



Scaling Deep in Practice:

Minderoo's
Model for Early
Childhood Systems
Innovation in Place



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Introduction: A New Paradigm for Systems Change

Child poverty and intergenerational disadvantage remains one of the most complex and entrenched challenges facing communities.

These “wicked problems” are sustained by systemic fragmentation, siloed service delivery and historical underinvestment, especially in First Nations, remote and rural areas (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Altman & Hinkson, 2010).

Minderoo Foundation’s Place-Based Community Engagement model reimagines what’s possible when communities lead the transformation of the very systems meant to support them.

Minderoo’s Place Methodology

Building on the global literature of *Scaling Deep* (Cole & Hagen, 2024; Kania & Kramer, 2011), Minderoo’s approach activates deep systems change from within communities. We go beyond values and relational shifts embedding actionable, systems-wide transformation through co-governance, data transparency, strategic investment and the co-creation of permanent, place-based infrastructure for early childhood and whole-of-community wellbeing.

To respond differently, Minderoo’s Place Methodology integrates five evidence-informed frameworks that collectively shape its platform for applying *Scaling Deep* in practice:

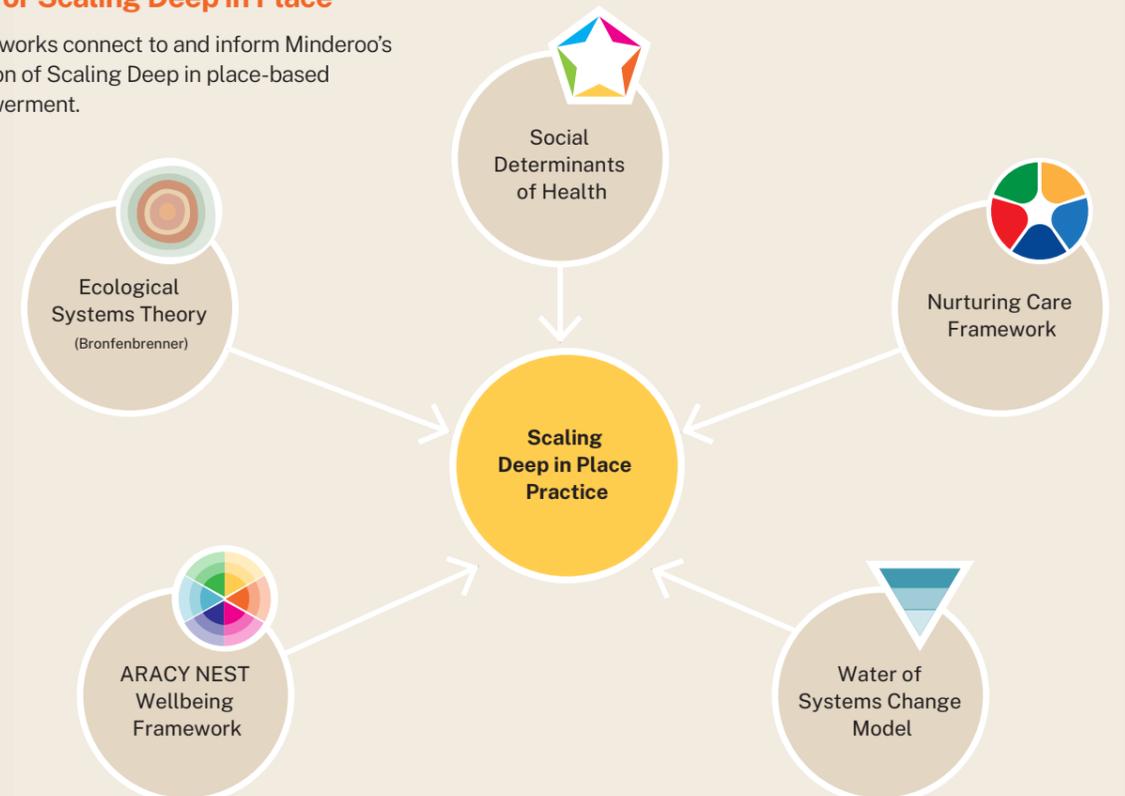
- **Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory:** Positions child development within a nested set of social, cultural and institutional systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
- **The Nurturing Care Framework:** Developed by WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank, defines five essential pillars for healthy child development.

