



# SOWING THE SEEDS FOR LOCAL CLIMATE LEADERSHIP:

A LEARNING GUIDE FOR RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT  
USING A CONNECTED COMMUNITIES APPROACH

Toronto Environmental Alliance  
Centre for Connected Communities



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE LEARNING GUIDE

- 2 Where Our Learning Came From: Working to Advance Equitable Climate Action With Community Hubs
- 3 The Connected Community Approach: 10 Keys Framework
- 5 Key: Learn Together

### 6 DEVELOP A THEORY OF CHANGE & ESTABLISH GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- 6 Why is Meaningful Resident Engagement Important for Climate Action?
- 7 Starting With the Why: Building a Theory of Change
- 9 Key: Let Values Lead
- 9 Guiding Principles
- 10 Key: Create Connected Communities from the Inside Out

### 11 BUILD DEEP COLLABORATIONS AND CO-CREATE PROGRAMMING

- 11 TEA's Resident-led Climate Engagement Model
- 13 Key: Build on Everyone's Strengths

- 14 Example of a Co-Designed Program: Bathurst-Finch Climate Ambassadors
- 17 Key: Facilitate Collaborative Processes
- 18 Example Of Centring Local Priorities: Parkdale Climate Justice Circle
- 20 Key: Prioritize Equity and Power Sharing

### 21 EVALUATE TO CAPTURE LEARNING & MEASURE RESULTS. A PROJECT EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

- 22 Key: Embrace the Messiness

### 23 SHARE KNOWLEDGE & STORIES TO DEEPEN IMPACT

- 24 Key: Make Community Building Visual and Accessible
- 25 Key: Work at Multiple Scales

### 26 CONCLUSION: PLAY A MEANINGFUL AND SUPPORTIVE ROLE

- 27 Key: Build Creative Infrastructure

### 29 APPENDIX: REFERENCES & RESOURCES

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE LEARNING GUIDE

## WELCOME TO OUR RESIDENT CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT LEARNING GUIDE!

Our goal is to highlight the importance of meaningful resident climate engagement, share lessons that we've learned from our partners and community members, and encourage other organizations and individuals to adopt resident-led approaches to their climate work.

Please consider this learning guide as a starting point. This document summarizes some good practices from the field of community development, explores the application of these practices to local climate work, and presents a model for resident-led climate action. We hope that this offers a helpful framework and useful tools that can be adapted and customized to work in different local settings and contexts.

## WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR

This guide is for organizations and individuals undertaking work to engage residents on climate change issues and/or support resident-led climate action, specifically:

- Environmental non-profits and charities
- Grassroots climate / green groups or community groups with environmental goals
- Policymakers with environmental, planning or related portfolios
- Environmental funders

This guide aims to help the reader to reflect on how their organization and/or work can apply these resources and insights to deepen their climate engagement practice and support authentic community building processes.



## WHERE OUR LEARNING CAME FROM: WORKING TO ADVANCE EQUITABLE CLIMATE ACTION WITH COMMUNITY HUBS

This learning guide showcases some of the behind-the-scenes processes and learning from the Toronto Environmental Alliance's *Accelerating Neighbourhood Climate Solutions Through Community Action* project. Through this capacity-building project, TEA partnered with community hubs and local residents to catalyze neighbourhood-level climate action. This project was launched in July 2019 and implemented over two years in two Toronto neighbourhoods: Bathurst-Finch and Parkdale.

**Our project was designed to build on and integrate good practices from the community development and climate engagement fields, with the belief that residents are key actors in shaping their communities, and environmental initiatives and policies are made better with their contributions.** In planning this project, TEA identified a disconnect between the work of environmental movements and community building efforts taking place in Toronto's diverse communities. In order to bridge environmental work with community

work, we sought to learn how, as an environmental organization, we could work in a truly community-centred way.

Over the course of the project, we collaborated with the Centre for Connected Communities (C3) to explore how to apply their **Connected Community Approach** and **10 Keys Framework** to shape our work with residents and local partners. We believe that this framework can help other environmental organizations with developing meaningful local partnerships, centring residents' voices and priorities, and understanding how to effectively bring their own unique assets and perspectives to community building work.



**“Community hubs are inclusive and trusted place-based or virtual spaces which leverage local networks, respond to neighbourhood priorities, support the actions of residents, and grow grassroots leadership in order to build strong, resilient, and connected communities.”**

– Definition of a “community hub”, developed by the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Community Hubs



## THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY APPROACH: 10 KEYS FRAMEWORK

**The Connected Community Approach (CCA) is a set of principles and practices that support the authentic and meaningful connection of people who want to make a positive impact in their community.** The Connected Community Approach identifies 10 keys that when implemented together, with authenticity and intentionality, can foster the paradigm shift required to unlock the potential of connected communities. The 10 keys builds on the 20 years of community development experience of the East Scarborough Storefront and draws on foundational literature to propose a community-centred way of identifying local solutions to complex social issues.

Working in neighbourhoods is complex; it becomes more complex for organizations that do not have a history of working in those neighbourhoods primarily because they lack the local context, relationships, and trust which are critical to advancing local priorities authentically. This is not an uncommon scenario, since many organizations that are not place-based seek to work in neighbourhoods to achieve their goals. In this scenario, sound community development approaches are critical to success.

**Through this learning guide, there are boxes with brief explanations of the 10 keys, how they relate to local climate action work, and how the keys can be applied to better engage with communities.**

## THE TEN KEYS

1. BUILD ON EVERYONE'S STRENGTHS
2. FACILITATE COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES
3. CREATE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT
4. LEARN TOGETHER
5. EMBRACE THE MESSINESS
6. PRIORITIZE EQUITY AND POWER SHARING
7. LET VALUES LEAD
8. WORK AT MULTIPLE SCALES
9. MAKE COMMUNITY BUILDING VISUAL
10. BUILD CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE



The *Accelerating Neighbourhood Climate Solutions Through Community Hubs* project centred on building genuine relationships and a foundation for ongoing community-based climate projects and collaboration. A core project element was the co-design of local climate learning programs with residents and community hub staff, which was a highly rewarding and valued process, but also time and resource-intensive. We learned that residents and hub staff needed dedicated, context-specific support in order to devote sufficient time and energy to climate action, while advancing other critical community priorities. We found that an ongoing commitment to shared decision-making and mutual learning from all partners was necessary to ensure equitable, inclusive, and meaningful participation in project initiatives.

