

Foundation_{for} Communities

A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS, COALITIONS & PLACE-BASED CHANGEMAKERS

A Model for Driving Systemic Change

A practical, six-stage model for organizing collective action and achieving lasting community-led change — grounded in trust, shared power, and continuous renewal.

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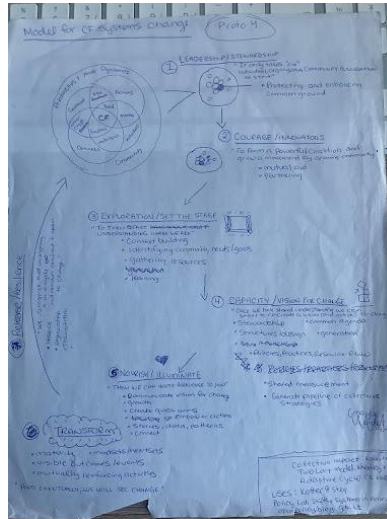
Foundation For Communities

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Where This Model Came From

This model didn't start as a framework. It started as a sketch.



Caption: a photo or scan of the original concept sketch, kept exactly as drawn.

I spent several years as the Executive Director of Westlock Community Foundation, a rural community foundation in Alberta, Canada. Like a lot of community foundations, we were doing good work: granting, fundraising, convening, but I kept coming back to a harder question: what would it actually take for a community foundation to help shift the systems that keep communities stuck, not just fund around the edges of them?

That question came into focus when I joined a Community Foundations of Canada transformation huddle, an interactive, peer-led exchange that brought together community foundation leaders from across Canada and around the world, all wrestling with the same shift: from programs to systems, from grantmaking to movement-building, from holding resources to sharing power.

Hearing how differently and how similarly foundations everywhere were approaching this work was the spark. Afterward, I sat down and started sketching: not a polished model, just my own shorthand for the patterns I kept hearing. Stewardship and trust at the center. The slow, necessary work of listening before acting. The leap from a shared vision to shared infrastructure. The narrative work that keeps people believing. And running through all of it, the releasing and reorganizing that has to happen for anything to genuinely change.

That sketch, rough edges, arrows, and crossed-out words included, is the image above. I've kept it deliberately as-is, hand-drawn and not AI-generated, because it's the real starting point: one practitioner's attempt to make sense of what community foundation leaders around the world are already living, testing, and learning together. Everything in this toolkit grew from that page.

If it's useful to you, adapt it, redraw it, argue with it, make it yours. That's exactly the spirit it was made in.

The Model at a Glance

This model describes how community foundations, coalitions, and place-based initiatives move through six interconnected stages of systemic change. It is not a straight line. Foundations and coalitions can sit in more than one stage at once, move back and forth as conditions change, and re-enter the cycle at any point.

The goal is the same as any community foundation's: to know where you are, what's likely to come next, and what kind of support, structure, or mindset shift will help you move well; a choose-your-own-adventure for systems change, not a checklist.

These are prompts for thinking, not rules. Use what is useful, adapt the language to your context, and revisit the model often; it is meant to be lived with, not filed away.

1. Establish Leadership & Stewardship BACKBONE & TRUST <i>"Who is holding this, and on whose behalf?"</i> A core organization (or small team) steps forward to steward, not own, the work. Its job is to protect common ground, build legitimacy, and create the conditions of trust that everything else depends on.	2. Form a Courageous Coalition MOVEMENT & MUTUAL AID <i>"Who else needs to be in this with us?"</i> Grow a movement of unlikely allies: residents, civic leaders, funders, frontline organizations bound by mutual aid and shared risk, not just shared interest.
3. Explore & Set the Stage LISTENING & MAPPING <i>"What's really going on here?"</i> Before solutions, understanding. Map the system, identify community needs and existing assets, gather resources, and listen for where power and trust currently sit.	4. Build Capacity & a Vision for Change COMMON AGENDA & INFRASTRUCTURE <i>"What are we building toward, together?"</i> Co-create a shared vision, common agenda, governance structures, policies, resource flows, and shared measurement is the scaffolding that turns collective will into collective capacity.
5. Nourish & Illuminate the Path NARRATIVE & MOMENTUM <i>"How do we keep people moving and believing?"</i> Communicate the vision widely, empower distributed action, celebrate quick wins, and surface the patterns and connections that keep momentum alive.	6. Realize Transformation MUTUALLY REINFORCING CHANGE <i>"What's actually different now?"</i> Visible outcomes and mutually reinforcing activities compound into lasting systems change: new norms, policies, resource flows, and relationships that didn't exist before.

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE: RELEASE & RESILIENCE

This sits at the center of the model, not as a seventh stage, but the logic that runs through all six. At every transition, something has to be released for something new to emerge: an outdated structure, an assumption about who holds power, or a program that's run its course. Resilience doesn't come from holding on tighter; it comes from the system's capacity to let go and reorganize. The model is built around the conditions that hold problems in place: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics, and mental models, and transformation (Stage 6) means at least some of these have genuinely shifted.

