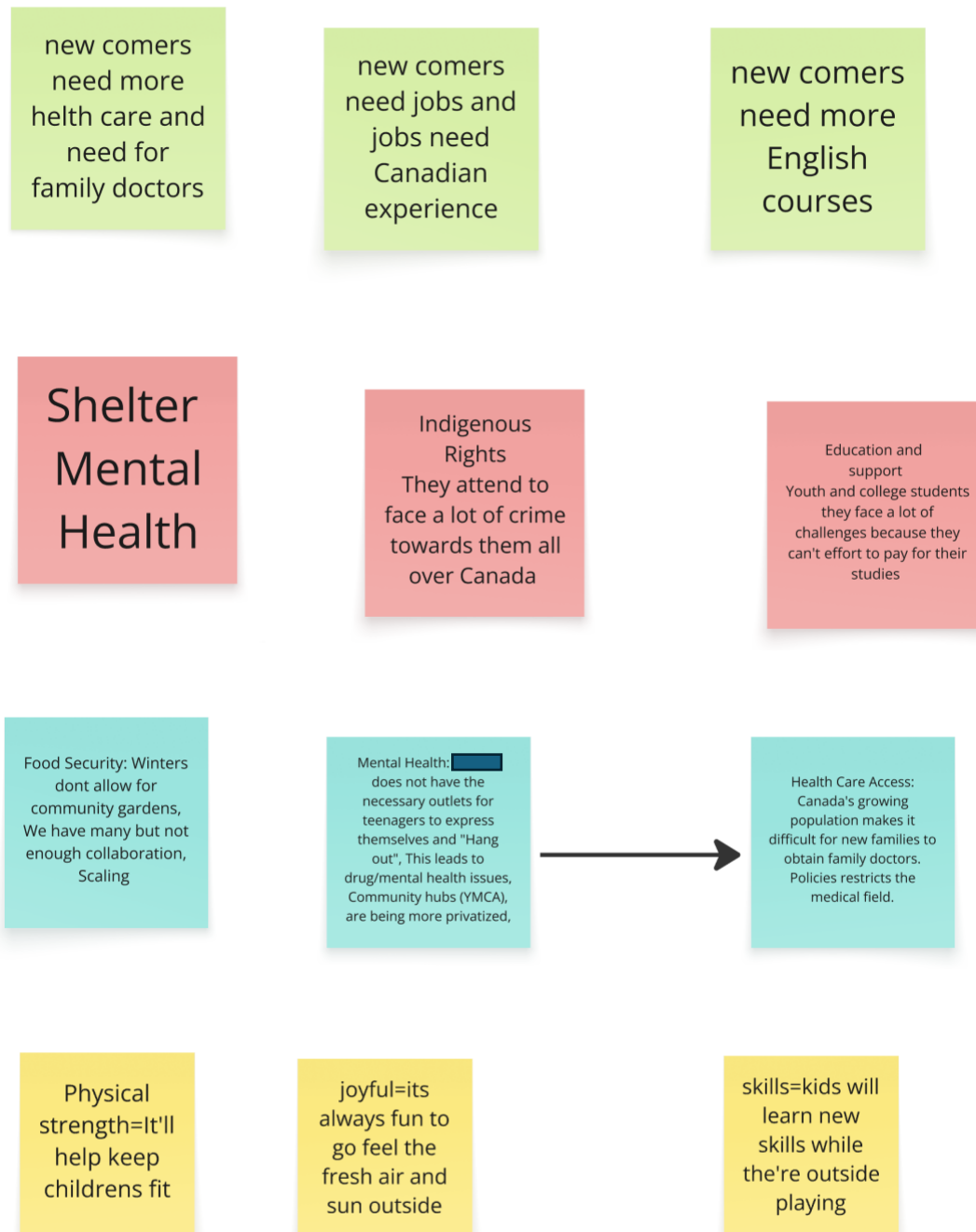
*What do you see as problematic from your lens? (Organization staff, Meeting notes)*

As part of the training sessions in the first couple of weeks of the pilot program, participants were provided training on inclusion, accessibility, and project management, by me and the organization staff in line with the study's grounding in transformation and empowerment. Additionally, organization staff and I completed group exercises with the PPPs to establish roles and expectations to facilitate the project eventually coming together. PPPs were also encouraged to identify other skills they believed would be useful for their work that they could utilize the organization's subscriptions to online learning platforms to learn. This element of self-directed professional development aimed to align capacity building with participants' own assessments of need, reinforcing the idea that they were community owners and leaders rather than passive beneficiaries.

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As a result, the pilot program participants came up with many ideas centered around challenges faced by the community that they could address. An image from the online Miro board used during this stage of pilot program participant visioning is captured in Figure 2.

**Figure 2** Screen capture of whiteboard with Pilot Program Participants' ideas



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Furthermore, PPPs were given autonomy to identify and approach organizations they wished to collaborate with, expanding the potential network of partners beyond those pre-selected by the nonprofit. However, organization staff observed challenges in this area:

*“noticed that they [pilot program participants] are making connections with only organizations that they are familiar with” (Organization staff, meeting notes)*

For the pilot program participants, developing a plan from scratch, sourcing partners, and managing their own learning proved daunting without prior experience or established networks. The absence of a structured program meant that organizational staff needed to provide extensive support at multiple stages:

*beyond logistics, we need more pop education, more project management support, and maybe even a stronger group leader. Some of this might just be inexperience. (Organization staff, meeting notes)*

During conversations with the project officer, she informed me that the PPPs required a lot of support. According to the project officer’s conversations with the pilot program participants, the ideation phase was too open-ended and they [the pilot participants] were struggling to reach consensus on what type of project they should pursue.

Eventually, at one of the meetings together with the director, project officer, myself, and the PPPs, they asked us to choose on their behalf, and the director recommended AI as a topic. Even after the topic was selected, there was contention about the specific topic:

*the team decided to work on another topic related to AI instead of the initial idea about language training. (meeting notes)*

This dynamic underscores a recurring tension in the pilot: the aspiration for distributed leadership and participant autonomy versus the reality of uneven participant capacity and limited program infrastructure such as demonstrated here:

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*The project itself as a group was hard to bring together (youth struggled to work through their internal challenges together/uneven distribution of work due to different competencies) so that's why they decided to do 3 separate workshops instead of one project they all work on together. Within the same program they ended up working and planning alone rather than together, where as marketing efforts were focused on event all together. (meeting notes)*

While the intention was to redistribute decision-making power and cultivate agency, the heavy reliance on staff guidance indicated that leadership development requires sustained mentorship, clear role expectations, and consistent feedback loops. Without these supports, leadership opportunities risk reinforcing dependency rather than building sustainable autonomy.

From an inclusion perspective, the leadership model offered space for participants to bring their identities, interests, and lived experiences into the program's design. A valuable counterbalance to the externally imposed *funder* agendas. However, from a knowledge hierarchy perspective, the model also revealed how quickly authority and expertise can revert to established organizational actors when emergent leaders face uncertainty or resource gaps. Addressing this requires not only opening leadership opportunities but also embedding systems that nurture and sustain participant capacity over time.

### ***Timelines***

In response to restrictions imposed by the funder, the nonprofit pivoted toward a youth-led model of community innovation. This decision was strategic in the sense that the organization had a stronger track record working with youth through employment and internship programs, whereas community-wide engagement would have required deeper groundwork. While this maneuver allowed the program to launch within the required timeline, it introduced tensions by moving away from the original intention of fostering bottom-up, community-driven innovation, structurally inhibiting the grassroots participation.

Rather than having time to plan with the community members, the pilot program design adopted the *Constellation Framework*. The adoption of the *Constellation Framework* by the

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organization staff as a temporary guide was a collective decision, in effort in overcoming the planning dilemma since we did not have sufficient time to develop a participation process unique to CSIL. As described by the organization staff:

*[Constellation Framework] is a framework for organizations to come together, create partnerships, and realize mutual objectives. Given our focus on enhancing our participatory system, exploring this model could offer valuable insights and opportunities for us. (Organization staff, email)*

The Constellation Framework is a model that emphasizes light governance, distributed leadership, and flexible structures for *cross-organizational* partnerships. The model suggests interorganizational collaboration and the inclusion of “action teams” to focus on specific issues before dissolving, and “stewardship groups” as a guardrail against power imbalances. According to the analyzed document, this framework does not suggest long-term engagements but rather, short-term *agile* teams to accomplish a task, in this case: overcome the constraints imposed by limited organizational capacity. However, this framework, while potentially effective in other contexts, distanced the pilot program from its original participatory engagement intentions and centered engagement with external organizations.

The Constellation Framework lacked a plan that centered community members within its proposed processes. Its applicability in this case countered potential to engage relationally with community members and foster deeper connections.

The time pressure was also felt by pilot program participants who reported limited opportunities to engage with residents or build sustainable partnerships with the external organizational partners:

*“Did not have enough time was one of the challenges that I faced during this project.”  
(PPP, AI Report Outline)*

Pilot program participants identified that it would have been helpful to have more engagements with the same people:

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*“Had more meetings but not meeting the same people again...I do think it would have helped to meet with them more than once.” (PPP, AI Report outline)*

Lastly, time constraints left certain planned outputs unfinished, for example, the PPPs had included in their ideation phase a plan to create a take-home booklet for community members participating in the study as part of their accessibility and inclusion strategy:

*We prioritize inclusivity and accessibility by designing our program to accommodate individuals with varying levels of AI literacy and technical expertise. Through user-friendly workshops and a structured booklet, we aim to make AI education accessible to diverse audiences, regardless of their background or prior experience with technology. (PPP, AI Report Outline)*

Beyond inclusivity, the booklet was method of sustained engagement and learning with the community, that would have offered a way for the AI workshops to reinforce learning beyond the scheduled workshop time. According to the plan, additional resources, step by step instructions, staying up to date on AI news, were all to be included in the booklet. However, the lack of time did not allow the PPPs to complete this in time of the workshop date.

### ***Resource and Capacity Constraints***

Further constraints emerged around budgeting. Although pilot program participants and organization staff expressed a need for additional mentorship and program support, the funder had imposed restrictions on how much of the budget could be allocated to staffing. The funding structure prioritized short-term program outputs over the long-term capacity-building necessary for meaningful community development, or to even develop and mentor the Pilot Program Participants where they required support.