It is important to note that just as this project was gaining momentum, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly placed incredible pressures on community

hubs, whose staff took on a central role in supporting local residents from marginalized and equity-deserving groups. Hubs, and many of their resident collaborators, found themselves at the center of community responses to the pandemic. As a result, some activities planned for this program were put on hold or cancelled as hubs sought to support residents to meet immediate survival needs such as accessing food and income.

Public health restrictions also led TEA and our hub partners to pivot from planned in-person resident engagement activities to online delivery. Adapting to online delivery created challenges, but also unexpected opportunities for resident engagement. Our ability to successfully adapt project elements, such as resident training programs, can largely be attributed to the investment that all the project partners made in developing authentic and meaningful relationships and shared goals.



Photo Courtesy of PARC



## KEY: LEARN TOGETHER

Too often, environmental organizations enter into a community space seeking to impart new information to community members and compel them to take action. While developing new knowledge and building capacity is important, if climate action is to be truly adopted by community members, it is critical to build on the knowledge, wisdom, and momentum that already exist within the community.

Learning feedback loops are what strengthens a community over time; intentional learning can help everyone - e.g. grassroots groups, institutions, organizations, funders - to learn how the community works, how communication flows, and what people care about, so that synergies can be found and decisions can be grounded in community context. In this way, initiatives build on each other over time.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO LEARN TOGETHER?

- ✓ Intentionally learn what knowledge, projects and initiatives already exist in the community

- ✓ Work with local organizations (e.g. hubs, centres, agencies, residents groups) to find out:
  - How communications and information is shared across the community
  - Who in the community is focused on climate action work
  - What the impact of this climate action work has been so far
- ✓ Facilitate knowledge exchange events on climate and community priorities that allow various local players to come together and understand one another's context and perspective, and build a foundation of mutual understanding from which to design locally relevant and impactful projects
- ✓ Offer to support, and explore how to bring a climate lens to initiatives already taking place in community
- ✓ Share resources and learnings with with residents engaged or interested in climate action initiatives



## 2. DEVELOP A THEORY OF CHANGE AND ESTABLISH GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### WHY IS MEANINGFUL RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT FOR CLIMATE ACTION?

**We believe that residents are key actors in shaping their communities, and environmental initiatives and policies are made better with their contributions. Community action to reduce emissions and build resilience is an important element of addressing the profound threat posed by climate change.**

TEA embarked on the *Accelerating Neighbourhood Climate Solutions Through Community Hubs* project with a strong conviction that residents are integral to, and interested in, advancing local climate solutions. In addition, we felt there was a gap in supporting residents to catalyze climate action in their own neighbourhoods, especially residents from communities that are most impacted by climate change.

Climate change does not affect all people equally, nor are all contributing equally to climate change. In fact, those who have contributed the least - which include Indigenous people, children and youth, people with low incomes, people with Disabilities/Disabled people, migrants and immigrants, and people living in the Global South - often experience the greatest harm.

The most impacted communities should have meaningful influence over decisions that determine how climate change will affect their lives. However, these communities have been continuously excluded from processes to develop climate programs and policies. Furthermore, environmental decision-makers have failed to recognize their broader and distinct responsibility to honour and uphold Indigenous sovereignty, treaty rights, and knowledge in these processes. As such, this responsibility often goes unacknowledged in the design and implementation of climate initiatives.

At the onset of the project, we recognized that TEA had a lot to learn as an organization about how to take up our responsibilities and use our assets to centre the voices of the people most deeply impacted by climate change (and we still do). In a sense, this project was designed to test our belief that when residents from impacted and excluded communities are positioned to make decisions and access resources, they can play a meaningful role in building healthy, equitable, and resilient low-carbon communities. This belief was the starting point for developing a theory of change, which helped to ground these convictions in the specific parameters and context of our neighbourhood-based project.



## STARTING WITH THE 'WHY': BUILDING A THEORY OF CHANGE

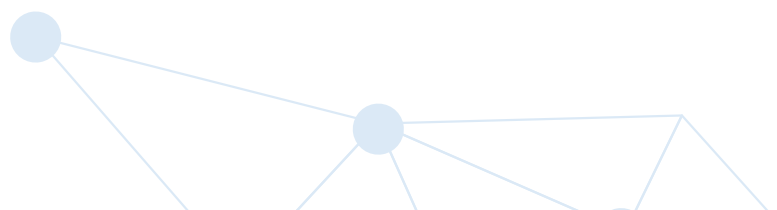
**It is important for organizations to clearly understand their own strategic and values-related motivations for launching community-centred work.** Sometimes organizations with a specific scope of work and expertise lack a foundational analysis of why and how they want to work with communities. In order for TEA, as a local environmental organization, to act in a truly community-centred way, we first did some introspective work to reflect on why we wanted to focus on local climate action. What was our purpose and how did this relate to achieving our mission? How did our goals and intentions interact and intersect with those of community members and local partners? What principles and values were informing our work?

In addition to understanding our 'why', we had trouble defining TEA's role in relation to our partners when we first started this work. We asked ourselves: *what kind of knowledge and experiences do we bring to community-centred climate work?* We wanted to ensure that we were adding genuine value to local solutions and expertise.

TEA and hub partners worked with Openly, an external consultant, to develop a theory of change for our project. This process was extremely valuable in helping us to reflect on and articulate our purpose, goals and roles, and our pathway to achieving change. For us and our partners, it was especially important to have a shared framework that integrated climate goals with other important social justice and community development goals.

### OUR PROJECT'S THEORY OF CHANGE:

Underlying our theory of change are the shared values and principles held by TEA and our partners. By building on this common ground, we were able to develop a collective understanding of how we would approach this novel work in a challenging and evolving context.



