# GLOSSARY OF ELEMENTS

V1.2

# What Thinking With Elements Lets Us Do

In this **Glossary of Elements,** we define the key elements, explain how each influences civic and community contributions, and provide examples of the elements in action. These are the more clearly definable and directly fundable elements that enable participation and complement the effervescent, individually experienced **Dark Matter** discussed in the **Way Finding Guide**.

This Glossary has been created to support the constellation mapping and learning activities in the Wayfinding Guide and is not intended to be exhaustive.

**Citations and references**
In this Glossary, you will see reference to a Place-based Deep Dive (PBDD 2025). This is on the ground research in a regional community in Victoria, Australia, undertaken by CPI. You will also see references to a series of interviews conducted by CPI, in which interviewees are identified by their initials (e.g., BD 2025). You can read more about the interview process as well as the methodology for creating this glossary in the Wayfinding Guide, Appendix A: Methodology.

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# Identity and Personal Traits

**Individual identity and traits influence people's ability and willingness to be active participants in their places and communities. The Elements in this category highlight how traits such as age, education, gender, health and ability, mindset, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and religion influence how a person experiences the world, what knowledge they carry, and what issues feel most urgent or relevant to them.**

These experiences can motivate participation (for example, advocacy driven by lived injustice) or make certain forms of engagement feel more or less meaningful or safe.

People's individual circumstances also affect access to resources and opportunities. For instance, people juggling insecure work, caring responsibilities, or financial stress may have less capacity to attend meetings, volunteer, or engage in unpaid civic activities—even if they are highly committed.

A person's **gender identity, race, or age** can also affect whether they feel heard, respected, and taken seriously—or whether they anticipate discrimination or tokenism, which can discourage participation.

**Historical exclusion or harm** (for example, toward First Nations peoples or migrant communities) affects trust in institutions and willingness to engage. *Participation is shaped not only by who someone is now, but by how people like them have been treated over time.*

When considering identity and personal traits, it is important to consider **intersectionality**, recognising that a person's life is shaped not only by individual traits, but also by how these traits intersect, creating unique experiences of advantage or disadvantage that influence how a person participates.

Funders looking to address barriers to participation must take into account that what works to engage one cohort (e.g., young people) may look different to what works for another (e.g., refugee and migrant families), while also recognising that no cohort is homogeneous, given the intersectional nature of people's identities.

# Age

**Age** is the number of years a person has lived. This is the fixed characteristic most often used legally and administratively (e.g., age 18 for voting, age 65 for retirement in some systems) (ABS.gov.au).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Participation starts at an early age.**
   Fostering accountability and agency for young people is crucial for developing engaged citizens and preventing democratic backsliding (IFES 2004). For young adults, particularly in regional areas, online spaces are vital for connecting to others, especially for those with marginalised identities (Waite & Bourke, 2015; PBDD, 2025). In addition, education, particularly civic education, is vital for giving young people the tools to be informed and responsible citizens (From Classroom to Community).

2. **There is an opportunity to activate older Australians as civic participants.**
   Older Australians are reported to be more likely to have time for both formal and informal volunteering (State of Volunteering Queensland 2024), contributing significantly to community strength. However, the AHRC found that ageism—discrimination based on age—occurs in workplaces, retail, social situations, and healthcare, negatively influencing older Australians' ability to participate (AHRC). A one-size-fits-all approach to engaging people across a community won't work, since getting most 65–year-old men to show up to a run club is unlikely, while they may show up to a men's shed (JD 2025). While places that foster a sense of being seen and supported are important to an individual's sense of identity, intergenerational engagement benefits individual well-being and overall community strength (McKinsey, 2023).

3. **Age differences and power imbalances impact participation.**
   When engagement opportunities occur only during working hours, it limits engagement among younger people and can result in groups that are predominantly retired and older in both demographics and lived experience (ZC 2025).
4.

**See it in action:**

- Programs like Children's Parliament (NSW gov and QLD) and Youth Advisory Bodies (National program) are intentionally designed to involve youth in civics and include programs that suit school calendars.