Organization staff also noted the impact of budgets on other organizations:

*the contract for school rental means [NPOs] have to pay extra to use the space on the weekend or outside normal hours which doesn't allow for an underfunded NPO to use the space or participate freely. Since cost can be a big barrier for other community*

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*organizations or groups to use the space, we do our best to accommodate that. (Organization staff, meeting notes)*

These findings suggest that even where CRC is even to utilize the former highschool for community development, they do not have full autonomy to manage and use the space in a way that's effective for all community organizations. They are limited by contractual agreements that end up imposing restrictions on smaller organizations with much smaller budgets.

*Maybe we need to select a stronger group leader.*

*It's the first experience they have creating and developing a project so the lack of initiative might be lack of experience.*

### ***Roles, Expectations, and Conflict Management***

Throughout the pilot program, tensions emerged from a misalignment of vision, expectations, and capacity between the nonprofit and the pilot program participants (PPPs). Staff frequently expressed concern over what they perceived as a lack of leadership experience or initiative among the youth, while PPPs sometimes struggled to understand the boundaries and expectations of their roles.

*I have realized the importance of effective communication and collaboration. Coordinating with various stakeholders, each with their own perspectives and expertise, is crucial for the success of any project. Clear and consistent communication helps in aligning goals, managing expectations, and ensuring that everyone is on the same page. (PPP, AI Report Outline)*

The co-leadership model, weekly sessions jointly facilitated by organization staff and PPPs, was meant to be flexible, evolving in response to participants' ideas and needs. Some youth took initiative by proposing activities, preparing for meetings, or managing portions of the project budget. However, interpersonal conflict amongst PPPs emerged despite early attempts of setting roles and expectations:

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*“Tensions with [redacted] have shifted [their] role away from working on the group project. How do we handle conflict in a way that strengthens rather than fractures the team?” (Organization staff, meeting notes)*

However, ambiguity persisted over whether organization staff were acting as mentors, facilitators, or managers, and whether PPP were expected to lead, co-create, or follow guidance. As noted in my journal: *“People are still figuring out how to work together, how to hold space for each other, how to move from ideas to action without defaulting to the same old power dynamics.” (Reflective journal)*

These observations revealed deeper assumptions within the organization staff about capacity and leadership. During a conversation with organization staff when asked about what they thought might be a hindrance to the way they originally envisioned the pilot program, they noted that there was a lack of “activist” energy amongst PPP:

*“There is a lack of leadership and activist energy. Some of the pilot program participants are stronger than others in different areas but without more support amongst each other, they couldn’t make it work. That’s why we’re having to provide so much support.” (Organization staff, Field notes).*

In reflecting on potential reasons, organization staff stated:

*Maybe we need to select a stronger group leader...*

*It’s the first experience they have creating and developing a project so lack of initiative might be lack of experience. (Organization staff, meeting notes)*

The need to meet funder-defined metrics placed additional pressure on staff, reinforcing a subtle reversion to traditional top-down management, even in a program designed to share power.

### **Community Member Engagement and Inclusion**

During visits to the Centre, the staff was often seen greeting visitors by name and guiding them through the space to welcome them, offering tea and snacks to anyone who enters; an everyday

practice that reflects the organization's aim to be both an incubator and a place of belonging. These small gestures underscore the role of CatalystOrg within the hub, and why the transition to a CSIL is possible.

Moreover, the pilot program's design and workshops created opportunities for organization staff, pilot program participants (PPPs), community members, volunteers, and external organizational partners to interact across lines of age, language, and technical ability. By designing sessions that introduced artificial intelligence in accessible, hands-on ways, the program not only built skills but also fostered a sense of belonging among participants. Volunteers, many of whom spoke multiple languages and shared lived experience with attendees, played a central role in lowering barriers and encouraging participation. This interpersonal dimension, rooted in trust, familiarity, and shared purpose, underscored the program's potential to be more than a skills-training initiative.

### *AI Education as a Tool for Engagement*

While the pilot program emphasized participant-led decision making, the project choice was not entirely organic. One of the pilot program's most visible engagement efforts was a series of Artificial Intelligence (AI) literacy workshops. Although early program design suggested that participants would select the focus themselves, field notes and meeting notes indicate that AI as a topic was partly introduced by the organization staff who wanted to "explore the social impact of AI" since early conception (Field notes). As a former employment and entrepreneurship hub focused on in demand skills for youth empowerment, I observed that the organization viewed innovation through the lens of emerging technology. In this context, AI was seen as a naturally emerging successor to the organization's former responsibilities.

The organization's perspective on innovation could be seen through field notes and observations from meetings with the organizational staff which underscore the importance of technology in the physical space: set up displays of tech equipment, use space to show usable tech equipment, and references to how technology could be used to foster inclusion and community engagement such as through the set up of an online platform. These embedded values eventually shaped the topic of choice for the workshops, despite previous ideation sessions suggesting a

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different direction as seen in the previous section. Regardless, PPPs quickly embraced the idea of AI as the project, framing it as an opportunity to address digital literacy gaps in the community:

*“Our primary goal is to demystify and democratize AI by providing accessible education and hands-on experience to individuals who may be unfamiliar or apprehensive about this rapidly evolving technology.” (PPP, AI Project Report)*

Pilot Program Participants repeatedly emphasized that technology literacy, particularly in AI, was uneven in the community and that educational sessions could make a tangible difference as discussed during meetings together:

*I am confident that together, we can make a significant difference in advancing AI literacy and fostering community empowerment. (PPP, Email)*

Their rationale was rooted in the belief that AI, when understood and used responsibly, could help individuals save time on routine tasks, improve their communication and language skills, and develop new digital competencies.

*Ultimately, this [workshop] targets AI literacy as it is becoming increasingly essential in the modern workforce. But even workforce aside, AI is a tool that can act as one's assistant making quality of life better by offering a personalized and quick-thinking experience enhancing user experience across various domains such as entertainment, shopping, online learning, and more. (PPP, AI Project Report,)*

This aligns with the organization's broader goal of empowerment and leveraging technology for community well-being.

The workshops attracted local community residents who were curious about AI but had little prior experience which some attendees shared during the workshops. Activities were intentionally light and creative to make the technology approachable. For example, attendees learned how to:

1. Use ChatGPT to generate a recipe for an apple pie that could be made in a microwave with limited ingredients, see Figure 3.

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2. Write a short story paired with AI-generated artistic graphics.
3. Practice English language skills using prompts for smart home devices.

**Figure 3** *ChatGPT's Microwave Apple Pie Recipe*



Community members were able to participate in a survey following the workshops, sharing how they enjoyed the topic of discussion:

*"I really liked the topic of discussion, especially because it's super critical to how AI will be incorporated in everyday life. I feel like a program like this is mandatory." (Community member, survey)*

As well as enjoying the learning opportunity:

*"I enjoyed the opportunity to practice, receive assistance in a fun atmosphere." (Community member, survey)*

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The educational activities also served a social purpose, bringing together residents of all ages who connected over shared interest in technology. The sessions created low-barrier entry points for participation including kids as young as 8 to seniors as observed at the workshop, contributing to more diverse engagement and inclusion.

### *Community Outreach and Advocacy*

At an institutional level, CRC has a long-standing history as a hub and resource centre (CRC website). This legacy of inter-organizational relationship building and convening has made the centre not only a service provider, but also a trusted meeting ground where ideas, needs, and resources intersect, as now observed through the organization's networked operations. Accordingly, this approach is embedded in CatalystOrg's programming and by extension, the CSIL and the pilot program.

The CSIL is founded on the principle that strong community connections are essential for innovation as noted during early meetings and relayed by the PPP:

*“At CatalystOrg, we believe in the transformative power of collaboration and innovation to address pressing societal challenges” (PPP, Email)*

On an organizational level for example, efforts by the director and innovator-in-residence, have strengthened interorganizational collaboration both within the hub and across external networks, including the development of this research study and other collaborations between local universities and other organizations. The extensive partnerships established by the organization staff as well as the physical location of the CSIL, bring together collaborators who might not interact otherwise. These principles shaped the design of the pilot program from recruitment, to planning, to execution.

From the start, the organization staff was dedicated to the inclusion of diverse participants and partners in its programming. To start off, the organization staff removed any language in their job-posting for the pilot program internships that would require formalized education. This ensured that potential participants could be considered regardless of academic background or experience.

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By lowering this barrier, the nonprofit signaled its intent to engage participants from a range of socio-economic and experiential backgrounds, consistent with PAR.

Internal documents and field notes show a range of outreach efforts by the organization staff, advocating for support in the pilot program by sending out communications to community partners about the progress of the Pilot Program, promoting the program online through social media, and sending out invitations and announcements via email.

As per the suggestions of organizational partners during the consultations, Pilot Program Participants' outreach activities for their workshop included setting up marketing booths at family events, distributing posters across the neighbourhood, and promoting workshops at youth-serving locations, as described in the meeting notes below. These strategies were intended to attract local residents, particularly youth and families, and to increase visibility and build workshop attendance, a key success metric the PPP chose to measure, and conducive to a workshop aimed at empowerment through AI literacy.

Through the Pilot Program Participants presentations during the CSIL launch to introduce their workshops, I observed as the PPPs spoke passionately about how AI has helped them and their families, and how they want to democratize this technology for everyone. With this in mind, they aimed to extend the invite to as many attendees as they could within their allotted budget. The meeting log underscores that promotional activities were a large topic of discussion and critical community member engagement element for the duration of the pilot program:

### *Meeting Notes*

*“Met to discuss workshop promotion and gather more participants*

*Met to to connect and network with other groups.*

*Met to market our program to the youth at the [redacted].*

*We can market to all, but our marketing would be more effective if we can identify key demographics.*

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*Set up a marketing booth at the [redacted] to promote our event to families.” (PPP, meeting notes)*

However, while these activities positively connected with some local participants, they also served to maintain the program’s profile within broader professional and funding networks. In my reflection after learning of the extensive promotional activities, I wondered why community members were engaged with at a level of being *informed of* the workshops, rather than being engaged with earlier in the Pilot Program process. In my reflexive journal, I reflect on the nonprofit funding structure, and the role of community member attendance as a success metric:

*“For many nonprofits, their funding structure depends on how their money is utilized and the numbers of people helped. By participating in the programs and work, the community actually helps the organization grow so that it can bring in more money however, this is done without the local community gaining long term meaningful or substantial benefit towards their empowerment. Rather, organizations get to boast that they helped feed 10000 meals to people in need.” (Journal Reflection)*

While attendance numbers for education sessions is indeed a number to be proud of, this reflection targets the efforts of engaging community members superficially without creating opportunities for deeper, sustained engagement.