STAGE 1

Establish Leadership & Stewardship

BACKBONE & TRUST • “Who is holding this, and on whose behalf?”

A core organization (or small team) steps forward to steward, not own, the work. Its job is to protect common ground, build legitimacy, and create the conditions of trust that everything else depends on.

Roots & Enablers — What This Stage Asks of You

Area	Guidance for This Stage
Power, Trust & Legitimacy	Be honest about your organization’s own power and limits. Name who is missing from the table now, and commit to bringing them in. Legitimacy is earned, not claimed.
Community Voice & Leadership	Identify early champions and “sparkers” inside the community, not just inside your organization. Their credibility opens doors that yours can’t.
Governance & Backbone Infrastructure	Stand up a lightweight backbone function, even one person, focused on coordination, not control. The backbone serves the work; it doesn’t own it.
Strategy, Vision & Shared Agenda	Articulate the “why now”: the common ground across stakeholders that justifies bringing people together. This becomes the anchor for everything that follows.
Resourcing & Capital Beyond Money	Inventory what already exists: relationships, credibility, convening power, in-kind support, before fundraising. These are often your most valuable starting assets.
Measurement, Learning & Narrative	Treat this as a hypothesis, not a fixed plan. Build in regular reflection points from day one.

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO MOVE FORWARD

The steward has clarified its role and named who else needs to be involved. Early conversations are surfacing more potential partners than you can engage alone.

STAGE 2

Form a Courageous Coalition

MOVEMENT & MUTUAL AID • “Who else needs to be in this with us?”

Grow a movement of unlikely allies: residents, civic leaders, funders, frontline organizations — bound by mutual aid and shared risk, not just shared interest.

Roots & Enablers — What This Stage Asks of You

Area	Guidance for This Stage
Power, Trust & Legitimacy	Build trust through mutual aid before formal asks. Show up for partners’ priorities, not just your own. Legitimacy comes from who the coalition represents, not how official it looks.
Community Voice & Leadership	Recruit members for what they bring, not who they represent on paper. Build in rotating leadership so the coalition doesn’t become another top-down structure.
Governance & Backbone Infrastructure	Set ground rules for decisions, conflict, and credit-sharing before you need them. Coalitions often fracture over governance questions nobody named upfront.
Strategy, Vision & Shared Agenda	Develop a shared rationale for why members are stronger together than apart. This isn’t the full strategy yet; it’s why everyone stays at the table.
Resourcing & Capital Beyond Money	Mobilize mutual aid and in-kind contributions across the coalition: space, data, staff time, networks. Shared resourcing builds shared ownership.
Measurement, Learning & Narrative	Agree on what “working well together” looks like. Trust between partners is a leading indicator worth tracking from the start.

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO MOVE FORWARD

The coalition can act together, but doesn’t yet have a shared, evidence-based picture of the system it’s trying to change.

STAGE 3

Explore & Set the Stage

LISTENING & MAPPING • “What’s really going on here?”

Before solutions, understanding. Map the system, identify community needs and existing assets, gather resources, and listen for where power and trust currently sit.

Roots & Enablers — What This Stage Asks of You

Area	Guidance for This Stage
Power, Trust & Legitimacy	Listening builds trust, and failing to act on what you hear destroys it fast. Map where power currently sits, formal and informal, so the work doesn’t reproduce existing imbalances.
Community Voice & Leadership	Use participatory methods: listening sessions, asset mapping, story circles, so the picture of “what’s going on” comes from residents, not just data.
Governance & Backbone Infrastructure	Map existing governance structures, decision-makers, and gatekeepers in the system. You’ll need this map when you start co-designing change.
Strategy, Vision & Shared Agenda	Synthesize what you learn into an honest picture: root causes, existing efforts, gaps, leverage points. This becomes the evidence base for the vision.
Resourcing & Capital Beyond Money	Map community assets alongside needs: natural, cultural, social, human, political, built, and financial capital. Funding gaps are often smaller than coordination gaps.
Measurement, Learning & Narrative	Document baseline conditions now. This becomes your “before” picture and the foundation for shared measurement later.

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO MOVE FORWARD

You have a clear, shared understanding of needs, assets, and gaps — and partners are asking, “so what do we do about it?”

STAGE 4

Build Capacity & a Vision for Change

COMMON AGENDA & INFRASTRUCTURE • “What are we building toward, together?”

Co-create a shared vision, common agenda, governance structures, policies, resource flows, and shared measurement is the scaffolding that turns collective will into collective capacity.