- Accountable Futures Collective is an example of a First Nations-led systems-change initiative focused on redefining and embedding accountability to young people within the systems, organisations, and institutions that impact their lives.

- The Civic Journey in the UK is a two-year programme, led by young people, that supports and inspires sustained engagement in social action, community activism, and entrepreneurial spirit.

- The Seniors Exercise Park Champions Program is a volunteer program for adults aged 60 and over to lead physical activity programs at the Seniors Exercise Park.

- Strengthening 'seniors' inclusion and participation (Victoria) was a state government initiative focused on creating more opportunities for seniors to join, attend, and participate in clubs, groups, organisations, and activities in the community.

- Humanitas (Netherlands) builds community in their aged care home by providing free accommodation to university students in exchange for spending at least 30 hours a week socialising with residents, and participating in designing the community.

# Gender Identity

**Gender Identity** is a person's deeply felt, internal, and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. It is distinct from sex (biological attributes), exists along a continuum and is not confined to a male/female binary (World Health Organization). This includes First Nations specific identities such as Brotherboys and Sistergirls (Vic.gov)

**Why it matters:**

1. **Differences in gender are linked to differences in participation.** The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) Gender Equity Insights Series shows that women participate more in unpaid work, including community-based activities and caregiving, than men. A higher proportion of men (27.6%) reported often or always feeling lonely compared to women (23.1%). Men are also found to be more likely than women to lack social support or a close confidant, which is a key component of social isolation (The Loneliness Report: A survey of Australian life 2018).

2. **Women and non-binary people feel less safety in public spaces and transport.** Women, girls, and nonbinary people experience significantly less safety in public spaces compared to men, often restricting their mobility and public life participation due to fears of harassment and violence. This fear is a global reality for women, who report feeling unsafe in public spaces—especially after dark—at rates roughly double those of men (NSW.gov , 2024).

3. **Recognition and respect of gender identity is a precondition for participation.** Individuals must feel their identity is recognised and respected (a core condition of belonging) before they feel safe participating and contributing (United Nations). Experiences of stigma and discrimination (including incorrect pronoun use) resulted in a "mistrust of providers or the system". They led to a broader withdrawal from civic and community networks (Rainbow Health Australia).

**See it in action:**

- The Transgender Victoria (TGV) Peer Support Program strengthens relational and social ties by connecting individuals and ensuring a sense of belonging. Building internal resilience and peer networks empowers participants to take on broader advocacy and civic roles.

- The Northern Territory Men's Places Policy and Program supports programs, activities, and networks that help men develop community-focused initiatives, participate in community activities, and encourage volunteering.

- The Trans Justice Project trains and organises trans people and their allies nationwide to advocate for trans justice and inclusion.

# Sexual Orientation

**Sexual Orientation** is an inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people, distinct from gender identity (Human Rights Campaign). LGBTQIA+ is often used as an inclusive umbrella that recognises the most common categories, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer-identifying people, intersex and asexual, with the '+' being an inclusive and intentional way of representing all identities and experiences (UNSW).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Safety is a prerequisite for presence and participation.**
   DSS's National Plan to End Violence against Women and their Children 2022–2032 recognises LGBTIQA+ people experience health and wellbeing disparities due to stigma, violence and discrimination, and recommends increased attention to LGBTIQA+ communities. Experiences of exclusion lead to higher rates of school drop out, restricted access to formal labour markets and decent jobs, affecting their ability to access basic healthcare services and housing stability (Harvard.edu), making it harder to participate fully in civic life. If a community space or institution is perceived as hostile or non-inclusive, the cost of participation (psychological and physical risk) outweighs the benefit. Funders can enable participation by supporting "brave enough spaces" that explicitly signal safety (commons.org; LGBTQ Map 2025).

2. **Role models and "reflective representation" both increase belonging.**
   Participation, connection and belonging are strengthened when individuals see their sexual orientation reflected in local leadership and civic structures. This representation reduces internalised stigma and increases the likelihood that LGBTQ+ individuals will volunteer or engage in local governance (Victoryinstitute.org). Participants in a youth program shared that having an adult around who was queer made it more welcoming and safe for them to be who they are, despite broader stigma faced in the community (PBDD 2025).