Outreach and promotional efforts combined direct engagement with local community members and volunteers along with visibility efforts targeting organizational partners, subject matter experts, and funders. These activities directly and indirectly shaped the pilot program’s reach and capacity and determined who learned about the program, who was able to engage with it, and in what ways.

The nonprofit continues to advocate on behalf of community members in order to secure funding, gain access to different programs and resources whether through collaborations with other organizations or partners, as well as highlight community successes and stories. Their advocacy efforts allow for the interorganizational collaboration amongst partners within and outside of the

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hub. This dual targeting created a tension in how time and energy were allocated. Efforts aimed at increasing local inclusion sometimes overlapped with, or overshadowed by, the need to demonstrate reach and visibility to external stakeholders. The result was a balancing act between fostering genuine grassroots participation and also sustaining the legitimacy and credibility of the program. This dynamic raises important questions about how outreach strategies are designed, implemented, and evaluated in community innovation contexts.

### *Accessibility and Inclusion*

While community outreach activities focused on drawing in participants and making the program visible to local residents, accessibility and inclusion determined how those participants experienced the program once they engaged. In other words, outreach established the initial connection; accessibility ensured those connections could translate into meaningful participation. From the earliest planning stages, this meant thinking beyond just attendance numbers to consider how people of different abilities, backgrounds, and levels of digital experience could fully take part and benefit from the pilot program activities.

Since the beginning, organization staff emphasized creating an environment that was physically, digitally, and socially accessible. In meetings with community partners (external partner organizations, subject-matter experts), participants consistently asked how to design workshops that would welcome individuals with different abilities, experiences, and comfort levels with technology. As extracted from PPPs notes:

*Coming from a tech background, is there any advice you can give us to help ease people with no experience into using technology such as AI regularly? (PPP, Meeting notes)*

Workshops were intentionally broad in appeal, using topics that were relevant and understandable regardless of prior experience with AI. Practical steps included providing extra computers for participants without devices, showing mobile-friendly ways to join, and designing user-friendly materials with simple language:

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*We aim to make AI education accessible to diverse audiences, regardless of their background or prior experience with technology. (PPP, AI Project Report)*

By embedding accessibility measures into workshop design and delivery, the program sought to create a welcoming and culturally sensitive space for local residents, bridging social, technological, and cultural divides. Pilot Program Participants worked together with volunteers at the AI workshop to, “meet people where they are,” using icebreakers like “welcome bingo” (as seen in Image 5.4), encouraging community members to ask for help, and leaning into collaborative learning to build comfort and connection. In the weeks leading up to the launch, Pilot Program Participants diligently worked to ensure there would be a sufficient number of volunteers available to help.

Efforts for inclusion and accessibility were also visible in the ideas exchanged by organization staff during meetings when it came to collecting feedback from community members:

*“We have a video booth to gather feedback verbally or visually rather than just writing. We could also set up a feedback wall for a more visually appealing method of gather feedback. We can set up an app that people can digitally add their thoughts too, and of course surveys!” (Organization staff, Meeting notes)*

Pilot Program participants also shared ideas of how volunteers could assist:

*“After we can ask the volunteers how they think the participants interacted with the software and etc” (PPP, Documents)*

Volunteers were instrumental in light of accessibility and inclusion during the workshop. By engaging volunteers in AI workshop, the Pilot Program Participants were able to ensure community members were well-supported during their learning and fostered engagement:

*“Similar to technical assistance in the first section, having volunteers to assist with the workshops adds to the idea of fostering a collaborative community spirit.” (PPP, Documents)*

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During the workshops, I observed volunteers as they assisted community members by removing barriers around technology use, access, as well as overcoming language barriers. From speaking to the volunteers (there were 4), I learned that they were local community members (residents of the ward); all of which spoke at least two languages. One of the volunteers explained that she volunteers as a way to grow connected to the community, gain experience, and learn things that can help her support her family. This particular volunteer invited her family to attend the workshop, as well as another family who had recently immigrated, contributing to increasing access to learning for marginalized groups. Additionally, her multiple language skills enabled the exchange of knowledge and activities that promote the utility of AI across language barriers. In one of the demonstrations, she participated by speaking in her mother tongue and showing how Google Home could translate between the two. These efforts not only reduce intimidation around AI but also encouraged community members to see themselves as capable of engaging with emerging technologies. The diverse perspectives, skills, and lived experiences of volunteers fuel creativity while contributing to fostering trust and goodwill between the organization and community members. I reflect on this in the following:

*“Volunteers were very helpful, engaging, supportive. Closeness between them and organization. There is a a sense of duty or commitment to their community.” (Reflexive Journal)*

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**Figure 4** *AI for Everyday Life BINGO Card*

**AI FOR EVERYDAY LIFE BINGO**

Has a dog	Plays Basketball	Speaks more than 2 languages	Visited another country this year or will	Loves spicy food
Uses AI to write reports	Is wearing a watch	Is a twin	Has a cat	Reads books regularly
Hates Chocolate	Was born outside of Canada	FREE SPACE	Watches anime	Has family outside of Canada
Is a middle child	Can play a musical instrument	Can do a backflip	Can remember the Canadian national anthem	Is above 6 foot tall
Does martial arts	Is a vegetarian	Notice your thoughts	Declutter one space	Get a good night's sleep

Find a different guest who matches each description and write their name in the box. Everyone who gets at least one line on the card will be entered to win a \$30 gift card at Gifts In Kind!

Overall, the way “community engagement” was defined and enacted reflected the CSIL’s broader priorities. Decisions about program framing, partner selection, and event promotion were shaped not only by grassroots needs but also by the imperatives of navigating conflict, competing priorities, and structural constraints. This raises the question: engagement for whom, and toward what end? These tensions point directly to issues of legitimacy, both in the eyes of local residents and in the competitive ecosystem of nonprofit funding.

## **Organizational Legitimacy**

The pursuit of legitimacy created a tension in the process and outcome of the pilot program's activities. Public-facing events, such as the program launch, prioritized visibility with political figures, board members, and sector "experts" over direct engagement with local residents. Accountability to the funders was pursued in the form of reporting requirements, signaling that legitimacy was being pursued upward and outward rather than within the immediate community. Lastly, topic ideas that centered the perceived local challenges, were set aside in favor of a technology-focused theme, that was perceived as more "innovative" and resume-worthy, as well as more marketable to funders.

### ***Legitimacy Through Outreach Activities***

The pilot program's development revealed a balancing act between meeting community needs and aligning with institutional and funder expectations. The organization's outreach efforts (as mentioned in previous theme) were grounded in its position of a trusted community organization, but they were defined by underlying expectations of the funders and external organizational partners. Throughout the study, the pursuit of legitimacy eclipsed alternative methods of community engagement:

*[Redacted] wants to be realistic with goals for the pilot program but also high achieving in the outcome because there is a huge need to meet funders/government reporting needs which we will need to abide by. (Meeting notes)*

The CSIL launch event mirrored this emphasis on external validation. The launch event was expected to be the first introduction of all interested parties to the CSIL after being approved for funding. The event was an open invite to all, however, at the event I observed that it was centered around the board, funders, and political figures, ie. those typically holding power. Besides the introductions from the organization staff, speeches were given by board members, funders, and the politicians. The pilot program participants gave a presentation on their project proposal and then took their spot on the periphery of the space: on a separate floor. There was next to no input from any local community members as per the agenda of the event. A community member, in conversation towards the end of the event shares her thoughts with me:

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*It felt like it was put together to celebrate people who brought it together. Kind of like a 'look at what we did with your money' ...if it was supposed to be for the local community, then, I didn't get that. (Local community member, field notes)*

Moreover, the launch party of the CSIL was on a weekday, during normal work hours, effectively excluding working-class families from attending but allowing funders and other organizational partners to attend. In contrast, the choice to host the AI workshop on the weekend allowed local community members and their families to attend but excluded funders and most organizational partners.

The exclusion of local voices and meaningful action at such events was noticed internally as well; one organization staff member referred to such events as:

*"It's like a NATO meeting...No Action Talk Only...just like the innovator conferences that I don't go to anymore - they only talk about all the things they can do but don't take any action." (Innovator-in-Residence, field notes)*

My frustration with the CSIL launch is captured in an excerpt in my journal:

*"The scene that keeps replaying in my mind is the clapping and for all the funders with their BIG company logos projected behind them. Everyone is so polished and poised... The whole event seems bureaucratic; like we are grovelling at the funders for them to be convinced they gave us money for the right reasons. It feels so inauthentic and performative. All the speeches are just buzz words – impact, transformation, empowerment...of who?! What bothers me the most is that an event like this is even necessary... that we have to "sell" social transformation to those who have the resources to buy it. What if they don't [buy] next time?" (Journal)*

This example presented through the following excerpts from internal meeting notes reveal how legitimacy was linked to partnerships and workshop success: first, through the mention of credibility based on endorsement from another organization,

*"[redacted] already has many initiatives that relate to digital literacy therefore having them promote our program would be of great help and adds credibility." (PPP, Meeting notes)*

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Second, positive endorsement of the program through the support of another external organization:

*“The event could feature [redacted] as a co-sponsor, highlighting their support for AI education and community development.” (PPP, post-meeting notes)*

These findings reveal that the pursuit of legitimacy in outreach activities played a role in the pilot program’s processes.

### ***Legitimacy Through Accountability to Funders***

Another example of the pursuit of legitimacy is the focus on reporting mechanisms. Field notes and meeting notes reveal that legitimacy was being pursued upward and outward rather than with the community members. In this incident, the PPP were provided a report template designed by the organization staff and me in order to satisfy a funder requirement. This legitimizes the work of the CSIL in the eyes of the funder. In fact, I later learned through organization staff that the funder would also be hiring a third-party agency to assess the report and the results of the pilot program.