# THEORY OF CHANGE

Accelerating Neighbourhood Climate  
Solutions Through Community Hubs Program

## IF WE...



### LEVERAGE

the unique models,  
strengths and assets  
of **community hubs**



### AMPLIFY

the talents, stories,  
and energy of  
**local residents**



### GROUND

learning and capacity  
building in **local**  
priorities



### BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

make new connections,  
and strengthen  
**relationships**

## WE EXPECT...

**Community hubs** to have greater capacity to catalyze neighbourhood-level climate action

**TEA** to have stronger networks and greater capacity to support local climate action

**Local residents** to have enhanced knowledge, capacity and confidence to engage in low-carbon projects

**Communities** whose voices have been underrepresented or missing from the environmental movement to be more engaged in building climate justice and effecting community change

## SO THAT...

more neighbourhood-level climate initiatives take root

more local climate initiatives contribute to policy change and have systems-level influence

local residents enjoy the health and equity co-benefits of a more resilient climate

environmental organizations learn more about how to do effective community development work

neighbourhoods have lower GHG emissions

## KEY: LET VALUES LEAD

Many collaborations lack a clear purpose and shared understanding of why they are doing this work, what they hope to achieve, and the principles that will guide the collaboration. As a result, time and energy is spent seeking clarity as opposed to advancing solutions.

When organizations or groups are trying to engage in activities that foster a connected community, their work needs to be built on a foundation of values and shared purpose. This can be articulated through an overarching theory of change. In essence, a theory of change asks the following questions:

- Why are you creating this project?
- What is this project designed to change?
- How are your activities designed to achieve that change?
- What principles will guide your collective action?

- A theory of change is a good start to authentically engaging in community.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO “LET VALUES LEAD”?

- ✓ Begin all collaborations by spending time collectively drafting a shared understanding of the purpose of the partnership
- ✓ Identify what the necessary conditions of a successful partnership are from the different perspectives (e.g. local hubs / organizations / grassroots groups and environmental organizations - which may be located outside the community)
- ✓ Reflect on various players’ purposes and guiding principles to make sure that the approach resonates with all players

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To keep us grounded in our theory of change, our work was built upon guiding principles that we developed with our partners to shape our work:

- Meeting community partners and residents where they’re at
- Amplifying existing initiatives and approaches
- Pursuing co-benefits of local climate action and social justice
- Co-creating learning and capacity building opportunities with community partners

We found that it was important to ‘check-in’ on our principles throughout the project.







## KEY: CREATE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Healthy, nurturing organizations and groups are fundamental for a connected community. Investing in the wellbeing of the people doing the work will ultimately mean greater impact.

Both a theory of change and guiding principles can help organizations stay grounded in what is important in the face of political, financial and logistical pressures. When staff are grounded in the purpose and principles of the project, it helps to build a supportive and effective team, which in turn, positively impacts how they work with grassroots groups and residents. This will ultimately result in greater impact.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO CREATE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT?

- ✓ Take the time at the beginning of a project to ensure that all the organizational partners involved (e.g. staff from both the environmental organization and community hub) have an understanding and commitment to the project purpose, principles and values
- ✓ Co-design as much of the project as possible with local collaborators
- ✓ Brainstorm ways to provide support and recognition for the people on the frontlines (staff and residents) doing community work
- ✓ Schedule frequent touch points to listen to challenges as they emerge and adapt the project based on new learnings from the community

# 3. BUILD DEEP COLLABORATIONS AND CO-CREATE PROGRAMMING

## TEA'S RESIDENT-LED CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Residents and grassroots groups have many assets - such as knowledge, skills, and relationships - that they can bring to local climate initiatives. This is why undertaking a meaningful co-design process for community engagement with local people is critical for catalyzing climate action in our neighbourhoods and across our municipalities. TEA's model was developed with support from the Centre for Connected Communities and the 10 Keys framework.

## OUR MODEL: RESIDENT-LED COMMUNITY CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT

### STEP 1: FERTILIZE THE GROUND (PARTNERSHIP AND MAPPING)


- Meet with local partners to set project goals, a work plan, evaluation metrics, and guiding principles.
- Identify assets that can advance climate action at the community level (e.g. community hub, grassroots groups, local initiatives, neighbourhood resources, skills)



### STEP TWO: PLANT THE FIRST SEEDS TOGETHER (CO-DESIGN)

- Work with partners (e.g. hub staff and resident leaders) to design a facilitative process to introduce climate action to the community
  - These processes can take on a variety of creative approaches such as designing a neighbourhood climate action/conversation toolkit or knowledge exchange events
  - Such facilitative processes are important for starting the conversation including identifying local priorities that are connected to climate action, communicating the relationship between climate action and community building,





helping to surface where a climate lens can strengthen ongoing work in the community, and translating technical language and policy jargon into accessible language

### **STEP THREE: THE FIRST SPROUT! (COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AND CONVERSATION)**

- Leverage the local assets identified in step one (such as grassroots groups, interested residents, local initiatives) and other local relationships held by partners to facilitate conversations about climate action
- Co-deliver the conversations with partners playing different lead and support roles (e.g. promoting, hosting, facilitating, pre-post communications)