Roots & Enablers — What This Stage Asks of You

Area	Guidance for This Stage
Power, Trust & Legitimacy	Shared governance is where trust becomes durable or breaks down. Decision-making rights, not just input, determine whether this feels like power-sharing or consultation theater.
Community Voice & Leadership	Co-design the vision and agenda with the people most affected. If they weren't in the room when it was written, it isn't a shared agenda yet.
Governance & Backbone Infrastructure	Formalize the structures that will carry the work: working groups, advisory bodies, agreements, and fiscal arrangements. Build for adaptability; these will need to evolve.
Strategy, Vision & Shared Agenda	Co-create the common agenda: a shared definition of the problem, a shared vision of success, and agreed strategies and roles. This is the strategic core of the model.
Resourcing & Capital Beyond Money	Design resource flows deliberately: pooled funds, braided funding, flow-through funding to grassroots groups, blended capital. Decide how money will move before chasing it.
Measurement, Learning & Narrative	Co-design a shared measurement framework. Common indicators, data-sharing agreements, and feedback loops that every partner uses and trusts.

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO MOVE FORWARD

The common agenda, governance, and measurement framework are in place; now the work needs visibility and momentum to move from plan to action.

STAGE 5

Nourish & Illuminate the Path

NARRATIVE & MOMENTUM • “How do we keep people moving and believing?”

Communicate the vision widely, empower distributed action, celebrate quick wins, and surface the patterns and connections that keep momentum alive.

Roots & Enablers — What This Stage Asks of You

Area	Guidance for This Stage
Power, Trust & Legitimacy	Honest narrative, including about setbacks, sustains trust through the messy middle. Make sure quick wins are visibly credited to the people and partners who made them happen.
Community Voice & Leadership	Equip community members to tell the story in their own words and channels. Distributed storytelling builds more durable buy-in than one official campaign.
Governance & Backbone Infrastructure	Keep governance visible but light during this stage. Heavy process smothers momentum. Use existing structures to channel energy rather than creating new ones.
Strategy, Vision & Shared Agenda	Translate the strategy into a public narrative and a visible roadmap with near-term milestones people can rally around.
Resourcing & Capital Beyond Money	Use early wins to attract aligned capital. Funders, investors, and partners are drawn to visible momentum, not just plans.
Measurement, Learning & Narrative	Track and publicize progress against shared indicators. Use real-time data to adjust course and fuel the public story.

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO MOVE FORWARD

Quick wins are landing, the narrative has traction, and activities across partners are starting to reinforce one another rather than run in parallel.

STAGE 6

Realize Transformation

MUTUALLY REINFORCING CHANGE • “What’s actually different now?”

Visible outcomes and mutually reinforcing activities compound into lasting systems change: new norms, policies, resource flows, and relationships that didn’t exist before.

Roots & Enablers — What This Stage Asks of You

Area	Guidance for This Stage
Power, Trust & Legitimacy	Legitimacy is tested here: does the new system distribute power differently than the old one? If trust hasn’t translated into shifted power, the change is cosmetic.
Community Voice & Leadership	Hand off ownership of outcomes to community structures wherever possible: resident councils, cooperatives, advisory boards, so the work outlives any one organization’s involvement.
Governance & Backbone Infrastructure	Review governance against the original power-sharing intent. Sunset structures that served their purpose; formalize the ones that should outlast this initiative.
Strategy, Vision & Shared Agenda	Assess outcomes against the original common agenda, and decide what’s next: deepen, scale, replicate, or release and redesign.
Resourcing & Capital Beyond Money	Build sustainability mechanisms: endowments, earned revenue, recurring public investment, so transformation doesn’t depend on any single funding source.
Measurement, Learning & Narrative	Evaluate against shared measures, capture and share what was learned (including what didn’t work), and feed it back into the system for the next cycle.

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO BEGIN THE NEXT CYCLE

Outcomes are visible, and the system has shifted. It’s time to honestly assess what should be sustained, what should be released, and where the next cycle begins.

How to Use This Framework

This framework is offered as a thinking tool for community foundations, funder collaboratives, civic coalitions, and anyone organizing for systems-level change in their community. There is no single right way to use it. Some starting points:

- **Self-assessment:** Use the six stages and the “signals” to map where your initiative sits today; you may find you're operating in more than one stage at once.
- **Strategic planning:** Use the “Roots & Enablers” tables stage by stage as discussion prompts with your board, staff, or coalition to identify gaps and next moves.
- **Funder & partner alignment:** Use the model as shared language across organizations working on the same community challenge, even if each is at a different stage.
- **Renewal check-ins:** Revisit the Guiding Principle regularly and ask what needs to be released for the next stage of work to emerge.

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Help Shape This Framework

This is a living model, and your experience using it is what will make it better. Does the six-stage cycle match your organization's journey? Are the transition signals recognizable from your own experience? What's missing? Share your story, questions, or suggestions. We welcome case studies, translations, and adaptations from foundations and coalitions worldwide.

Inspired By

Cyclical understandings of change, that systems emerge, grow, endure, and renew, have long been held within Indigenous ways of knowing and the lived practices of communities across generations. This framework draws on and resonates with that deeper lineage, and is offered as one lens among many.

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