The pursuit of legitimacy is not necessarily a deliberate choice made by the organization, but a result of constraints and barriers that are imposed by external agencies. The CSIL’s survival hinges on its compliance to these imposed rules as explained to me by the organization staff, who risk losing their funding if they are not in compliance. This contradiction in how legitimacy is forced onto the everyday practices of the pilot program shaped the process and outcome of the pilot. For example, the language used in the invitation to the launch is very focuses on professional development rather than liberatory practice, to demonstrate the tangible outcomes of the program, such as job-readiness:

*Our initiative focuses on fostering work-integrated learning experiences for youth, enabling them to develop their professional skills in a safe and supportive environment while actively engaging with the community...join us on this journey of fostering innovation and creating positive impacts in our community. (AI Project Report)*

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This excerpt when compared to early discussions between the organization staff and me about community-based work and the transition to a CSIL, are glaring:

*We are planning and designing events for community gathering. Trying to figure out how to initiate social transformation...we want to identify the potential for greater participation by community members who may not identify themselves as "entrepreneurs" (meeting notes)*

These excerpts taken together show two different intentions: the former on tangible outcomes and skills with community members being engaged *with*, and the latter as socially transformative outcomes *by* the community. The tension between legitimacy and organizational alignment with their local community versus the funders points to the effects of institutional pressures on the outcomes for nonprofit organizations. Without the accountability mechanisms that come from direct feedback from the local community, the organization's sense of legitimacy became entirely tied to the expectations of its funders, which is noted in my field notes after a group meeting:

*Structure is still a for profit/growth structure because the goal is to bring more money in for more program so it has to be things that look good and sit well with the board or else they may not get more funding. (field notes)*

This created a situation where the success of the pilot program was measured not by its utility to the community, but by its ability to be approved by the funders, raising the question of how transformative nonprofits can really be under current funding structures.

### ***Legitimacy through Selecting AI as a Topic***

The choice of AI as a topic, while partly participant-driven, also aligned with the nonprofit's broader goal of fostering future-oriented skills and positioning itself as a forward-thinking educational resource. Based on early ideation processes, the PPP had decided to work towards creating an event that facilitates learning English for Newcomers as demonstrated in the planning whiteboard:

**Figure 5** Screen capture of pilot program participants planning whiteboard



Through the whiteboard, it is evident that the PPPs are developing a socially innovative event that would facilitate community engagement through various modes of interaction and recreational activities. However, lack of consensus among the group of PPPs delayed the process of confirming the idea and moving forward. Eventually this led to the abandonment of this idea. The conflict at the time was noted in my field notes:

*“can’t decide on topic –don’t know what to focus on – too many moving parts- each [PPP] wants different things – each need to lead their own” (field notes)*

The proposal of AI as a topic from the organization staff was a viable adaptation that would allow each PPP to run their own workshop, using AI as a common theme. PPPs would also still be able to focus on community engagement by turning an emerging technology trend into a

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community-rooted learning experience. The Pilot Participants enthusiasm towards AI was linked to the perception of AI being applicable to “*everyday tasks and creative endeavours*” as reported in the AI Report Outline.

However, discussions with PPPs during interactive sessions offered insights into personal gains from working on an AI-specific workshops, where it would “*legitimize their work in the eyes of employers and expand opportunities for work,*” and “*look good on [my] resume*”.

**Figure 6** Purpose of AI Topic



This alignment between participant enthusiasm and organizational positioning strengthened the legitimacy of the pilot program in the eyes of both the pilot program participants and their

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future prospects and potential funders, while also offering something valuable to the community because, *“it’s something they [local community] don’t have but everyone needs to know about it”* (PPP, field notes).

Legitimacy of the program and consequently, community-based work was important to establish with the pilot program participants. The organization staff explains it as follows:

*“AI was selected because it was obviously ahead of its time to say you gave a community workshop on AI at that time – but also because the youth [PPP] had to be interested in the subject so they could actually take ownership of it. During the training, they saw how AI was being used in different programming and framed as innovative. And they noticed that there was a lot of “technology” being used in “innovation” so that kind of became their understanding of social innovation. We needed to ensure they would stay interested in the program so it had to be a topic they could be proud of. Looking back, we obviously missed the chance to course correct and teach them about separating social innovation from tech, but we just needed to keep going.”* (Organization staff, meeting notes)

This misunderstanding is hard to combat when on an institutional level, we learn that:

*“The funder understands innovation as tech. That’s where all the money is going now”* (Organization staff, meeting notes)

These decisions reflect an ongoing balancing act: ensuring programs remain attractive to those who control resources, while still attempting to serve the people who live in the neighbourhood, or in this case the pilot program participants. In the pilot, this balancing act sometimes created tension between the program’s stated aim of community-driven innovation and the implicit need to produce outcomes that would be recognized as valuable by external audiences such as the funders and employers.

### ***Survey Design and Feedback Process***

The idea of consulting with local community members during the development of the workshops surfaced throughout the pilot program, however, ultimately it was hindered by the lack

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of time and available know-how in how to implement it. In my notes during the pilot program, I write that:

*“[The organization staff] are focused on bringing experts but open to involving community. However, needs to know how.”*

In this light, prior experience and embeddedness of community-oriented processes in the organization’s operations play a role in how the organization makes decisions under pressure.

To compensate for the lack of community member engagement, the organization staff and PPP requested I create a survey that would enable them to collect feedback from the community members that attend the workshops, amongst any other attendees. The measurement of outcomes through a survey and the collection of participant feedback was an important component in the pilot design, as it allowed participants to voice their thoughts on the workshop. It also provided a tangible way of gauging satisfaction and future interest. In this sense, it was a strategy to engage participants for their thoughts on the workshops.

For this survey at the end of the workshops, the PPPs removed a key portion of the survey that focused on gathering feedback on the community’s sense of belonging and interest in becoming more involved with the future events, to the great disappointment of myself and the organization staff. The PPP’s rationale was that the survey was too long, and participants would lose interest in completing it. The retained portion of the survey focused almost exclusively on the utility or usefulness of the AI workshops, the overall setting, and individual feedback for the PPP who taught the workshops that day.

This decision reveals a perception among the PPPs that the program's value was more important and perhaps economically beneficial than the social value of togetherness. In seeking to know that it was a *“job well done”* (PPP, AI Report Outline) and that participating community members *“got something out of their time there,”* (PPP, AI Report Outline) the PPPs prioritized a form of accountability to themselves as facilitators, rather than to the broader social goals of the program and the organization’s desire for deeper engagement. Again, this illustrates the ongoing tension between seeking legitimacy through tangible, marketable outcomes and the more intangible, social objectives of community-based work.

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In my reflexive notes, I vent my frustrations:

*Barriers exist at each stage that hinder the involvement of community. Cannot enact community engagement without change in the whole system. (Reflexive Journal)*

While the eliminated section of the survey reflects oversight on part of the organization staff and me, it should also be celebrated as a win for PAR. From the perspective of PAR, this illustrates that the PPPs felt comfortable and in control of the workshop they dedicated 11 weeks planning for; and made a decision based on *their* idea of the best outcome for the workshop and community member attendees. Decision making power is an important aspect of PAR, and while the survey results may not capture elements that were beneficial for my thesis or the funder's report; it was ultimately grounded in the PPPs power over the project.

This dynamic illustrates how the pursuit of legitimacy, measured through alignment with funder priorities and the appearance of innovation, at times overshadowed grassroots relevance. Without mechanisms to anchor decision-making in community feedback, the pilot's success metrics skewed toward visibility and novelty rather than sustained local impact. This orientation also changed the dynamics of whose knowledge counted and what the focus of the pilot program was. Instead of the local community engagement-centered programming for language learning, the program shifted to a top-down classroom environment where knowledge was passed down to local community members. The emphasis on gaining legitimacy through alignment with dominant sector norms thus flowed directly into the formation of a knowledge hierarchy within the program.

### **Knowledge Hierarchy**

The privileging of technical and institutional expertise shaped how program decisions were made, who was invited to contribute, and what was recognized as a valuable asset. Organization staff and participants tended to emphasize tangible resources, such as equipment, formal partnerships, named experts, over intangible assets such as community trust, cultural knowledge, and lived experience. This hierarchy was reinforced in program meetings, where professionalized or "expert" voices carried greater weight in shaping the agenda and defining success.

*Expert-led Collaborations*

The pilot program's design emphasized "consultations" with external community organizations, subject matter experts, and residents of the ward as stated in an internal document. The stated intention was to have youth collaboratively design and run a community initiative, with feedback loops from local residents. This vision was echoed in an email sent to external organizational partners:

*We believe that community participation and engagement should be at the forefront of the program, which is why we are reaching out to community partners like you. We believe that your organization's expertise and dedication to community well-being would greatly enrich our participants' learning experience... Our plan is to have the youth meet with community partners and community members after they have decided upon a project to pursue. (Organization Staff, Email)*

This excerpt demonstrates two things: firstly, that the organizational partner is prioritized as the expert knowledge source, and second, that community members (local residents of the ward) are just that: members. Rather than *partners* in the projects to take place in the pilot program. This is also supported in the following excerpt from a slide show:

*Community Partners (refers to organizations)*

*Community members (refers to local) (Organization staff, slideshow)*

Partnerships with other nonprofit organizations and subject matter experts were positioned as a key strength of the program. The value of these relationships is described in the following:

*We firmly believe in the transformative power of local talent and knowledge in enhancing the well-being of our communities through innovation, creativity, collaboration, and cohesion. Our Social Innovation Lab will serve as a dynamic platform for innovators eager to share their expertise and collaborate with others to bring their ideas to life. (CSIL Article, online)*

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Through these networks, participants were introduced to mentors who could offer guidance, resources, and access to professional knowledge channels. While these connections expanded the range of expertise available, they also reinforced a knowledge hierarchy in which validation and “best practice” often came from external professionals rather than from lived community experience, as can be see in this email to external organizational partners where they are framed as collaborators:

*We believe that your expertise and involvement could greatly enhance the impact of our program. Your insights and support would not only enrich the content of our workshops but also contribute to the broader goal of empowering our community through AI literacy. ...We wish to discuss potential collaboration opportunities, whether it be through guest speaking engagements, content co-creation, or any other form of partnership that aligns with your interests and expertise.*

On the other hand, local community members were not at all consulted at any point in the process. First because of funder pressures that rushed the start of the pilot program, therefore removing the opportunity for community consultation; and later because priority was given to meeting with subject matter experts and external organizational partners. While most of the external organizational partners and subject matter expert interactions were positive, there was a moment where the PPPs felt confused and overwhelmed because of the range of ideas and opinions coming from the many different collaborators.