### **STEP FOUR: WATER THE SEEDLINGS (BUILD ON LOCAL MOMENTUM AND ASSETS)**

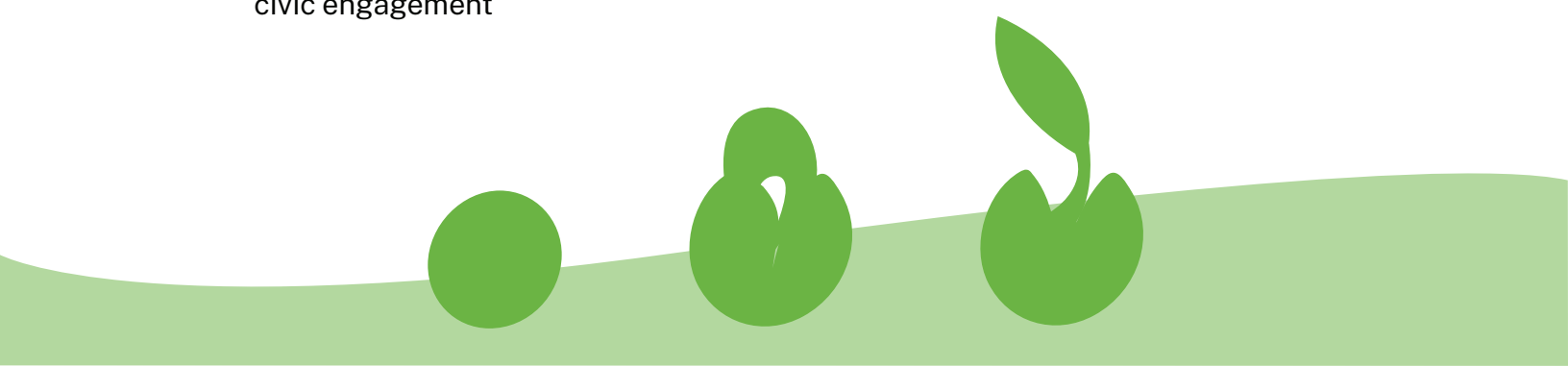
- Based on the learnings and reflections from the community conversations, identify the local initiatives that environmental and community partners can support and strengthen with a climate action lens (e.g. with supplementary knowledge, resources, and support) or climate-related initiatives that residents want to start
  - Alignment with local initiatives could include: local, healthy food; housing; health; waste reduction; sustainable infrastructure; and civic engagement

- Meet with the people leading local initiatives to explore working together
- Learn about one another's work. Describe organizational or project goals to folks working on local initiatives. Listen to their goals!

### **STEP FIVE: BEAR FRUIT (FORM COLLABORATIONS)**

- If it's the right fit, co-create a plan with the community collaborators to develop and resource the initiative(s)
- Support community collaborators to launch or add new elements to their initiatives; work together to document experiences and results

### **STEP SIX: HARVEST (LEARN TOGETHER)**

- Once local initiatives are launched or implemented, regroup with partners and collaborators to reflect on achievements, challenges, and learning; assess progress together against original plans and goals
  - Share learning with other interested stakeholders who can benefit from these experiences
  - If there is the desire to continue to collaborate, discuss how to integrate learning into the next phase of work
  - Discuss what resources will be necessary to continue ongoing work from the foundation that you've built together (e.g. funding, staff, volunteers, timelines, etc.)
- 



## KEY: BUILD ON EVERYONE'S STRENGTHS

Asset-based community development starts with the belief that everyone has skills, resources, knowledge, and expertise that can be leveraged to advance community priorities. It acknowledges that in all communities there are existing strengths that should be built upon as opposed to starting from scratch.

Engaging a community in climate action work means first taking time to learn about a community's strengths and priorities, and reflecting on what assets you have to contribute to the community. It is important to find alignment in where an organization's strengths can be complementary to those of community partners, with the goal of deepening existing climate action work in the community or supporting new initiatives that address local priorities.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BUILD ON EVERYONE'S STRENGTHS?

- ✓ Instead of only looking at community challenges, ask the questions:

- ✦ What positive changes are already happening within the community that can be built on?
- ✦ Who is doing great work that could be strengthened and connected for greater impact?

- ✓ Work with local players to identify strong initiatives that could benefit from a climate lens

- ✓ Identify your own organization's assets and how they can contribute to the community. Some examples of an environmental organization's assets that could advance resident-led climate action work can include:

- ✦ Providing technical expertise in climate action models and frameworks
- ✦ Decoding and translating climate action language
- ✦ Sharing municipal policy and strategy analysis and linkages
- ✦ Helping to make connections between community priorities and climate issues





## EXAMPLE OF A CO-DESIGNED PROGRAM: BATHURST-FINCH CLIMATE AMBASSADORS

When provided with the opportunity and resources, local communities can apply their knowledge, skills, and relationships together and to play a meaningful role in animating and leading the transition to an equitable, humane and sustainable city.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM:

Increase resident leadership capacity to take on climate-related activities in their hubs and local communities by:

- Taking stock of existing groups, knowledge, skills, capacities, interests, and initiatives related to climate change.
- Support resident leaders in identifying ways to best support and amplify existing initiatives and seed new ideas
- Support resident learning and action opportunities to strengthen climate action.

### THE BLUEPRINT:

#### Context

Bathurst-Finch is a mixed-income neighbourhood in North York with a diverse population that includes multiple newcomer and racialized communities. The Bathurst-Finch Unison Hub houses co-located health and community services, and has been home to a long-running resident engagement program (Action for Neighbourhood Change), currently known as the Our Strong Neighbourhoods (OSN) program.

#### Partnerships

A strong partnership was essential to the success of the program. The co-designed Climate Ambassador Training program was built on TEA's relationship with the Bathurst-Finch Unison Hub, which began with a research project in 2018 and grew from our mutual interest in exploring how to integrate climate objectives into the Hub's operations and programs. To

begin developing the climate leadership program, TEA met with the Hub's project-leads to review draft purposes, principles, and deliverables as well as conduct a collaborative local scan and mapping exercise to identify priority contacts.

With the support of Hub staff, TEA also developed a partnership with the Bathurst Finch Climate Action Network (BFCAN), a local resident-led group supported by the Hub's OSN program, to co-design and facilitate the training program. BFCAN had previously developed and delivered climate-focused civic engagement activities at Hub events.

### **Co-creation and Training**

Over several months, TEA held working sessions with Hub staff and BFCAN members to develop the Climate Ambassadors Training Program, which included both co-created and co-curated curriculum content, and a supported community outreach and recruitment process. BFCAN members facilitated sessions and participated as learners in the program. Early in the training co-creation process, government direction and measures on COVID-19 remote work took effect, which compelled the partners to pivot to developing an online program.

## **THE ESSENTIALS OF CO-DESIGN**

**1. Facilitating knowledge exchange to share unique strengths, tools, ideas, and connections.**

**2. Incorporating local priorities and interests.**

**3. Promoting supportive communications to problem-solve, reduce conflict, and facilitate collective decision-making.**

Government direction and measures on COVID-19 remote work and social distancing took effect early in the training co-creation process, which compelled the partners to pivot to developing an online program.