**See it in action:**

- The LGBTQ+ Victory Institute (USA) funds the civic participation of queer individuals by training them to run for office and participate in public boards, moving from "inclusion" to "governance."
- The Trevor Project and the It Gets Better Project (USA) work to eliminate suicide among the queer community by building safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

# Health/Ability

**Health** is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO). It impacts an individual's physical and mental state and their functional capacity to interact with the world.
**Ability** is understood here through the Social Model of Disability, which distinguishes between a person's impairment and the barriers to participation created by society (afdo.org).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Poor health leads to lower participation.**
   Health determines an individual's functional capacity to show up, stay engaged, and contribute energy to community life; so poor health decreases the likelihood of engagement, even when the individual is highly motivated (Mattila et al. 2017). Mobility issues are a primary driver of social exclusion (AIHW.gov). Mental health challenges also drive social exclusion as they lead to social anxiety, stigma, and reduced energy. This results in increased social isolation, which in turn worsens mental health, creating a negative cycle (Eager et al. 2025).

2. **Health and social connection are self-reinforcing and interdependent.**
   Social Connection is measured by the quantity and quality of time individuals spend with one another, alongside the support they feel they receive (Mahoney et al. 2024; OECD framework). It is a fundamental determinant of health, creating a reciprocal loop where health enables more connection, and connection improves health outcomes AIHW: Social Cohesion and Health, and can protect against serious illness and disease (CDC.gov ).

3. **Everyone benefits from the increased inclusion of people with disabilities.**
   Community inclusion of people with disabilities improves community economic health, fosters greater acceptance and compassion, and generates diverse perspectives (Australian Disability Network). In 2022, more than one in five Australians had a disability (ABS). As the population ages, this rate is expected to increase, creating more demand for inclusive modes of participation and accessibility considerations (See Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031).

**See it in action:**

- The Fairfield Social Prescribing Project (NSW) helps people with chronic health conditions who are experiencing loneliness and social isolation by connecting them with local services and community-based activities to support their overall health.
- Local Communities Supporting People With Disabilities (VIC) was a partnership between RMIT, local governments, community organisations, businesses, and service providers. It used an action-based research methodology to engage 100 residents with disabilities in co-designing and testing new, inclusive community spaces.
- The National Ethnic Disability Alliance Challenging Stigma program is recruiting and compensating participants for 1:1 interviews and online workshops to help CALD people with disabilities share their lived experience of stigma with community organisations and policymakers.
- ADD International conducted a Tanzania Participatory Grant-Making pilot where young disability justice activists were given authority over grantmaking for community engagement projects proposed by other local young people with disabilities.

# Ethnic Background/ Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

**Ethnic Background** describes a social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, or language. It is often a self-defined identity, focusing on country of birth, language spoken at home, and religious affiliation (ABS: Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity). **CALD** refers to groups in Australia who are born abroad with diverse origins, languages, religions, and ethnicities, generally excluding Anglo-Celtic or Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (VIC gov).

**Why it matters:**

1. **CALD communities face barriers but want to be involved.**
   The Multicultural Framework Review found CALD communities want to be a part of decision-making processes, to co-design and co-produce with relevant layers of government, and to share responsibility and have a role in accountability. The Review identified 3 core principles: connection, identity and belonging, and inclusion. These principles are also echoed by National engagement strategies more broadly and are central to enabling civic and community participation (PBDD 2025). Expanding participation opportunities is important; however, experts we interviewed warned that an artificial need to include every demographic can create "alien environments" where no one feels comfortable, and participants perform inauthentically (KC 2025, citing Gehrke 2014).

2. **Anglo-Celtic Australian culture can feel less community-minded.**
   Sydney Policy Lab finds that civic engagement is higher in younger people from multicultural backgrounds. Some individuals from CALD communities interviewed for this guide expressed surprise at how isolated and segmented people in Australia seem to be, and they missed the more community-oriented culture of their home communities (PBDD 2025).