In the PPPs feedback at the end of the pilot, one PPP expressed that meeting with one mentor multiple times would have been better than meeting many partners once. This expression of quality time spent speaks to the importance of relationality. Towards the end of the pilot program, the influence of knowledge hierarchies and power became apparent to the organization staff:

*[redacted]'s role has been mostly advisory, but the team needs more than advice. They need a mentor. Someone with a strong community background who can guide them through this without taking over the project and distancing them from their goals. That is going to be crucial as we move toward community consultations. (Meeting notes)*

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By the time the community feedback session was ready to be held, the organization staff informed me that the PPP felt overwhelmed by the amount of conflicting feedback from the various external organizational partners and subject matter experts that they chose to forego it all together. A key piece that offers insight into whose knowledge was centered even at the meetings with other partners, is “*without taking over,*” suggesting tension between the PPP and the *experts* who were offering advice.

### *Democratization of AI*

Once AI was established as the program focus, efforts were made to democratize the knowledge. Workshops reframed AI from being an elite or specialist domain to something practical and relatable. PPPs demonstrated how AI tools could be applied to everyday tasks like cooking, art creation, and language learning, aiming to challenge the notion that only tech experts could meaningfully engage with these tools:

*Demonstrate how AI technology can be used in everyday tasks such as cooking, art creation, and language learning. (PPP, AI Report Outline)*

The program’s emphasis on usability and real-world relevance attempted to position community members as active participants rather than passive consumers of technology. However, this empowerment was still mediated by expert-led framing, from the consultation sessions, structured around concepts introduced by organizational staff and external mentors rather than organically arising from the pilot program participants’ own explorations of community needs.

**Figure 7** *AI Workshop attendees*



These dynamics not only influenced the kinds of contributions that were visible but also determined how community assets were identified and mobilized. Staff had a more expansive sense of available resources, while participants often reported “nothing” was available, reflecting the gap between an asset-based and a deficit-based lens. Understanding how assets were mobilized in practice provides insight into how knowledge hierarchies played out in tangible ways.

### **Asset Mobilization**

The nonprofit considered many assets in the development of the pilot program such as external organizational partners, funders, intraorganizational networks within the CRC hub, the physical space of the centre, the availability of educational resources and mentors to guide the participants, the availability of technological tools and equipment that were available, as well as software subscriptions and other physical resources available through other partners.

*Incorporating Asset-based Community Development*

The asset-based perspective was large part of the PAR study with the organizational staff when designing the pilot. This is seen in online publications by the innovator-in-residence who writes:

*Local innovation resources include: a) “people-centric” gifts: knowledge, resourcefulness, ideas, dreams for a better future, ingenuity, imagination, networks, wisdom, lived experiences, histories, new perspectives, trust and goodwill; b) physical spaces, buildings and infrastructure “Third Places” that can be repurposed, reconfigured, re-imagined for new uses); and c) introduction of new tools and enabling technologies that are accessible to the community-at-large fueling the imagination and actualization of ideas. Adopting this perspective reveals that even so-called disadvantaged communities have sufficient resources rather than being considered having a deficit of means to engage in innovation practices, processes and ecosystems. (Online article)*

Meeting notes also illustrate instances where the organization staff brainstormed ideas for community assets mapping:

*Can we create a tool that could help us gather community assets?*

*Can we have a community centric wiki where community members can pitch in?  
(Organization staff, meeting notes)*

Information packages, posters, mailing lists, activities and demonstrations by other nonprofits were other sources of community assets leveraged to enhance participation and community engagement for the workshops. Additionally, the presence and availability of social and physical infrastructure to supports community engagement process by repurposing and reconfiguring physical spaces to serve community needs and the workshops. The following excerpt from meeting notes contains a sample list of assets discussed together with organization staff:

*Microgrants*

*Donations*

*Online connections*

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*Community coffee*

*Ideas welcome*

*Outreach co-ordinator*

*Video booth for insight*

*Micro-credentials*

*Placements*

*Badge for accreditation*

*Multigenerational space (meeting notes)*

The development of the pilot program and workshops relied on many institutionalized community assets beginning with funding that allowed for the development of program, all the way until the completion of the workshops. These opportunities to promote community engagement rise through the interdependence of the organization with others and its ability to leverage its networks have allowed it to continue to develop its programming.

For the AI workshops, the pilot program leveraged a broad array of resources, from physical spaces within the community centre to partnerships with local nonprofits, funders, and subject matter experts. Staff drew on their networks to secure educational materials, technological tools, and promotional channels. The assets available for use by local community members enhanced equity and lowered barriers to access through the use of physical tools and infrastructure at no cost to community members (computers, devices, internet connections, adaptable spaces) and intangible assets (volunteers, shared knowledge, and peer support networks). These assets contributed to removing participation barriers and supporting engagement.

Notably however, intangible *relational* assets, that existed within the local community members: like resident relationships, informal community leaders, and shared histories, were not apparent until the end of the program, where the relationships between community members were observed at the workshop. As captured by the AI Report put together by the PPP:

*“Our program fosters community engagement and collaboration by bringing together individuals with shared interests in AI and related fields... Through collaborative learning*

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*experiences and networking opportunities, participants have the chance to connect with peers, share ideas, and inspire each other to further explore the potential of AI in their lives.” (PPP, AI Report Outline)*

Interestingly, a difference in perspective of assets emerged from PPPs compared to the organization staff members during early meetings. During conversations about what was available in the community for mobilization, the PPPs often responded “nothing.” The organization staff however, often had a plethora of ideas and suggestions to counteract this view. I noticed however, that the organization staff response applied only to tangible assets when it came to community members. Intangible assets that are characteristic of people such as trust or knowledge or determination were met with uncertainty. When the AI workshop drew close, the PPPs had reversed their stance, having realized all the assets of resources, relationships, friends, and support they could rely on to help with the event, suggesting confidence in their community to support the initiative.

Through deeper exploration of the organization staff’s view of intangible assets in the community base, they revealed that they had plans for events that would showcase the skills and talents of local community members to increase visibility and create opportunities for connections among residents to overcome this very issue. Pointing back to one of the goals of the CSIL, which was to transform the space into a community space which requires trust building.

Even when assets were identified, mobilizing them was shaped by structural constraints. Compressed timelines, budget restrictions, and funder conditions determined which resources could be deployed, and when. This often meant prioritizing visible outputs over slower, relational processes, linking asset mobilization directly to the structural barriers that defined the pilot program’s operating environment from the beginning. However, through the empowerment of the PPPs, change in their mindset towards their view of the community became visible, they were more informed and cognizant of how much power they held.

Across all themes, the pilot program reveals how grassroots engagement can be constrained by the structural and institutional ideology of the nonprofit sector, even in initiatives explicitly framed as community led. The interplay of engagement, legitimacy, knowledge hierarchies, asset

use, structural constraints, and accountability underscores the challenge of aligning organizational goals and knowledge with community-driven innovation.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study's findings are organized into five interrelated themes: Structural Barriers to Participation, Community Engagement and Inclusion, Organizational Legitimacy, Knowledge Hierarchy, and Asset Mobilization each shedding light on how the pilot program navigated the tension between its stated goal of community-led innovation and the institutional demands of program delivery. The table at the end of this section represents a summary of these findings.

Structural Barriers to Participation reveals how unclear roles, institutional timelines, and capacity gaps limited the depth of participant leadership. Community Engagement and Inclusion capture the program's intentional outreach, accessibility measures, and culturally sensitive facilitation strategies, while also revealing gaps in reaching beyond established networks. Organizational Legitimacy examines how the nonprofit balanced accountability to funders and partners with accountability to local residents, showing how visibility efforts sometimes overshadowed grassroots involvement. Knowledge Hierarchy highlights the dynamics between staff, youth participants, and external experts, where decision-making power often resided with institutional actors despite efforts to democratize knowledge production. Finally, Asset Mobilization illustrates the nonprofit's ability to leverage both tangible and intangible resources to support programming, while also exposing differences in how staff and participants perceived available community assets. These themes demonstrate that while the program employed democratic, community-led strategies, structural and institutional factors limited the ability of pilot program participants and community members to lead projects.

Throughout the pilot program, recurring tensions affected the development and implementation of the AI workshop initiative, but efforts rooted in the ethos of social transformation helped to balance. The nonprofit aimed to experiment with community-driven models but remained reliant on institutional structures that on one hand, enabled their existence such as funding mechanisms, but on the other hand controlled the level and type of engagement through their imposed conditions. This limited how far co-governance and new approaches could

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be meaningfully implemented, prioritizing structural dependency. Next, while the program emphasized inclusion and youth voice, decision-making power were heavily guided by external constraints. Community ideas were influenced by institutional timelines, risk aversion, and internal priorities, prioritizing organizational control. Lastly, the pilot valued confidence-building, connection, and curiosity. Yet, pressure to show results and gain recognition often prioritized measurable achievements over deeper, long-term social goals, prioritizing legitimacy seeking behaviour.

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**Table 6** *Summary of critical analysis*

Category	Institutional rationality	What actually happened	Resulting contradiction	Impact on community
Structural Barriers to Participation	We don't have the time or money to do X.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time constraints led to making decisions under pressure that mirrored service-based processes.</li> <li>• Early community focus eroded by funder implementation pressures.</li> <li>• Prioritizing partners over community due to little time for planning.</li> <li>• Constellation framework risks reinforcing existing hierarchies.</li> <li>• Feedback forms created accountability mechanisms but were limited in scope.</li> </ul>	Reproduction of same power issues.	Exclusion of marginalized voices. Loss of opportunity to contribute.
Community engagement and inclusion	Experts and partners are a resourceful part of the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superficial events/programs served legitimization without long term planning for genuine community impact.</li> <li>• Misalignment between stated intentions (community benefit) and actions (lack of consultation).</li> <li>• Community outreach that targets specific communities</li> </ul>	Symbolic inclusion or tokenistic engagement.	Members viewed as beneficiaries instead of partners or co-creators.
Organizational Legitimacy	We must change how we market ourselves/what we do to get more funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners' resources leveraged primarily for organizational goals.</li> <li>• Accountability directed primarily towards funders and meeting their criteria.</li> <li>• Use of buzzwords to appeal to funders.</li> <li>• Clear distinction between bureaucratic power and community power.</li> </ul>	Institutional priorities chosen over community needs.	Organization retains control. Loss of opportunity for community-driven initiatives.
Knowledge Hierarchy	Experts know how to do things better.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert-led collaboration reinforcing the dependence of progress on experts having the knowledge</li> <li>• Relationship building exclusively with experts/organization.</li> <li>• Marginalization of local knowledge.</li> </ul>	Prioritization of expert knowledge over community knowledge, and tech solutions over community solutions.	Power is in the hands of external actors. Community knowledge sidelined.
Asset Mobilization	Organizational partners can share their knowledge with us!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program had significant assets (networks, space, technology).</li> <li>• Assets primarily benefited institutional actors rather than local community.</li> <li>• physical spaces/social networks were used for NPO programs, not community-driven initiatives.</li> <li>• Relationships built with institutions, not residents.</li> </ul>	Resource paradox: assets used to benefit NPO programming over community needs.	Reinforces separation of NPO governance from local community.