- **The NEST Framework (ARACY):** Offers six interdependent domains of child and youth wellbeing requiring coordinated systems responses (ARACY, 2023).
- **The Water of Systems Change model:** Highlights the need to shift mental models, relationships and power dynamics — not just structures and programs (Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018).
- **Social Determinants of Health:** Emphasises that health inequities arise from the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age — shaped by the distribution of power, money and resources (Marmot, 2005; Marmot et al., 2008).

Together, these frameworks provide a coherent conceptual architecture that informs every aspect of Minderoo’s approach ensuring that *Scaling Deep* is not just relational or cultural, but structurally transformative, systemically aligned and grounded in what children, families and communities need to thrive.

Foundations for Scaling Deep in Place

Our five key frameworks connect to and inform Minderoo’s practical application of *Scaling Deep* in place-based community empowerment.



The Minderoo Difference: From Scaling Deep Theory to Method in Place

While traditional Scaling Deep approaches focus on values and cultural shifts (Cole & Hagen, 2024), Minderoo's Place Methodology operationalises this theory into structured, multi-phased implementation. What makes it unique is its dual commitment to community-led innovation and systems-level reform. Our approach is:

- **Data-Driven:** Every decision is underpinned by localised diagnostic data, early years evidence and shared measurement frameworks.
- **Root-Cause-Oriented:** We facilitate deep community analysis to identify structural drivers of disadvantage moving beyond symptoms to systemic redesign.

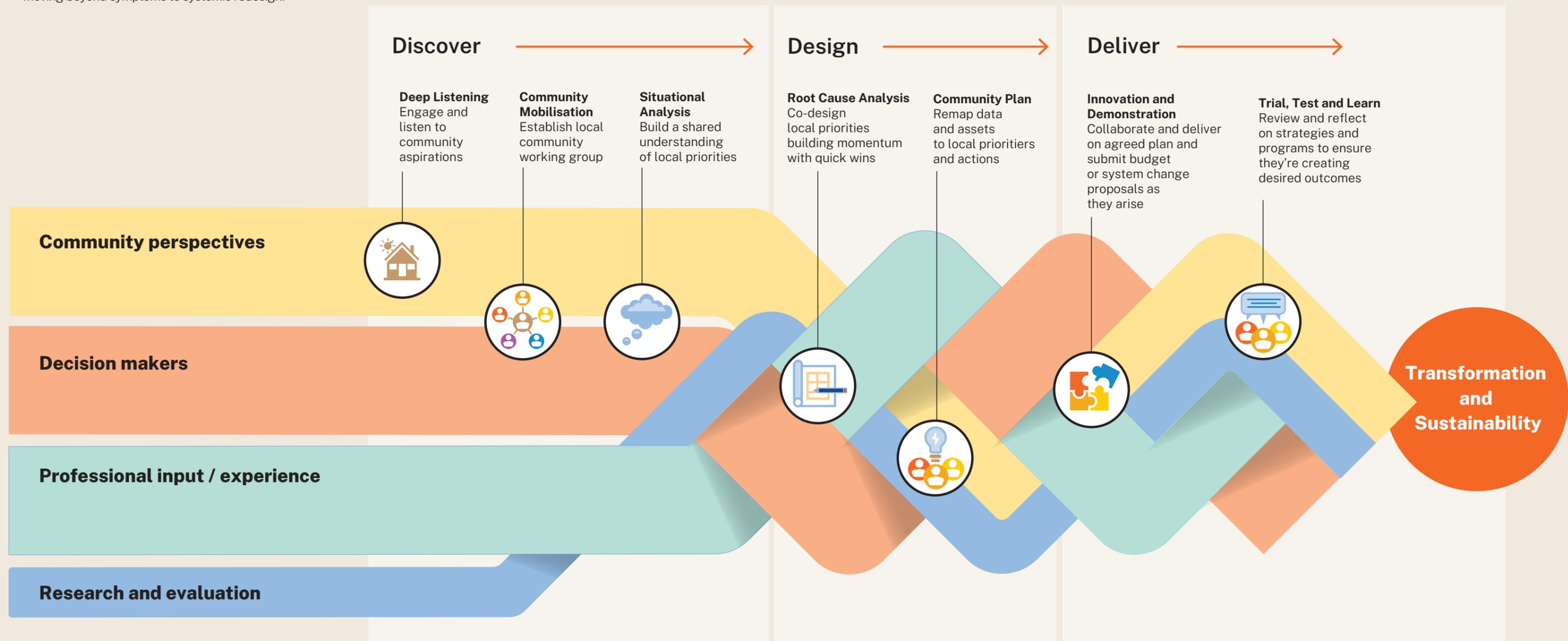
- **Multi-Systemic:** Change is targeted across early childhood development, health, education, housing and economic systems coordinated through a single, place-based early childhood agenda.
- **Permanently Anchored:** We are co-designing a Universal Place-Based Early Childhood Offering, a shared, community-owned platform for delivering services, mobilising partnerships and generating evidence to influence national reform.