3. **Ethnic diversity is a barrier or enabler, depending on material resources.**
   These are core individual attributes, but the way they impact participation is mediated by broader elements in the systems, like relational and social ties, cultural narratives, and the inclusivity of institutions, structures and services. Some speculate that the more ethnically diverse a neighbourhood is, the more it 'constricts' and erodes trust. This theory has been popular with pundits and used to explain why culturally homogenous places may have stronger social support and welfare. However, in studies that account for material deprivation, these negative associations disappear (Society, UK; NCBI, 2018).

4. **Peer support arises amidst similar marginalised groups.**
   Cultural networks often rely on bonding social capital, deep ties between similar people, to navigate economic hurdles and social integration, often by providing mutual aid, information sharing, and emotional support. Formal or informal groups that explicitly welcome and accommodate people who are newly arrived enable people to build "trust, safety, sharing and understanding" and are important in countering racism and prejudice, which may be experienced (PBDD 2025).

5. **Recognise and build on the strengths of Australia's multiculturalism.**
   Some forms of participation and community connection go under the radar and are unaccounted for in official measurements and surveys (The Urban Institute, 2003). For instance, the OECD Better Life Index acknowledges that it does not capture the strong connections of Indigenous Australians to family, community, culture, and the land. As one interviewee noted, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD community leaders do work that is often overlooked by funders, and that's not recognised as formal civic participation. The trusted relationships they hold and the way they can translate and interface between communities and systems are vital but not often recognised by funders (JM 2025). It is important to acknowledge, enable and celebrate a range of participation, for instance, families who host dinners for significant cultural holidays and share food may not immediately see this as a form of community participation (PBDD 2025).

**See it in action:**

- Each state offers grants to promote cultural sharing, celebrate diversity, and build social cohesion. They offer funding to address community needs, host events and festivals, support the construction of physical infrastructure for cultural or religious purposes, and sometimes provide advocacy and consultation services.
    - Multicultural NSW offers various grant programs, events and projects.
    - The Victorian Multicultural Commission offers funding for community initiatives, and strengthens cultural diversity in Victoria through consultation, advocacy, celebration and promotion.
    - The Queensland Government provides funding through the "Multicultural Connect Grants Program" to support community-led projects, events, and infrastructure development across the state, to help build an inclusive, harmonious, and united Queensland.

  - The Western Australia Office of Multicultural Interests provides information, advice, funding, training and support to communities and community organisations.
  - South Australia's Multicultural Affairs Division is responsible for developing multicultural policies and programs and promoting cultural diversity in South Australia, and offers grants such as "Celebrate Together Grants" and "Multicultural Festival Grants".
  - Tasmania has released the Embracing Diversity, Fostering Belonging: Tasmania's Multicultural Action Plan (2025). Support for CALD communities in Tasmania is often channelled through key organisations like the Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania and the Multicultural Council of Tasmania, which receive government funding to run specific programs and provide support services.

- Government policies and programs have focused on tolerance for difference and plurality as a key enabler of engagement. Multiple jurisdictions invest in programs to foster belonging and integration of refugees, recently arrived migrants and multicultural communities, such as Victoria's Multicultural Policy Statement and WA's Multicultural Policy Framework, as well as the Federal Multicultural Framework Review and Roadmap.
- Victoria's African Communities Action Plan was developed in collaboration with hundreds of African community members and aims to allow all African community members to belong, contribute, and thrive.

# Educational Attainment

**Educational attainment** is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university (Oxford Languages). This can include schooling such as foundation, primary, and senior secondary; Vocational Education and Training; as well as higher education certificates, diplomas, degrees, and advanced degrees.

**Why it matters:**

1. **Educational attainment increases employability, stability, and the ability to thrive.** Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to be employed (Education.gov, 2016). As educational attainment increases, the employment gap between First Nations people and non-Indigenous Australians narrows (AIHW.gov, 2024). This contributes to increased housing stability and, in turn, feelings of belonging and the ability to build support networks necessary for supporting thriving families (UNSW, 2025).