## **Chapter VI: Discussion: Contradictions of Nonprofit-led Community Engagement**

Across the themes, the findings emphasize the importance of interrogating power, process, and positionality within nonprofit-community collaborations. While the language of participation and co-creation is widely used, its realization is often constrained by institutional norms, funding pressures, and the pursuit of legitimacy. Drawing on critical literature, this study contributes to an evolving conversation on how community-driven initiatives can move from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation through shared visioning, equitable planning, and deep accountability.

Building on the contextual overview of CatalystOrg, the following section presents a discussion of the research findings. The discussion is organized in alignment with the study's central research questions and reflect both the organization's stated intentions and the practical realities observed during the pilot program. By examining recurring patterns and points of tension, the discussion offers insight into how community-driven principles are taken up, negotiated, and sometimes compromised within nonprofit settings, as well as the implications for community engagement. While the previous chapter responded to the research question in broad terms, the following section succinctly responds to each, followed by a discussion that synthesizes the findings and implications.

The following subsections are organized around the three guiding research questions:

1. What are the initiatives taken by the nonprofit to promote community-driven projects?
2. What are the challenges faced by the nonprofit in implementing community-driven projects?
3. What is the perceived impact on the community?

The research questions yielded the following summary results:

**Initiatives to promote community-driven projects:** the data shows a disconnect between participatory rhetoric and practice. While the organization emphasized education, advocacy, and collaboration, those involved in the collaborations were not local residents. Instead, they were external organizational partners and subject matter experts. Workshops focused on AI education without the emphasis on risk and dangers of the technology and without a sustainable plan for

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long-term community engagement or community ownership. Lastly, feedback mechanisms measured satisfaction with predetermined programs rather than incorporating community input in design. Instead, the nonprofit may be forced to *lean into* funder demands as a way of ensuring its survival.

**Implementation challenges:** external pressures significantly constrained the process. Funder-imposed timelines led to rushed planning phases, inconsistent communication, and unclear expectations. The compressed schedule limited the ability to have any meaningful community consultation or any attempt at co-governance. Resource constraints and conditions for use further exacerbated these issues, particularly in staffing and program development support which may have provided the flexibility to complete the pilot in a more community-driven way.

**Perceived community impact:** outcomes reflected these systemic limitations. While participants reported increased confidence with technology, the focus on individual skill-building (like AI literacy) overshadowed broader community needs. Accessibility efforts, though well-intentioned, often failed to reach beyond existing networks and the existing infrastructure. Lastly, the emphasis on quantifiable outputs such as a quantitative survey, captured surface-level impressions but missed possible deeper impacts.

In conclusion, while the nonprofit framed its community engagement model as participatory and asset-based, emphasizing education, advocacy, and collaborative initiatives, this study finds that its practices ultimately prioritized organizational survival over community engagement. External pressures, including funder expectations, time constraints, and reputational imperatives, drove the organization to prioritize institutional legitimacy over accountability with the community. As a result, initiatives like AI literacy and surface-level inclusion reflected a technocratic, individualistic approach that fell short of the systemic, collective transformation it claimed to pursue. Despite genuine efforts, the absence of sustained, reciprocal relationships with community members ultimately reproduced the very power asymmetries the organization sought to dismantle. Additionally, projects like these carry the risk of becoming a form of innovation extraction, where community needs are reframed to fit pre-set, funder-friendly interventions, rather than organically emerging from community-driven processes. The result was a visible

demonstration of innovative activities and partnerships that served primarily to enhance external legitimacy.

This tension between espoused values and enacted practices form a central focus of the subsequent discussion, particularly as it relates to the dynamics of innovation extraction, technosolutionism, and the pursuit of legitimacy in the nonprofit sector. Future efforts must consider how to build the tools and capacities necessary for shared governance, ensuring that co-leadership is supported by both structure and trust. They must also ask what scaffolding youth need in order to lead meaningfully, balancing empowerment with guidance. Finally, organizations considering a shift in their governance structures and transitioning from service-based models to community-led requires thoughtful planning, time, and flexibility from the funder to allow for the exploration of alternatives.

### **The Paradoxes of Legitimacy and Accountability**

The findings reveal a pronounced shift toward the commodification of nonprofits, a process driven by three interlocking mechanisms: funder pressures, the rise of social enterprise models, and the institutionalization of business-like practices (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Maier et al, 2016). While such market-oriented adaptations may enhance financial sustainability and organizational scalability, they simultaneously engender mission drift, accountability deficits, and the potential distortion of core social missions (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Mair et al., 2015).

NPOs are known to play an important role as a civic intermediary between citizens and the state (Phillips, 2006). Even historically, NPOs were known to be a place for communities to practice *citizenship* engage in public debate, and build trust (Putnam, 2000). However, they have been constrained by the view that they should be providing services and are so overwhelmed by their preoccupation with providing services, that they have been unable to develop *political capital* (Sorensen, 2002, Sorensen and Torfing, 2004 as cited by Phillips, 2006, p. 9). In this view, constraining nonprofit advocacy was an incremental process at starting at a federal policy level.

The federal government created a list of criteria to limit the nonprofit sector's ability to qualify for funding which were intended to change the role of advocacy groups into service providers

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(Jenson & Phillips, 1996). First, funding was denied unless NPO programs aligned with the government priorities, second, the legitimacy of NPOs was brought into question over issues of representation. That is, if they didn't represent all Canadians, they were labelled as a "Special Interest" group, thus slowly eroding their credibility to the public (Jenson & Phillips, 1996, p. 124). The impact of funder pressures cannot be separated from the role of neoliberalism and the consequent austerity measures that took place in the early 90s (Phillips, 2006). This study's findings affirm the enduring legacy of these policies, illustrating how program-focused funding and questioning legitimacy continue to constrain nonprofit autonomy.

These also align with observations by Cooper et al. (2022), who discuss how the research environment and funding structures often prioritize outputs and metrics that are misaligned with community timelines or needs. Such constraints can limit the scope of participatory processes, pressuring organizations to adopt externally driven models of accountability that undermine community-driven processes. These pressures affect not only implementation, but the framing of community problems and the definition of success.

Furthermore, because of federal accountability requirements in public funding, the voluntary sector has evolved into contractual relationship with the government rather than one based on trust (Phillips, 2006, p.8). Evans et al. (2005) describe this as a, "narrow form of administrative accountability," focused on efficiency and compliance with funding agreements (Evans et al., 2005, p. 87). In practice, these mechanisms blur the lines between evaluation, public accountability, and administrative oversight, making accountability itself a tool of control (Evans et al., 2005). For the pilot program, this translated into fixed reporting requirements that could not fully capture the intangible outcomes valued by participants such as relationship-building and creative experimentation. Organization staff were responsible for meeting these administrative demands, which at times meant making unilateral decisions to keep the program on track for funder expectations.

To counteract these effects, Polanyi (1944) highlights the roles that civil society can play in fighting against the commodification of social and ecological goods. He argues that when naturally occurring things are stripped of their social and ecological context and instead treated as market

commodities, contradictions arise. The push to create a market society is met with the countermovement against it which he called “double-movement.” While the state exists to enforce these regulations, Polyani (1944) argues the real pressure comes from civil society, such as social movements and cooperatives. Peredo and McLean (2019) offer a contemporary example by documenting how common property arrangements can serve as forms of decommodification in practice. Their work shows how communities resist market ideology through relational, place-based practices that reclaim resources and governance from extractive systems.

NPOs as civic intermediaries act as agents of change demonstrating the dynamic relationship between marketization and the struggle against it. From this perspective, creating a relationship of dependency between nonprofits and funders achieves the goal of marketization with *less resistance* from civil society. Without integrated geographical communities and without credible groups to organize socially-based communities, individuals are likely to become more disconnected from both civil society and the state.

### **“Innovation Speak”: The Impact of Language**

An emerging concern across the data in this study was the pervasive use of “innovation speak” and business-oriented language such as *growth*, *empowerment*, and *marketing*, within community initiatives and goals. While often intended to signal progress or attract funding, this language had the unintended consequence of distancing organizations from their social missions and alienating some community members (Jimenez et al, 2025).

This observation aligns with Jimenez et al. (2025), who argue that “innovation speak” often reinforces dominant power structures by advancing Anglo-Eurocentric norms of what constitutes progress or success. Rather than emerging organically, such language is frequently internalized by nonprofits and local actors striving to appear modern, productive, and fundable- what the authors describe as mirroring global ideologies that maintain the coloniality of power (Jimenez et al., 2025). This is not simply a matter of external imposition; it reflects how internalized discourses of innovation and entrepreneurship shape the priorities and identities of social actors.

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The pressure to perform legitimacy through this kind of language contributes to a form of “tactical mimicry” (Dey and Teasdale, 2015 as cited in Tracey & Stott, 2017), where nonprofits publicly align themselves with neoliberal discourses such as social enterprise while privately expressing skepticism or even disdain. For example, a few months after the pilot project research was complete, the centre changed their name from “Community-based Social Innovation Lab” to “Social Innovation Community Lab”. This nuanced difference positions the CSIL as a social enterprise instead of a nonprofit, enabling the organization to access more funding, despite their intentions being towards participatory methods. Where the former centered community and restricted its boundaries to a locality, the latter implies a different type of community, such as a community of interest that is not rooted in political mobilization and active citizenship, but an enterprise.