## **OUTCOMES:**

An updated online learning framework and implementation plan was created and delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The flexibility of the project and team was vital to allowing the training to continue. A diverse group of residents from the Bathurst-Finch and the broader North York area were recruited to the program. Program participants demonstrated a very high level of engagement and commitment to the online training with twenty-one Climate Ambassadors attending six virtual training sessions and graduating from the program. Following the conclusion of the program, BFCAN led their own online program series on waste reduction based on the experience they had gained. Hub staff indicated that they would like to deliver other online programs based on the learning from this experience - even if this was not driven by necessity.

All of these co-design elements (detailed below) contributed to a strong sense among participants of feeling connected to a community of people with shared environmental and community development interests. All the partners were pleased with the unexpectedly high levels of attendance and meaningful contributions by participants throughout the training program, despite a very challenging external context.

**Spotlight on good practices & lesson learned: an in-depth co-creation process**  
Undertaking an authentic co-creation



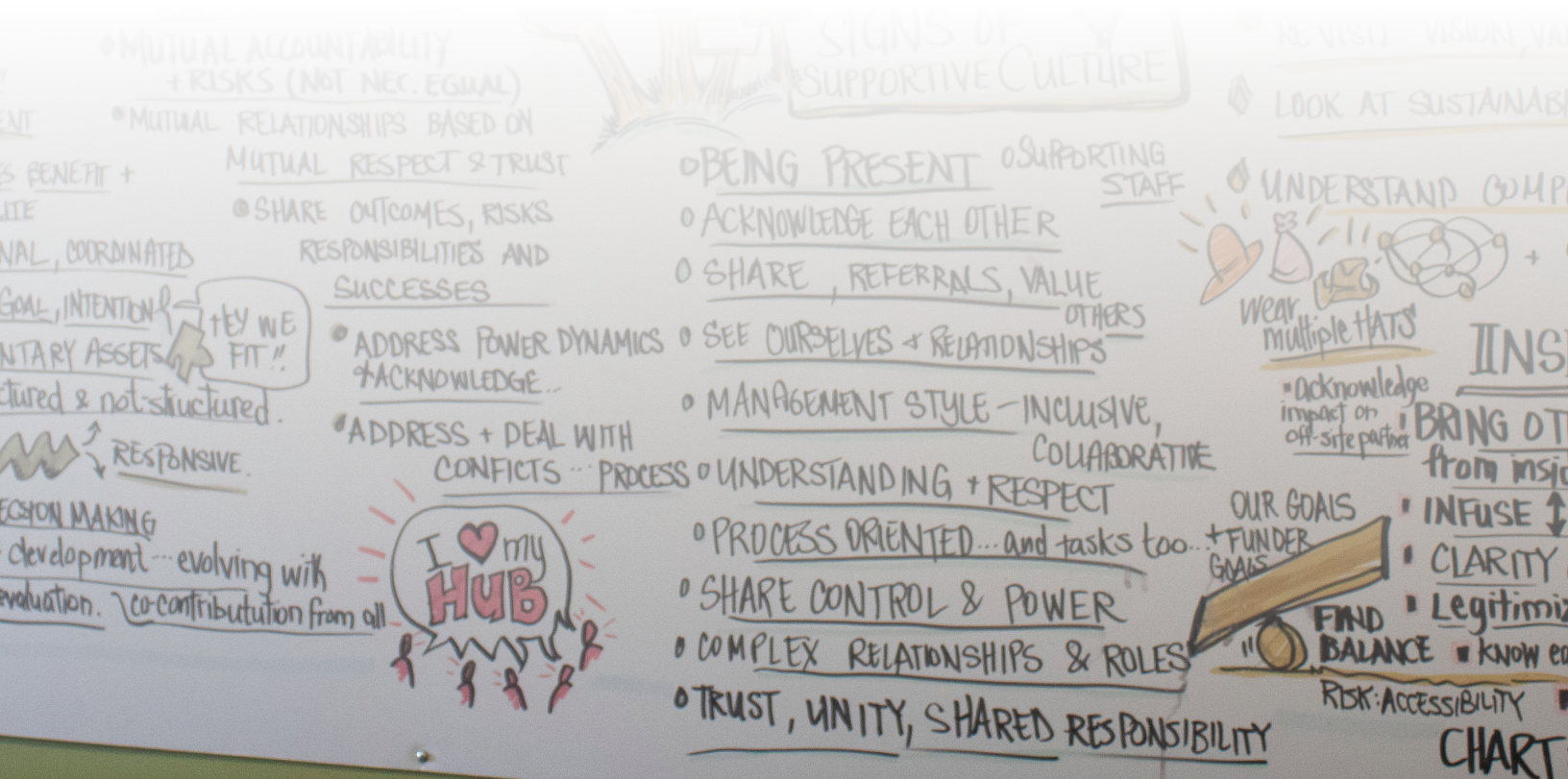


process to deliver a first-time online learning program was very labour-intensive for all the partners involved. The following elements were fundamental to the success of the program:

- **Dedicated time for working sessions to develop each module in the curriculum:** This required extensive group discussions and work to set learning objectives, research and refine content, identify additional learning aids such as videos and links to online resources, and develop an agenda and shared facilitation plan. BFCAN played a leadership role in this process with support from TEA and Hub staff.
- **Local outreach and recruitment:** Significant time was dedicated to developing and implementing an outreach plan to recruit residents to the training program that used the Hub's communications channels and other local channels, and facilitating the registration and participation by residents in the online program. These

processes were heavily supported by Hub staff.

- **Interactive, not just information-oriented sessions:** Sessions included breakout group discussions that linked different topics of local interest with climate: transit and active transportation, waste reduction, food security, and seniors & social connections. Participants developed ideas and outlined preliminary plans for initiatives. Adjusting to an online format required learning new practices to make sessions run smoothly.
- **Adapt curriculum to reflect the current context:** The Climate Ambassador Training Program launched with an initial session drawing connections between the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, and creating space for personal thoughts and reflections. In later sessions, trainers facilitated discussions about civic engagement for a green and just recovery.