2. **Education is linked to more involved and tolerant community members.** People with higher levels of educational attainment are two to three times more likely to be involved in a community, social or political group (Department of Education 2024). These trends hold after controlling for a wide range of potential confounding factors, including age, employment, gender, country of birth, and where people live. Educational attainment is linked to civic engagement, tolerance, and trust, and is also noted as a primary driver of social cohesion (Department of Education, 2016).

3. **Literacy and critical thinking enhance self-efficacy and effective citizens.** The "Cognitive Mobilisation Effect" (Inglehart 1970) suggests that education provides the literacy, critical thinking, and research skills required to process complex political information and express opinions, leading to more engaged and critical citizenry. Higher levels of education also correlate with higher levels of self-efficacy, the belief that one can influence decisions and outcomes, which can make people more likely to participate in their communities and civic life (IEA Civic Participation Study 2005).

**See it in action:**

- The Learning for Life Program supports disadvantaged students to stay in school. By providing financial and "soft" support (mentoring/learning clubs), it builds the academic confidence necessary for future civic participation.
- The NAP-CC (Civics & Citizenship) online assessment, conducted by ACARA, uses a national sample to track how well year 6 and year 10 Australian students understand their democracy. This data helps funders identify "black spots" where civic literacy is low.
- The People's Future Lab (Denmark) brought together students from folk high schools across Denmark for training in community action for sustainability, culminating in an international climate festival where students shared their ideas for sustainable community transitions.

# Socioeconomic Status

**Socioeconomic Status** is a measure of one's combined economic and social status (SES), encompassing not only income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class (APA.org).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Income impacts participation, but research presents a mixed picture.** Individuals with higher incomes are more likely to be involved in sports, school-related groups and to participate in collective civic activities than those with lower income (Baum et al. 2000). However, while participation in formal community activities or volunteering is often higher in areas with better economic conditions, individuals in lower SES groups engage heavily in informal, day-to-day mutual support networks, and may have more diverse coping strategies (NIH 2016).

2. **Location and long-term residence contribute to well-being and connections.** Families living in high-opportunity neighbourhoods with good schools and low crime rates see improved financial, social, and physical well-being (Thomas et al. 2014). (See also Infrastructure and place: Built Environment). Additionally, owning a home increases the ability to participate as residents; those with longer residential tenure tend to be more attached to their environment and community, have stronger friendships and connections, and are more likely to participate in civic life (Shin, 2022).

3. **Social standing and self-worth shape whether people participate.** SES can act as a psychological filter shaping whether an individual feels "qualified" or "invited" to speak, affecting their language skills, self-esteem, and sense of belonging. This creates both internal barriers (self-doubt) and external ones (less exposure/opportunity) that shape their confidence and willingness to participate (SCIRP 2012). Those with lower levels of education, skills, and income may also perceive their contributions as insignificant and may regard themselves as unwelcome and ineffective within organisations *(See also Relational Ties: Work and school Networks)*. Inequality also diminishes people's willingness to act for the public good, as people living in unequal communities often feel disconnected from a sense of "shared fate" and perceive the responsibilities for change as unfairly distributed (UK Parliament 2024).

4. **Everyone has something valuable to offer.**
   The notion that people can only contribute when they're housed or well resourced is a false belief that undermines their humanity and our need for purpose and meaning (MST 2025). Even recent arrivals participating in social welfare programs can find ways to give back and contribute if they feel a sense of belonging, responsibility, or purpose (PBDD 2025). For marginalised youth, "meaningful volunteerism" has been shown to build the social capital and professional networks necessary for upward economic mobility (YouthREX 2014).

**See it in action:**

- Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 (UK) is a proposed statute that would require local and public authorities to consider how their decisions increase or reduce inequalities resulting from socio-economic disadvantage. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service voluntarily adopted the duty in 2021, and implemented a range of measures to address inequalities of outcome which stem from socioeconomic disadvantage, such as introducing driving licence bursaries for applicants from deprived areas of Merseyside, creating a socio-economic disadvantage staff support network, and developing stronger links and more robust data-sharing practices with key partners.
- The Homeless World Cup (global) uses its annual marquee event, an international football tournament where all players have recently experienced homelessness, to activate the homeless footballers and their communities as champions for ending homelessness.
- While charitable donations declined in the early months of COVID-19 in the United States among low-income individuals, stimulus checks were associated with a significant rebound in charitable giving, suggesting that increased socioeconomic stability comes with a greater ability and desire to prioritise the health of community institutions.