Remarkably, this linguistic framing can also risk commodifying the very practices that aim to be community-centered and relational. Terms like “social capital” and “empowerment,” when used as buzzwords, risk becoming slogans that falsely promise transformation without delivering structural change (Cornwall, 2007). Cornwall (2007) argues for the “constructive deconstruction” of terms by picking apart their many different meanings as a way of understanding the way modern day marketization has distanced them from their ideological values. “By tracing their once-radical meanings, it can also help to wrest back more progressive usages of even some of the most corrupted of terms in the current development lexicon, such as ‘empowerment’” (Cornwall, 2007, p.481).

Language use creates a tension between doing the work in ways that reflect community realities and framing the work in ways that satisfy funders and external auditors. In the context of this study, these linguistic dynamics challenge the authenticity of community-driven efforts and complicate efforts toward empowerment. While some use of innovation language may be strategic or even necessary, its overuse or uncritical adoption may undermine trust, obscure power imbalances, and redirect efforts away from the core values of participatory, community-led development. This difference illustrates the dangers of neoliberal discourses, and the impact of the language used in combination with the barriers and challenges encountered by nonprofits.

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As noted by Jimenez et al. (2025), alternative conceptions of innovation and technological change exist, particularly among racialized and Indigenous communities; nonetheless, these are often marginalized or co-opted. There is a critical need to create spaces where these alternative visions can inform nonprofit practice, rather than being overwritten by dominant narratives of market-based economies. These findings suggest that genuine community-driven work must be continually earned through transparent practices, accountability, and authentic collaboration, rather than assumed based on organizational intention or positioning.

### **Knowledge Hierarchy as a Pre-cursor to (Techno)solutionism**

This analysis identifies two dominant knowledge hierarchies shaping contemporary governance and organizational decision-making in the pilot program. First, the systematic privileging of expert knowledge over local community epistemologies. Secondly, with the selection of AI as a topic and solution to community engagement, the nonprofit engaged in what Morozov calls solutionism or *digital neoliberalism* (Morozov, 2023). The institutional influences that led to these outcomes cannot be understated.

The initiatives presented in the findings align with other findings that identify education and awareness, collaborative engagement, bringing community members together, and engaging with volunteers aligns as activities that promote civic engagement (Shier et al, 2014). However, while these findings are in line with other studies, they raise the concerns of who is given an opportunity to collaborate. Shier et al.'s (2014) study highlights the variability in nonprofit civic engagement promotion: some nonprofits focus solely on engaging their members, while others promote engagement across diverse populations. The NPO from this case study focused on subject matter experts, practitioners, and external organizations as their main partnerships while citing time constraints and difficulties for community engagement of local residents. This is underscored in the distinction between "community partners" and "community members," as defined in the archival documents, suggesting a disconnect between the program's beneficiaries and decision-makers. Moreover, from the program outcomes, it was mostly the community "partners", ie those with an organizational or expert level affiliation who ended up being consulted throughout the development of the workshops. Therefore, relationship-building efforts prioritized organizational

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stakeholders, and community “assets” were frequently equated with partnering institutions rather than individuals in the local community.

Skill-building opportunities, particularly those that are hands-on and accessible, can instill a sense of personal efficacy and motivate individuals to become more actively involved in their communities (Hardina, 2009). Novy & Leubolt (2005) highlight that educational spaces like the workshops can serve as entry points for broader civic consciousness. In the study, participants were not only acquiring technical skills but were also engaging with one another in ways that promoted shared learning, reflection, and community building. The workshops created opportunities for connection among individuals with shared interests and concerns, thereby fostering a stronger sense of belonging and social cohesion (Shier et al., 2014). However, the inability to implement long-term engagements within the timeline of the pilot program creates a barrier for the positive effects of community engagement to take hold.

Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2008) identify that the process of social innovation depends on the creation of social capital by individuals who move in various networks and are ready to exchange their knowledge, influence, and social connections to discover innovative and effective solutions to complicated issues (as cited in Fontan et al., 2013, p. 310). However, the prioritization of organizational partners and the exclusion of community feedback reflect broader challenges in how local knowledge is valued and who benefits from it. Cooper et al. (2022) found that many so-called community-driven initiatives were in fact initiated by researchers or institutions, with limited early engagement from the community. Similarly, in the pilot program, planning often originated within the nonprofit, with community involvement occurring only after initial frameworks were established, such as the transition to a CSIL, the creation of a pilot program, and further activities within the pilot that were driven without community member input. Ruebottom, Riaz, and Qureshi (2025) have offered a framework for understanding the complex nature of participation work through the *participation-inclusion paradox*. In their recently published study, Ruebottom et al. (2025) find that efforts to foster open, community-led participation can inadvertently lead to the exclusion of marginalized groups when decision making is left in accordance to community hierarchies. Conversely, restrictive, organization-controlled participation can lead to greater inclusion of the marginalized by bypassing existing hierarchies

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but be perceived as exclusive to the elite (Ruebottom et al., 2025). While the former conforms to existing power structures, the latter is disruptive to community norms, helping to empower marginalized communities by creating a space for their concerns to be shared (Ruebottom et al., 2025). This framing helps clarify the tension observed in the pilot: participation was not absent, but it was structured in ways that prioritized *symbolic* and *embedded* inclusion (as seen in Ruebottom et al.'s case study) over *strategic* inclusion (which would include decision-making power).

This observed pattern limits the transformative potential of community-driven work and raises questions about the authenticity of participatory claims. When staff, community members, or others are brought in only after key decisions have been made, collaboration risks becoming extractive or symbolic rather than emancipatory. Therefore, community-led social innovation necessitates the inclusion of local community in knowledge sharing and generating activities.

Critical scholarship on social innovation raises the concern of the *dark side* of social innovation, one that focuses on the uptake of digital solutions in response to social issues, as well as the role of elites in driving social innovation outcomes (Tracey & Stott, 2017). This study found that the pilot program's trajectory reveals how knowledge hierarchies can perpetuate technosolutionism. By privileging technical expertise and emerging technology literacy over community-derived knowledge and needs, the program reproduced an imbalance in whose perspectives had a say in both the problem definition and the solution pathway. Solutionism refers to a preoccupation with simple answers or quick solutions to problems that are often extremely complex, fluid, and contentious (Kuusela & Kantola, 2023). It presumes the problems it attempts to solve rather than fully investigating it, "reaching for answers before the questions have been fully asked" (Dobbins, 2009, cited by Kuusela and Kantola, 2023). The core idea of technosolutionism, as discussed by Evgeny Morozov, is the recasting of complex social situations as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or transparent processes that can be easily optimized (Allen, 2024; Kuusela & Kantola, 2023).

While framed as "youth-led," the direction of the project, with AI as a central theme, was set without community consultation at any stage. This framing implicitly positioned technical knowledge as the most valuable resource, reinforcing a hierarchy in which social, cultural, and

experiential knowledge held by local residents was secondary. This concentration of authority and decision-making power outside of the local community and into the hands of organization partners and subject-matter experts had two effects: first, it narrowed the scope of where an AI workshop could be most helpful to local community members; second, it reinforced a dependency on externally sourced knowledge.

Kuusela and Kantola (2023) describe ‘unpolitical solutionism’ as the dismissal of the inherently political dimension of social problems. This mirrors criticisms in *digital neoliberalism* which criticizes the reframing of social problems as having technological solutions (Morozov, 2023). In the pilot program, this logic took form through a dependency on those holding technical expertise on AI and enterprises, reinforcing a power dynamic based on those with the knowledge and those receiving the information.

This dynamic reflects a core critique of technosolutionism: the tendency to privilege technical fixes over approaches rooted in relational, political, or systemic change. The decision to center AI in the program aligned with broader institutional incentives to appear innovative, future-oriented, and attractive to funders. Yet this framing also side-lined alternative solutions that emerged from sustained, open-ended dialogue early in the ideation process. Without challenging the underlying knowledge hierarchy, participation became less about co-creating solutions on equal footing, and more about adapting community members to a preselected technological solution.

### **The First Responsibility of NPOs: Resisting Depoliticization and Market Economy Ideology**

Building on the preceding critique of neoliberal language, this section examines its material consequences: the encroachment of market ideology into nonprofit practice. While the previous discussion highlighted discursive risks, we argue here that the marketization of nonprofits does not merely alter terminology but actively reconfigures relationships by transforming political actors into depoliticized clients (Ferguson, 1990; Brown, 2015). This shift systematically privileges efficiency over participation, reframing community engagement as a transactional

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exchange rather than a site of collective agency. In doing so, it undermines the very relational foundations upon which nonprofit legitimacy rests.

This dynamic becomes particularly salient in the context of government-contracted service delivery (Leroux, 2009). While such contracts ostensibly expand organizational capacity, they also impose a paradoxical tension: the infusion of market discipline compromises the sector's ability to function as a locus of democratic accountability (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). As LeRoux (2009) demonstrates, the reliance on technocratic, market-based frameworks does not merely "modernize" nonprofit practice; it displaces participatory models with privatized governance, thereby *normalizing* rather than *confronting*, the structural inequities that necessitate nonprofit intervention in the first place (Spicer et al., 2009). The inherent risk is that communities are no longer seen as political actors, co-creators, or stewards of local knowledge, but rather as clients, users, or beneficiaries to be served and measured (Maier et al., 2016). The damaging effects of constructing community members as "target beneficiaries" deprives community members of their power through cultural assimilation (Peredo, 2003). In this context, citizens are increasingly constructed as consumers: individuals with the freedom to exit services when dissatisfied, rather than as political agents with the right and responsibility to collectively shape the public sphere (Spicer et al., 2019). This commodification of community engagement distances organizations from their social purpose and flattens the complex and inherently political nature of local organizing. This would naturally directly contradict the purpose of social innovation engagement as a political force.

This depoliticization starkly contrasts the historical traditions of collective political action found in many of the communities where community-based enterprises (CBEs) and grassroots nonprofits operate (Peredo, 2003; Peredo, 2017). Peredo (2017) emphasizes that such communities often carry embedded forms of "tacit knowledge" that have been nurtured through shared experiences. Embedded knowledge in the form of political organizing is a vital foundation for authentic community economies and restoring power to communities. However, it is often overlooked or undervalued in metrics-driven, "innovation" initiatives as it is a long-term outcome.