## KEY: FACILITATE COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

Successful collaborations don't just happen, they often require expert facilitation to ensure a collective understanding of the project, a shared purpose and mutually reinforcing processes. For example, an environmental organization is likely to be a **content expert** (bringing knowledge about climate mitigation and adaptation), and local community organizations and grassroots groups are likely to be **context experts** (knowledge about the lived reality of local people, local priorities and community building history). The role of **facilitator** is to bring **process expertise**: making sure that when the environmental organization and community groups come together they are able to leverage each other's strengths in positive and productive ways.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO FACILITATE COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES?

- ✓ Identify who is facilitating the process. It can be someone from the community or from the environmental organization or an external facilitator: someone with facilitation skills and perspective. Different people can play this role at different stages of the collaboration.
- ✓ Provide context: reflect together regularly as a collaborative on where you started and where you're going throughout the project.
- ✓ Be intentional about integrating new players into the collaborative: slow down activities to make sure you are bringing everyone along.
- ✓ Check in regularly with your partners not just on what they are doing, but how they are feeling about working on the project.





Parkdale residents had organized around various community issues, but wanted to start up new climate justice focused initiatives. TEA's key partners in this neighbourhood are the Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC), a community hub, and the Parkdale People's Economy (PPE), a network of over 30 community-based organizations and hundreds of community members collaborating to build decent work, shared wealth, and equitable development in Parkdale.

## OBJECTIVES:

- Support residents to build networks, access resources and support their efforts to identify community engagement entry points to local climate action.
- Explore learning opportunities at, and physical upgrades to, the Centre and other local project sites which can contribute to low-carbon solutions at the neighbourhood level. Advance initiatives in the Parkdale community, and support deep, meaningful resident engagement in local priorities related to climate change and sustainability.

## THE BLUEPRINT:

### Relationship Building

PARC encouraged TEA to participate in the Parkdale Neighbourhood Planning Table's community meetings as a good starting point for connecting with residents. Attending meetings with additional community groups facilitated by the Parkdale People's Economy over the next two months aided in gauging interest in climate learning and training, hearing opinions on local climate action opportunities, challenges, and priorities, and networking for relevant local group contacts. This was important as it fed into the creation of an advisory group of residents that formed to co-design the learning sessions.

## OUTCOMES:

### Centring Climate Justice Perspectives

When facilitating climate justice learning, organizers should create space for this learning to be led by Indigenous and equity-deserving people with authentic knowledge, experience and perspectives. Participants in the co-design process identified the priority of working in solidarity with Indigenous peoples on climate action early on, so PARC engaged a local Indigenous educator to aid in building participants' understanding of why the acknowledgement and incorporation of traditional and Indigenous knowledge is important to climate justice work. In addition, Climate Justice Circle sessions sought to connect climate action to system change discussions and immediate and pressing local concerns such as housing, food, transit and extreme weather.

### Re-prioritization and Flexible Partnerships

After launching with a successful in-person community learning session, resident engagement and development of training sessions had to be put on hold for a significant period due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the neighbourhood turned its focus to survival and mutual aid. During this time, PARC and PPE led a co-design of a resident consultation, engagement and capacity building process to support a community submission to the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild's public consultation process, with support from TEA to integrate climate considerations. While plans had to shift, the climate justice circles resumed in an online format and kept up the momentum for climate action in the Parkdale community. Flexible partnership can also mean prioritizing what neighbourhood partners need at that time over original plans.



### Enabling Resident Participation

PARC's and PPE's approach to enable resident participation in the Climate Justice Circle sessions - both in-person and virtual - provided valuable learning. Organizers of these sessions actively worked to offer residents different supports that would remove potential barriers and make it possible for them to participate. For example, the project engaged newcomer members of the Tibetan community and

a community translator was brought in to provide translation services for in-person and online sessions. Other forms of support offered to participants included transit tokens and honorariums. It is important to value and recognize the contributions that community members make to planning and engagement processes, and compensate them for their time.

## KEY: PRIORITIZE EQUITY AND POWER SHARING

Power is a complex dynamic in all communities. If an organization has not been in the community on a long-term basis, it is especially critical that the decision-making power rests in the community. The kinds of power structures and dynamics that people are used to often have to be disrupted to achieve this.

At present, in most climate action work with communities, the power and decision making rests with established environmental organizations, policy makers, funders, and/or researchers. This power imbalance can be addressed by all the collaborators in an initiative coming together to design more equitable planning and implementation processes, where decision-making is shared, and recognizes the expertise and experience that local organizations, grassroots groups and residents bring to the collaboration.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PRIORITIZE EQUITY AND POWER

- ✓ Use an environmental justice approach when working in the community
- ✓ Work with systems players to help them understand the role grassroots groups play in local climate action
- ✓ Acknowledge the power that your organization might hold as the driver of a project and holder of funds; be transparent about where you want to maintain power and where you will intentionally step aside for the community make decisions
- ✓ Enter each space with humility, knowing that everyone has a piece of knowledge not held by anyone else, and local people have the deepest knowledge of their communities

# 4. EVALUATE TO CAPTURE LEARNING & MEASURE RESULTS

## A PROJECT EVALUATION FRAMEWORK:

A project evaluation process was integral to measuring the impact of our community hubs project, but also to shifting strategies and improvements as needed along the way.

Rather than bringing in an external consultant at the end of the project, we engaged a consultant early in the project to assist with developing an evaluation framework and collecting baseline information. This was the same organization that helped us to develop our theory of change. The evaluation examined the extent to which we had realized our theory of change and guiding principles in implementing the project and assessed our progress on our detailed monitoring and evaluation framework that included indicators and deliverables.

### The evaluation was specifically designed to:

- Characterize the role and contribution of the project
- Identify the strengths and assets in our organizations' approach as well as the "sticking points" and areas for improvement
- Identify the opportunities for strengthening strategies and social and environmental impacts and for sharing lessons learned

### Key evaluation questions included:

- What will it take to live into our theory of change?
- How do our stakeholders experience our relationship? Are we bringing value and benefit to our partners? Where could we improve?
- What are we noticing about trends related to local climate action? Are these indicating movement towards our intended impact?
- Are we achieving our outcomes? Where are we shining? Where are we falling short? What facilitates success? Where are there persistent barriers and challenges?