# Religion and Spirituality

**Religion** is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and moral values, as well as the beliefs, observances, and social practices that foster a community of people who share that faith (Merriam-Webster). **Spirituality** is a personal belief in a Higher Power and a sense of connection to something bigger than oneself. It is a broad and subjective concept that may or may not align with formal religion (BGSU).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Religious groups can be a landing place and practice grounds for civic skills.** Faith-based groups are often a first foothold for the newly arrived (FM 2025). They can provide the physical space and social networks for food banks, housing support, and childcare, making them essential hubs (Philanthropy Roundtable 2019). Additionally, religious institutions and communities can be safe and inclusive places where people can practice skills such as public speaking, chairing meetings, or organising fundraisers. For marginalised groups or low-income communities, these may be the most accessible spaces to develop these leadership traits (Pew 2025).

2. **A theology of service instils shared values like altruism and charity.** There are arguments that participation in religions that include a theology of service (e.g., Sadaqah in Islam, Tikkun Olam in Judaism, or the Social Gospel in Christianity) leads to more acts of service, participation and altruism (Volunteering Australia). Stories taught to children from a young age instil these values and, according to a pastor, are central to why his parishioners participate, volunteer, and donate despite declining national rates (PBDD 2025).

3. **Religion can be an enabler to engagement, but also a barrier to social cohesion.** Participating in and volunteering at church can foster close social connections with similar people and enable cross-community engagement, leading to volunteering in the wider community (Aksoy 2023). However, the Scanlon Foundation's Social Cohesion Insights note that it is important to recognise religion's ambivalent role: it can provide strength, solidarity, and moral purpose, but also carry the risk of exclusion or insularity.

4. **A decline in organised religion calls for new ways to create purpose.** There is a decline in participation in organised religion, with "no religion" becoming the fastest-growing category, at 39% in 2021 (ABS 2021). Millennials, in particular, report lower levels of religious affiliation than ever before, favouring groups that offer

purpose, transformation, and creativity (CasperTK, 2015). This shift highlights a need for new or adapted institutions that can connect people within a geographic community and provide a sense of purpose. A sense of purpose is closely linked to many of the goals that public health research identifies as helping people live longer, better lives (Hidden Brain, 2025), and it creates opportunities for active participation (See also: *Communities of purpose*). As participation in organised religion declines, we need to fill the void with institutions designed to tap into people's energy, interests, and resources (JA 2025).

**See it in action**:

- Sikh Volunteers Australia partners with local councils in Melbourne's southeast to provide free vegetarian meals to everyone, bringing people together across identities and reducing social isolation.
- The Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong (VIC) organises tours of places of worship to connect faith communities in dialogue and community, and hosts an annual interfaith school gathering for students to share practices from their faith traditions.

# Mindsets and Internal Narratives

**Mindsets** are the underlying assumptions and beliefs through which individuals process information and make sense of the world (APA). **Internal Narratives** are the 'stories' people tell themselves that influence how we interpret the past, how we anticipate the future, how motivated we feel, how we act in relationships, and how satisfied we are with our lives (Psychology Today).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Internal beliefs influence whether people participate.**
   Internal stories, such as whether or not individuals have agency, their community's worth, and their relationship to power, influence how people choose to participate in or opt out of civic activities. Civic Identity is the sense of self as a member of a community, with associated responsibilities and rights, which motivates engagement in the civic and political life of that community (Stanford, 2025). Civic Agency is the belief that one has the capacity to work across differences to address common challenges (Harvard, 2022). These can be fostered through programs (Durand et al, 2024) or constrained by increased government restrictions on civic spaces and gatherings (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2021).