The Scaling Deep Architecture: From Seeding to System Reform

The diagram illustrates the Scaling Deep methodology structured across three connected phases: Discover, Design and Deliver, that together describe a journey from building early momentum and shared ambition to sustained system reform.

The methodology supports communities and partners to move from understanding local context and priorities, through redesigning how systems operate, to embedding approaches that endure. Across all phases, community perspectives, decision-makers, professional expertise and research and evaluation are progressively woven together.

This integration ensures change is grounded in lived experience, informed by evidence, aligned with decision-making and embedded within policy, funding and practice, creating durable improvements in outcomes over the long term.



The Three Phases of Scaling Deep

Discover: Building the Foundations for Change

The Discover phase builds and strengthens community agency to create a foundation for all future action to be authentic, community-led, culturally informed and centred in real relationships, not assumptions

Community Engagement & Trust-Building through Deep Listening

- Establish respectful relationships with community leaders, families and organisations.
- Spend time listening to local voices and understanding lived experience.
- Build the trust that underpins long-term collaboration.

Mobilisation: Building Community-Wide Awareness and Momentum

Mobilisation transforms listening into readiness. Community working groups and backbone teams begin to play a unifying and visible role. Together, they:

- Profile the initiative across the community.
- Raise awareness of early years through storytelling and culturally relevant events.
- Connect community aspirations, assets and opportunities.
- Mobilise around a shared purpose focused on early childhood, children and families.

Visioning, Mobilisation and Momentum

- Deep Listening to community priorities through facilitated engagement.
- Establishment of local working groups and early-stage governance architecture.
- Immediate investment in “quick wins” to build trust and demonstrate capability.
- Baseline data analysis to identify inequities and map opportunities.
- Begin early organising of governance, backbone architecture and shared accountability.

Design: From Insight to Collective Action

The Design phase shifts from understanding to co-creating. Philanthropy, community, professionals and government contribute equally to identifying systemic root causes and designing local solutions.

Root Cause Analysis & Evidence-Driven Design

- Root cause analysis workshops draw on lived experience, frontline expertise and policy insight.
- Access to community data becomes a fundamental platform for decision making.
- Systemic drivers are surfaced, explained and analysed.

Community Plan: A Blueprint for Change

- Prioritised areas for action are co-designed with those most affected.
- The Universal Service offering and its associated domains are strategically prioritised.
- Innovation opportunities are identified through structured labs to test gaps in the universal offering.
- Evidence is translated and aligned with local context to inform planning.

Capacity, Co-Design, and Systems Innovation

- Co-design processes to address systemic gaps and develop solutions.
- Rapid assessment techniques provide valuable insights for continuous improvement.
- Cross-sector partnerships and governance mechanisms are formalised.
- A whole-of-community Early Childhood Plan is developed and owned.

Deliver: From Prototypes to System Shifts

The Deliver phase turns plans into action and prototypes into systemic solutions.

Innovation and Demonstration Labs

- Innovation Labs test new models are integrated into the early years’ service delivery model.
- Solutions are trialled in real time, supported by government and guided by community.
- Iterative learning ensures continuous improvement.

Trial, Test and Learn

- Evidence generated from Labs informs both local strategy and broader policy.
- Learnings drive advocacy for policy reform and recurrent investment.
- Proven models are embedded into mainstream systems.

System Influence and Infrastructure

- Place-based evidence compels systemic response and unlocks government investment.
- Permanent infrastructure and governance mechanisms are embedded.
- Frameworks are transferred across jurisdictions.
- A long-term shift toward shared accountability and sustainable reform begins.

Place MEL framework

Data, Evaluation, and Evidence as Engines for Change

Key to Scaling Deep is commitment to evidence as a central to system innovation strategy. Our Place MEL (Measurement, Evaluation and Learning) framework includes:

- Data sovereignty principles and participatory evaluation with local leaders.
- Tools for measuring changes in trust, governance quality, cultural safety and service integration.
- Use of signals-based indicators and narrative impact to capture deeper forms of change in stages of community.
- Strategic aggregation of data to inform budget submissions, investment cases and policy design.