Building sustainable alternatives requires re-centering what Gibson-Graham (2006) call "ethical expertise", a form of embodied, other-directed knowledge that is crafted through relational

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care, mutual support, and collective responsibility. In community economies, ethical expertise is not an abstraction; it is lived and enacted through the social fabric of communities, forming the groundwork for trust and cooperation.

Asset-based approaches to development align well with this orientation, as they emphasize identifying and amplifying existing strengths within a community rather than approaching communities through a needs-based or deficit lens (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Peredo, 2003). This reframing resists the technocratic logic of “fixing problems” through innovation and instead affirms the capacities, knowledge systems, and relational practices already present in communities. (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Peredo, 2017). While digital tools may offer efficiency or scalability, the assumption that they can replace face-to-face relationships and local embeddedness is deeply flawed (Tracey & Stott, 2017). As Tracey and Stott (2017) note, the rapid expansion of digital "solutions" risks ignoring the nuanced and relational dynamics that are essential for meaningful, inclusive social change.

Resisting the commodification of communities and the depoliticization of nonprofit work requires more than rejecting market logics. Instead, it involves increasing political participation, grounding work in relational ethics, and incorporating of place-based knowledge. This approach involves positioning the community as an active agent, rather than a passive client, and valuing indigenous forms of knowledge and organizing. It also means and critically interrogating the implications of shifting toward digital solutions be it out of convenience or otherwise. These insights directly inform how legitimacy, accountability, and empowerment are practiced and understood in community-based initiatives.

### **The Second Responsibility of NPOs: Heeding the Signs of Gentrification**

This section does not attempt to make a definitive case that gentrification is underway in the neighborhood; rather, it suggests a critical examination of potential signs of displacement and how organizational processes may unintentionally reinforce aspects of gentrification. Gentrification is in the little actions; the closure of the school, the renoeviction of residents, and the influx of funders focused on social innovation, all represent examples of incremental steps that over-time push the

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working-class out of their neighborhoods or limit their mobility and disconnect them from social infrastructure.

For working-class families however, the school was more than an educational site, it was already a hub for daycares, ESL classes, and social supports. Its closure, alongside housing turnover and organizational repositioning, underscores how small, incremental actions accumulate into broader displacement pressures. Research has shown that enrollment decisions often reflect middle-class efforts to preserve social and cultural capital, with families opting out of schools perceived as “rough” or academically weaker (Slater, 2006). In this case, the local highschool served predominantly working-class and immigrant families, yet only 20 percent of students in its catchment area actually attended (Miller, 2017). Many families instead chose schools with French immersion or stronger reputations, leaving the local highschool stigmatized and under-enrolled (Miller, 2017). Its eventual closure displaced students to “unfamiliar schools” as reported by Miller (2017).

Displacement also manifests in the built environment. Local advocacy groups have identified the neighbourhood as ranking third in the city for “demovictions,” with long-standing homes demolished and replaced by higher-value builds. Simply driving through the neighborhood makes visible the rapid turnover in housing stock, signaling market pressures that are slowly changing the dynamics of the neighbourhood.

Gentrification reconfigures the funding and political ecosystem that nonprofits depend on. This aligns with the pressures noted in the study that are imposed by external funding mechanisms. In this case, the nonprofit’s own organizational shift, could easily fall into a process of further depoliticization without the proper accountability mechanisms in place. While this transition to a CSIL brought new partnerships and resources, it also shifted the organization’s orientation towards funder-friendly innovation, often appealing to external partners rather than the local residents. By adopting the language of “innovation”, and by extension taking a neutral stance, the organization avoids directly confronting the structural inequalities driving displacement. Yet, as scholars of neoliberal urbanism warn, such neutrality can mask complicity: the language of partnership and empowerment often camouflages market-driven restructuring (Cornwall, 2007; Slater, 2006).

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Here, Polanyi's (1944) notion of the "double movement" provides a useful lens. Gentrification exemplifies the commodification of space: housing and neighborhoods stripped of their social meaning and reframed as market commodities. The countermovement: civil society pushing back against marketization, is visible in local organizing, school advocacy, and resistance to demovictions. Nonprofits occupy an ambiguous place within this struggle.

From this perspective, nonprofits face a critical choice: align with funders and institutional stakeholders to secure short-term legitimacy, or risks eroding their credibility with the very communities they serve. To resist neoliberal framing, however, requires embracing the inherently political role of nonprofit leadership. This tension lies at the heart of whether nonprofits act as buffers against gentrification or inadvertently become agents of it.

## **Chapter VII: Recommendations and Conclusion**

This research set out to examine how a nonprofit organization attempted to implement a community-driven pilot program within a context of structural constraints, organizational mandates, and aspirations for alternative governance. Through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology grounded in qualitative journal data, the study sought to understand not only what initiatives were pursued to promote community leadership, but also the inherent challenges and contradictions that surfaced throughout the process, and how these influenced the perceived impact on the community.

While the nonprofit demonstrated sincere commitments to collaboration, advocacy, and leveraging community assets (RQ1), these efforts were often constrained by the need to conform to funder-driven outcomes, timelines, and organizational risk aversion (RQ2). This contradiction manifested acutely in the ideation and planning phases, where youth and community voices were present but ultimately limited in their influence. The result was a well-intentioned project that, while delivering some tangible benefits related to accessibility, inclusion, and empowerment (RQ3), fell short of the transformative, community-led governance it initially aspired to.

The study highlights that structural tensions are not just barriers to implementation, they actively shape what becomes possible within community initiatives. When community-driven goals are filtered through hierarchical decision-making, short funding cycles, and pre-existing organizational mandates, the result is often a diluted form of participation. The aspirations of alternative governance, while compelling, remain precariously situated within institutions still anchored in conventional forms of control.

Importantly, this research also demonstrates the value of PAR as both a method and an ethic. Engaging in continuous reflection, documentation, and co-analysis enabled deeper insight into the lived dynamics of governance work and brought to the surface contradictions that might otherwise remain unexamined. Through this approach, the research itself became part of the iterative process of questioning, learning, and accountability.

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Ultimately, this recommends that for nonprofits to genuinely embody community-led governance, they must not only invite participation but also transform their own internal structures, redefine relationships to power, and advocate for funding and policy models that allow for uncertainty and flexibility. Future work should explore how organizations can build infrastructures of trust that sustain community decision-making even when it deviates from institutional norms, while taking into account ever-present gentrification and actively resisting de-policization.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for policy environments that recognize and support the complexity of community-led work. Funders and policymakers must move beyond rigid, short-term funding models and outcome-driven frameworks that constrain genuine community ownership. Instead, they should invest in longer-term, flexible funding structures that allow nonprofits to engage in iterative, participatory processes without sacrificing accountability. Additionally, policies should be developed to incentivize shared governance models, youth-led planning, and relational, trust-based evaluation metrics rather than purely quantitative benchmarks. Without these shifts, efforts toward alternative governance will continue to be undermined by the very structures meant to support them. As a supplement to the theoretical aspects, Appendix B presents practical implications and questions for nonprofits seeking to transition to community-led governance models.

This thesis does not offer a simple formula for implementing alternative governance. Instead, it invites critical reflection on how governance experiments unfold in real, imperfect conditions, and what it means to pursue empowerment not as a product but as an ongoing and contested process.

### **Limitations**

This study is bounded by several limitations that shape how its findings should be understood. First, the research focused on a single nonprofit and its pilot program, making the analysis highly contextualized and not easily generalizable across all nonprofit settings. Second, the timeframe of the study presents a limitation as it only covers the pilot program, presenting insights for a critical period which do not speak for the nonprofit's activities beyond this program. A further limitation arises from the methodological approach. While the use of Participatory

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Action Research (PAR) provided rich insights through close engagement with program participants and organizational staff, the researcher's embedded role also carried the risk of bias in interpretation. Reflexive practices were used to mitigate this, but positionality inevitably influenced what was emphasized or downplayed.

This reliance on qualitative evidence limited the ability to capture the broader demographic or structural impacts. Lastly, external forces beyond the organization's control, such as federal funding requirements, accountability frameworks, and broader policy environments, moulded the pilot program in ways that could not be fully disentangled within the scope of the study. These limitations highlight the importance of situating the findings within their specific context and recognizing the complexity of nonprofit transitions under structural and institutional pressures.

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**Appendix A – List of Programs**

List of Programs by CatalystOrg:

- Employment opportunities and placements,
- Entrepreneurship opportunities,
- Micro-credential and accreditation programs,
- Community coffee chats,
- Ideas welcome chat,
- AI Art,
- Outreach Coordination,
- Venue rental and equipment rental,
- Online market for product sale,
- Community fairs and markets for vendors,
- Networking opportunities,
- High collaboration with other organizations.

**Appendix B – Practical Implications and Questions for NPOs**

1. **Transform internal structures and power dynamics.** Assess current processes to ensure decision-making process are not driven by institutional mandates.  
Guiding questions:
  - i. Who is currently making decisions?
  - ii. How are community voices represented and in what capacity?
  - iii. How can we create space for equal decision-making?
2. **Foster Authentic Engagement and Co-creation.** Embed community members from the outset in the program design. Extend outreach beyond existing networks. Be deliberate in who gets a seat at the table.
  - i. Whose knowledge are we depending on?
  - ii. Whose knowledge have we not considered?
  - iii. How are we supporting and mentoring new voices to encourage their participation?
3. **Resist Marketization and Depoliticization.** Actively embrace your role as a political institution. Create space for place-based knowledge to surface. Reject superficial language.
  - i. Does our messaging and language reflect community priorities?
  - ii. Is our messaging consistent with our goals and the community's goals?
  - iii. How have we ensured that programming and goals are rooted in local knowledge and realities?
4. **Negotiate with Funders and Organizational Partners.** Identify the role and power of funders and organizational partners and how it affects your community leadership goals. Advocate your position and ensure alignment.
  - i. Do we align with the funder/partner on our view of the community and our objectives?
  - ii. How are our funders/partners impacting us and/or limiting community participation?
  - iii. What conditions of our collaboration with the funder/organizational partner are hindering us the most from achieving our objectives?
5. **Incentivize Transformative Governance and Evaluation.** Prioritize evaluation metrics that focus on relationship building and community empowerment rather than numerical

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outputs. Negotiate for accountability mechanisms that are developed with the community, on their own timeline.

- i. What other metrics have we considered to gather feedback and engage participants?
- ii. Do these mechanisms prioritize community members equally?
- iii. How have we ensured accountability to the community is prioritized?