### The evaluation process included three core methods for collecting data:

- Participant surveys - both online and in-person formats were used and were customized to the unique contexts of the Bathurst-Finch and Parkdale neighbourhood co-design and capacity-building processes
- Focus groups - with resident leaders, hub staff, and TEA to understand the successes and outcomes, challenges and barriers, and key learnings emerging from local resident engagement activities
- Project tracking - tracking relationships, activities and interactions, including: invitations to speak and contribute a climate perspective; support provided





to new and existing climate action projects; number of new partnerships, collaborations, and network connections; and spinoff activities and initiatives.

The latter was important because it documented the extent to which residents and hub staff were integrating climate into their community activities as a practice and the extent to which TEA was contributing its expertise in a supportive and complimentary manner to local partners.

#### **Key project outcome areas included:**

- Hubs have greater capacity to catalyze neighbourhood-level climate action
- Local residents have enhanced knowledge, capacity and confidence to engage in low-carbon projects
- Communities whose voices have been underrepresented or missing from the

environmental movement are more engaged in building climate justice and effecting community change

- TEA has stronger networks and greater capacity to support local climate action
- More neighbourhood-level climate initiatives are beginning to take root

Many of the key learnings from the evaluation process have been integrated into this guide. We took an iterative approach to the project with our partners, which was important to be truly responsive to emerging community priorities and needs. This proved to be especially true in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it was important to have an evaluation framework and process that was designed to effectively and meaningfully document and assess progress in a complex and dynamic project environment.



## **KEY: EMBRACE THE MESSINESS**

Ideas, priorities, aspirations and enthusiasm in a community emerge in different places at different times which are impossible to predict. As you begin to work in a community, it is likely that synergies with other actors in the community may emerge as the project progresses.

Being able to build on these synergies and integrate aligned goals and visions where appropriate is vital. Facilitating processes in this kind of complexity requires you to see emergence as a strength that creates the nimbleness required to identify and build on local momentum. Equally, changes in communities may require the intended project to change course to respond to these changes.

### **WHAT CAN YOU DO TO EMBRACE THE MESSINESS?**

- ✓ Commit to maintaining a process of working which recognizes that communities are complex and ever-changing and invites changes to be integrated into the work moving forward
- ✓ Keep focused on the purpose and the principles as the fundamental underpinning of the project to help the project to be relevant to the community over time. Tasks and outcomes can then be emergent and nimble as the change occurs
- ✓ Use evaluation as a learning tool; work with partners on collective sense-making in order to adjust course as necessary

# 5. SHARE KNOWLEDGE & STORIES TO DEEPEN IMPACT

It is imperative that we celebrate successes, share insights and lessons learned from community-led climate action initiatives to inspire and create opportunities for future projects. Ultimately, our project was designed to demonstrate the essential social and physical infrastructure that community hubs and resident-led groups contribute to building low-carbon neighbourhoods. In order to share the knowledge generated by the project, we developed an extensive communication plan that included creative ways to capture and showcase project learning.

Creating digital or print materials that share project stories and successes can help residents and local organizations who participated to reflect and look back, as well as engage new residents who may not have been able to participate throughout

the course of the project. They also serve the purposes of sharing project learning with other stakeholders such as environmental organizations, policymakers and funders as well as interested members of the public.

To highlight our hub partners' climate-related initiatives - in their buildings and on their grounds - TEA created virtual tours of the Bathurst-Finch Unison Hub and the East Scarborough Storefront. We also created digital social-media pieces to go along with more extensive case studies on the key project components of resident and hub-led work for other community groups who may be interested in replicating a similar process or taking inspiration from what hubs and residents accomplished.

## CLIMATE-FRIENDLY HUB VIRTUAL TOURS



**The East Scarborough Storefront**



**The Unison Bathurst-Finch Hub**

## KEY: MAKE COMMUNITY BUILDING VISUAL AND ACCESSIBLE

Communication is foundational to building engagement in communities. Climate action language is often inaccessible and lacks relevance to many people's daily lives, and the link between climate and community priorities can be unclear. In addition, communicating across different languages, literacy levels, cultural reference points, values and priorities can create barriers for resident engagement if not done meaningfully and effectively.

Different approaches, such as using various visuals (graphic design, photographs, etc.) to illustrate ideas, concepts and intentions, can aid in accelerating shared understanding and momentum among diverse audiences and collaborators. Telling stories of local people and initiatives through a range of tools and techniques to illustrate how climate action can benefit communities can help residents to see themselves as part of solutions.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO MAKE COMMUNITY BUILDING VISUAL AND ACCESSIBLE?

- ✓ Create friendly, accessible, graphically-designed and locally-relevant materials to demonstrate the connection between climate action and community building
- ✓ Document the partnership process visually and creatively so that the people involved can literally see progress along the way and can provide feedback
- ✓ Highlight stories of local residents and organizations leading climate-related initiatives
- ✓ Use infographics to share data and complex concepts

Our project was designed to generate replicable, adaptable and scalable learning on the largely untapped climate leadership potential of resident-led groups and community hubs, which play important roles in many neighbourhoods. Another important element of the project was to apply this learning to inform government policies, strategies and investments focused on local climate action.

TEA convened an Advisory Group in collaboration with the City of Toronto to explore the role of community hubs in local engagement strategies and achieving

community climate goals from a policy perspective. The Climate Change and Community Hubs Advisory Group was made up of a range of stakeholders including multi-agency community hubs, faith-based hubs, community centres, civil society organizations, and City of Toronto Divisions.

During four meetings held between June and October 2019, the Advisory Group shared knowledge, built relationships across sectors, and made recommendations for the next phase (2021-2023) of Toronto's TransformTO Climate Action Plan.