These tools ensure that the evidence generated in place is fit for purpose: meaningful to communities and compelling to government and funders.



A Universal Place-Based Early Childhood Offering

A key innovation emerging from Minderoo's Scaling Deep model is the co-creation of a Universal Place-Based Offering, an enduring, community-designed Eco system with infrastructure that aligns services, investment and policy around what children and families need to thrive. This model is:

- **Co-designed by community**, informed by evidence and backed by data.
- **Tailored to local culture**, including First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. (Smith, 1999)
- **Anchored by shared governance** structures and cross-sector commitment.
- **Positioned for permanent** recurrent government investment as part of systemic reform.

These offerings challenge traditional programmatic approaches, offering a place as platform model where deep collaboration and community leadership are the norm not the exception.



Reimagining Government Partnership

Scaling Deep, as practised by Minderoo, is helping shift how government engages with community, moving from fragmented, short-term service provision to long-term, coordinated, community-centred investment. Our approach is explicit, deliberate and intentional in targeting system change at a state level, engaging governments from the very beginning as active participants.

Through engaging senior government leaders as well as the public service who will ultimately be responsible for translating policy into practice. By involving them in the earliest conversations and co-design processes at the community level, they are directly exposed to local wisdom, lived experience and emerging solutions. This means what is developed in community is fed through agency channels to the decision-making core of government, creating a continuous loop from local insight to state-level action.

Because these officials are engaged from the start, they are already identifying opportunities, exploring policy levers and preparing the ground for change. When the concept begins to demonstrate results, there are no surprises and government is primed and ready to act, with pathways for adoption and scale already in motion.

Through Scaling Deep we are creating new collaborative governance models that enable:

- **Shared decision-making** across community, government and philanthropy.
- **Alignment of local, state and federal priorities** through place charters.
- **Policy co-design** informed by community knowledge, data and lived experience.
- **Long-term sustainability** through legislative and funding reform.

In doing so, we are not just helping governments respond to proven models — we are shaping those models together, ensuring the system is ready to absorb, sustain and scale what works.

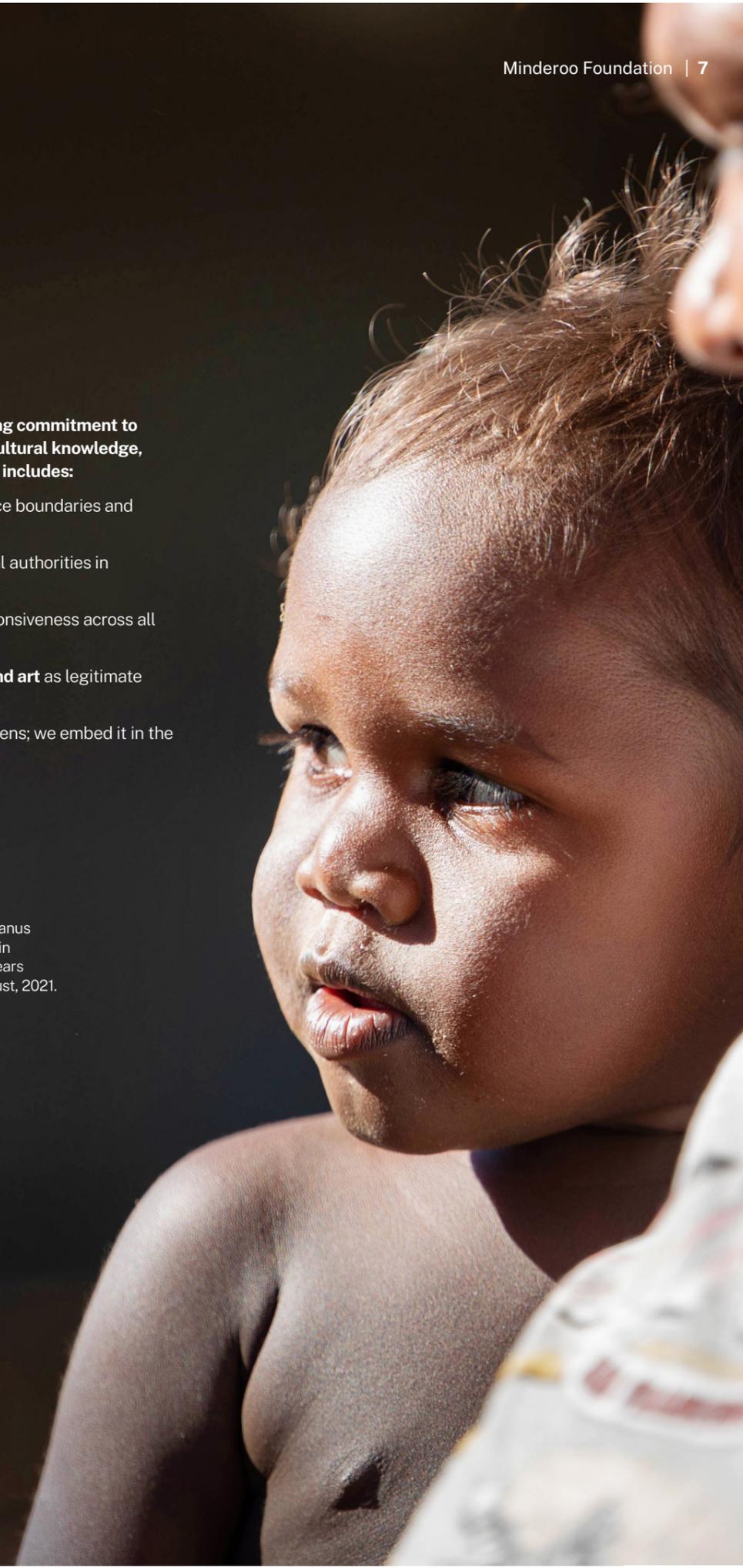
Embedding First Nations Knowledge

Central to our approach is an ongoing commitment to centring First Nations leadership, cultural knowledge, and governance in every stage. This includes:

- **Respecting Country-defined** place boundaries and community-defined priorities.
- **Engaging Elders** and local cultural authorities in governance and program design.
- **Building cultural safety** and responsiveness across all partner systems.
- **Using storytelling, oral history and art** as legitimate forms of community evidence.

We don't just include a First Nations lens; we embed it in the design of the system itself.

Photo: local community members in Pandanus Park, Western Australia who participated in engagement and listening for the Early Years Partnership community plan launch. August, 2021.



How the Minderoo Place Team Works to Scale Deep

Scaling Deep is about embedding long-term systems change by strengthening the conditions that allow community voice, local leadership and place-specific solutions to flourish.

The Minderoo Place team delivers this through four interlinked projects each contributing a critical dimension of the strategy. Together, they support transformation from the ground up, while influencing policy, funding and sector infrastructure from the top down. By integrating these four project streams, Minderoo is creating the enabling conditions for community-led transformation, policy and funding reform and sector-wide maturation.

This approach recognises that scaling deep requires patience, embedded presence and strategic systems work anchored in place, but with influence beyond.



Minderoo Foundation aims to ensure that all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, wealth or geography, can reach their full potential in thriving communities through the work of our Communities focus area.

Place Activation

Summary

Place Activation is the critical first step in Minderoo's Scaling Deep implementation supporting communities to move from aspiration to mobilisation. The project focuses on equipping identified communities with the technical, relational and financial resources needed to initiate organising, build trust and catalyse planning. It represents the activation of communities in the Place-Based Roadmap and Community Sequencing over a three-year period.

Goal

To create the conditions for locally-led change by resourcing communities to activate governance, build consensus and design data-driven strategies that respond to the needs and aspirations of children, families and local leaders.

Approach

- Provide technical and soft infrastructure to enable early-stage mobilisation, community organising and the co-definition of shared priorities.
- Resource local backbone organisations, prioritising Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) where possible with staffing, tools, systems and coordination support to lead early place-building work.
- Deliver agile, rapid-response funding through a Community Catalytic Fund, a flexible mechanism designed to support quick-win initiatives and Innovation Lab-style service system redesigns. This enables communities to test new approaches, build evidence and drive systems innovation based on lived experience and local priorities.

- Work in close partnership with Body of Work (BoW) Project Principals to integrate thematic expertise (e.g., Early Childhood, Gender, Economic Dignity, Natural Ecosystems) and ensure alignment across shared community agendas.
- Identify and connect partners and intermediaries -from local stakeholders to sector leaders, who can support early community efforts, drive momentum and anchor delivery capacity.
- Support the development of evidence-based, community-owned plans, built on local data and lived experience, to guide longer-term strategy, service reform and investment cases.

Key Partnerships

- Local backbone organisations including ACCOs, early years providers and community leadership bodies.
- Local government and regional service alliances.
- BoW teams across Minderoo (e.g., Valuing the Early Years, Vibrant & Connected Communities, Economic Dignity) to ensure integrated delivery and shared learning.
- Technical delivery partners providing facilitation, planning and implementation science support.
- Strategic partners such as Connected Beginnings, Early Years Partnerships and Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC) and Place Inc -aligned networks, who can amplify community-led proposals at broader system levels.