The recommendations covered nine key areas:

- ✓ Climate Action and Resilience
- ✓ Community Spaces
- ✓ Partnerships for Climate Action
- ✓ Inclusion and Equity
- ✓ Local Climate Leadership
- ✓ Community Benefits and Economic Development
- ✓ Funding Models
- ✓ Climate Communications
- ✓ Assessment of Progress

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Toronto, TEA launched a new phase of work with the Climate Change and Community Hubs Advisory Group and City. Many of the local organizations participating in the Advisory Group were at the forefront of responding to the urgent needs of vulnerable residents

in their neighbourhoods. While frontline work was the top priority, TEA was able to collaborate with these organizations to document their emergency response and community support work to collect key lessons learned that can be applied to future health and climate shocks. Hubs, and their resident collaborators, provided integral social infrastructure for neighbourhood-based pandemic responses, which is described in our report *Community Hubs and Community-Based Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Lessons for building a more equitable, resilient and climate-safe Toronto*. It is our hope that this body of work will inform government plans and investments at a scale that will help municipalities, and specifically neighbourhoods at the greatest risk, prepare for future climate shocks.



## KEY: WORK AT MULTIPLE SCALES

Facilitating a connected community means not only working to build a strong local social fabric, but also connecting community-led initiatives to larger systems, and movements to larger change efforts. Connecting community building to city building, to global change efforts, supports scale that is truly grounded in community. Climate action in communities is impacted by a variety of players in many different spaces and there are often intersecting interests across these players.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO WORK AT MULTIPLE SCALES?

- ✓ Identify where there is local momentum around climate action work

- ✓ Leverage your networks and connections in the environment and climate space to advance local priorities
- ✓ Bring learnings from the community back to systems players and people in broader environmental movements
- ✓ Build the capacity of community hubs/ organizations to understand the political and policy structures that affect climate mitigation/adaptation at the community level
- ✓ Connect hubs/community players to people involved in broader movements/ actions that might have relevance to the community agenda

## 6. CONCLUSION: PLAY A MEANINGFUL AND SUPPORTIVE ROLE

Residents, grassroots groups and local organizations can lead community climate initiatives, and contribute significant knowledge and learning to broader municipal climate strategies and plans.

**These local actors are positioned to play a central role in building healthy, equitable, and resilient low-carbon communities, but they must be equipped with the necessary resources and support to undertake this work together with other civil society partners and government.**

Environmental organizations can play a key role in collaborating with local actors to catalyze community climate action. However, this requires a willingness to replace conventional strategies, which aim to get community members to adopt climate goals, with approaches that centre and integrate community priorities

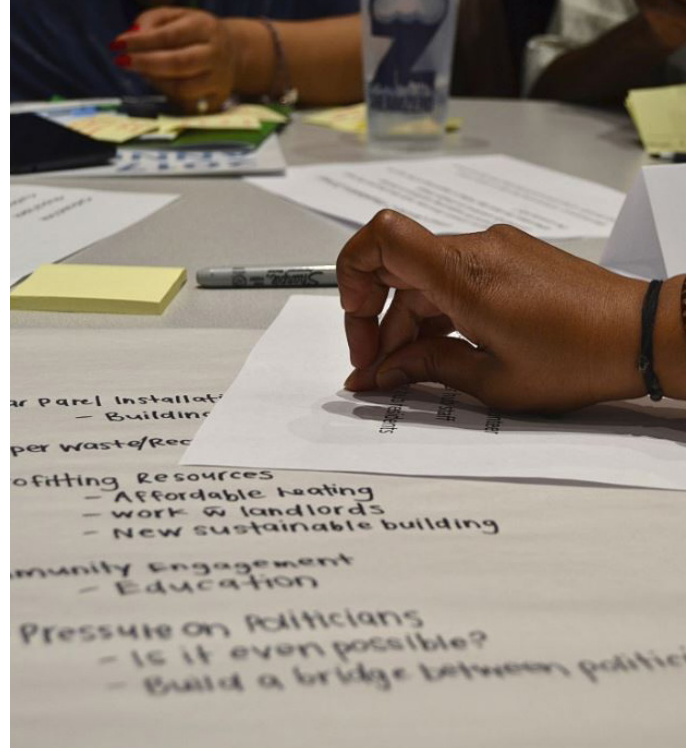
into climate initiatives. The Connected Communities Approach and 10 Keys provide helpful guidance for environmental actors who wish to engage in authentic community-building processes.

The starting point for launching or strengthening local climate initiatives is often working with partners to facilitate meaningful resident engagement processes. In order for environmental organizations to be effective collaborators in this work, they must recognize the valuable assets that residents, grassroots groups and local organizations bring to the table. Environmental organizations must be prepared to invest significant time in joint planning and co-design processes, and use their resources to support local priorities. Local actors should not be expected to apply a ‘climate lens’ to their work or launch



climate initiatives without a significant level of (additional) resources and support.

Each neighbourhood and community is unique. When residents and grassroots groups are supported to play lead planning and implementation roles, they will design engagement processes that use locally effective methods and develop climate initiatives that speak to community priorities. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution for building a groundswell of community climate action, which is why we must continuously listen, learn, support, adapt, and iterate.



## KEY: BUILD CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

While community-based action can be core to climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, many communities are not presently resourced to develop sustainable and effective community-led climate work. One of the most effective things environmental organizations and funders can do in a community is to invest in creating and strengthening the kinds of infrastructure that supports climate-related work over the long term. Creative infrastructure includes the way in which communications flow, the places in which people gather and plan together, the information that is readily accessible to the community, shared documentation, as well as buildings, parks and other physical infrastructure that can enable local initiatives.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BUILD CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE?

- ✓ Identify what role local organizations and grassroots groups would like to play in facilitating community-led climate action work and how can you help to strengthen that role
- ✓ Hold discussions with residents and local organizations' staff on what infrastructure (communications, channels, documentation, places and spaces, etc) are needed for the community to lead and contribute to climate action work
- ✓ Support local organizations and grassroots groups in accessing the resources and expertise they need to launch their climate action work and make it sustainable

# THANK YOU FOR READING

Thank you for taking the time to read our guide. This process has been an incredible learning experience for TEA and our partners. We are committed to continuing to grow our own knowledge and skills to undertake authentic co-design and collaboration processes with residents and community groups. We hope this learning guide has been a helpful starting point for you and/or your organization.

# APPENDIX: REFERENCES & RESOURCES

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