Place Research and Evidence

Summary

This workstream provides the insights, frameworks and measurement tools that guide place selection, tailor support and enable adaptive learning across the initiative.

Goal

To generate actionable evidence that informs decision-making in community, across government and within Minderoo, supporting the conditions for scalable, community-led change.

Approach

- Develop and refine the Place Selection Framework to identify readiness and tailor pathways of support.
- Advance data infrastructure that captures strength-based, community-informed metrics.
- Combine local learning with national and global insights (e.g., from the UK, USA and Argentina) to shape Minderoo's positioning as a thought leader in scaling deep.

Key Partnerships

Restacking the Odds, Griffith University, Orange Compass, Australian Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas, UK Place Matters, the Centre for Social Impact, Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) and Specialists in First Nations data sovereignty.

Place Transformation and Governance

Summary

This project establishes the governance, funding and operating conditions that enable communities to lead and sustain change. It focuses on how mainstream power and resources flow into and within place.

Goal

To create enduring, place-based infrastructure that aligns policy, practice and investment, and positions community as central in decision-making.

Approach

- Establish shared governance models involving community, government and philanthropy (e.g., Joint Planning Table in SA, First Nations design in Kempsey).
- Develop fit-for-purpose operating models that shift decision-making closer to community.
- Use evidence and proof points from place to shape policy reform, influence budget allocations and shift institutional practices.
- Create the conditions for recurrent investment, underpinned by data-driven advocacy and policy co-design.

Suggested Enhancements

- Strengthen the role of local government as permanent infrastructure for place stewardship.
- Build models for funding flexibility (e.g., pooled or outcomes-based funding).
- Align with broader movements such as the Commonwealth Outcomes Fund, IDAC pilots and state reform efforts in SA and WA.

Key Partnerships

State government departments (Premier and Cabinet, Treasury, Communities), local government entities, First Nations governance bodies, IDAC, PLACE. Connected Beginnings and relevant philanthropic peers.

Photo (l to r): WA Minister for Education; Early Childhood Sabine Winton MLA, Premier of Western Australia Roger Cook MLA and Nicola Forrest AO at the Armadale West Early Years Partnership community plan launch. May, 2024.

Pioneering Sector Leadership

Summary

This project drives system-wide change by building the field of place-based work, enabling shared language, infrastructure and influence to embed community-led approaches across sectors.

Goal

To strengthen and connect the ecosystem for place-based work in Australia and globally, ensuring sustainability beyond any single community or funder.

Approach

- Fund and co-design the National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration and convene the Amplifying Place role to unify field leadership.
- Broker cross-sector partnerships that influence how governments and philanthropies approach place.
- Share practice through international exchanges and position Minderoo as a global contributor to the place-based field.

Key Partnerships

PLACE, ARACY IDAC Convenor, UK Place Matters, Universidad de San Andres, Nesta, Kindred+, Collective Futures, Ethos, ECD Global Funders Group, Havard CDC.



Conclusion: Leading the Next Generation of Systems Reform

Minderoo's Scaling Deep model is more than a theory; it is a living methodology guided by communities to support transformation from the inside out. By integrating data, root cause analysis, Indigenous knowledge and whole-of-system innovation, we are creating the conditions for enduring change.

Our approach positions community as the author of its own future and government as a responsive partner in building it. We are not scaling programs, we are scaling paradigms: of community power, shared accountability and permanent systems change.

As we move forward, the evidence being generated from place will drive the next era of policy, investment and national early childhood reform. And at the centre of it all are communities; connected, capable and in control.

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About Minderoo Foundation

Minderoo Foundation is an Australian philanthropy, founded by Dr Andrew Forrest AO and Nicola Forrest AO in 2001, working to forge a fair future.

A fair future means every person has the opportunity to thrive in a healthy environment - now and for generations to come.

We focus on three areas: uplifting communities, supporting gender equality and safeguarding our natural ecosystems. Alongside these focus areas, we respond to existential threats and urgent challenges in an agile and targeted way through a series of impact missions.

We invest in people and ideas tackling tough and persistent problems - in policy, science, advocacy and on the ground.

Our work is grounded in evidence and driven by strong partnerships. By standing alongside those already making an impact, we help solutions go further to deliver lasting change.

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