2. **Negative stories are hard to dislodge and self-perpetuating.**
   People's biases and attention are shaped by internal narratives, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies (Psychology Today, 2026). An example of this is 'Learned Helplessness,' a mindset where repeated exposure to systemic failure or exclusion leads an individual to believe that no amount of effort will change their outcome. "It's about how much power they [the community] feel they have, [or if they] don't think things can be different" (Very Well Mind, 2025).

3. **Positive experiences can create new stories.**
   'Internal political efficacy' is the confidence that one has the skills to understand and participate in politics/community governance, and it significantly impacts participation (OECD, 2021). Positive experiences in which individuals feel their actions have an impact can reinforce a sense of political efficacy, particularly in adolescence (NIH, 2025).

4. **Biases of public servants further stigmatise marginalised communities.**
   Biases in the delivery of public services create systemic barriers that significantly hinder the ability of marginalised communities to thrive. These biases, whether conscious, unconscious, or institutional, translate into unequal access to essential

services, lower-quality care, and reduced economic opportunities (PMC.gov, 2025). (See also: *Services and Programs*). This is especially evident in racial profiling by police, which reinforces stereotypes and can further stigmatise targeted communities, leaving them feeling alienated and unsafe (HumanRights.gov, 2021).

**See it in action:**

- Narrative4 Story Exchanges (USA) is an evidence-based facilitation methodology used in schools to empower young people to become active community participants. One participant is quoted as saying, "If you had asked me what was possible in this world a year ago, I probably would have been like, 'Well, nothing's possible because this world is in shambles.' Since I've been introduced to Narrative 4, there's literally nothing I can think of right now that I think is impossible."
- The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (USA) Restorative Stories project features a story bank from incarcerated children as well as children and families affected by youth crime, with the goal of establishing that "no child is born bad" and illustrating how restorative justice can help youth create new internal narratives about their future.
- Northcott Narratives (NSW) was a collaboration between residents of Sydney's Northcott public housing building, the arts and social change organisation Big hART, and New South Wales state agencies to help residents move past the trauma of the building's history of murders and suicides towards community-building, storytelling, and increased connection.

# Relational and Social Ties

**Relational and social ties are important enablers of civic engagement because participation is fundamentally a social activity, rather than individual choice alone.** People's networks and relationships shape an individual's experience of connection and belonging, and are often the first places where civic and community values are learned and practised.

**Family and friends** have a significant influence on people's capacity and willingness to participate. Families are often identified as the first and most important role models for civic engagement. In addition, families can draw people into civic spaces (such as schools, parks, and third spaces). **Social networks** also impact participation, with strong networks fostering support and confidence for people to engage in their communities. On the flipside, where a person's immediate circle is disengaged, or where family trauma or violence exists, this may act as a barrier to participation.

**Neighbours and peers** also influence people's attitudes to participation by acting as bridges to the broader community, setting norms around participation, and creating a sense of safety. **Work and School Networks** also offer opportunities for people to connect and develop trusting relationships with people from different backgrounds. Workplaces can also provide financial security and work-based opportunities, enabling people to actively volunteer and participate in other ways.

Finally, while formal volunteering rates are declining on average, **communities of purpose, action and interest** (such as groups and clubs) continue to play a vital role in creating opportunities for people to participate in their communities by offering spaces where they feel connected and included.

It is important to note that ***strong relationships and social ties can also enable participation in harmful or exclusionary ways.*** When trust, loyalty, and belonging are built within networks with nefarious intentions, they can motivate people to actively engage in destructive behaviours or adopt rigid, harmful ideologies. The same social mechanisms that support positive community engagement can also be leveraged for negative or coercive forms of participation.

Funders seeking to create the conditions for participation need to consider how to support opportunities to establish, develop, and deepen productive social ties by investing in the relational infrastructure that makes healthy, constructive relationships possible.

# Family/Friends

**Family and Friends** are the primary, intimate social networks of an individual. While family structures differ across cultures, this element is about people who exchange: love, affection and companionship; day-to-day nurture and care; economic security; a sense of identity and belonging; and guidance on commonly held social values (ABS.gov 2001).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Parents set the stage for participation.**
   Families are often identified as the first and most important role models for civic engagement, with their political attitudes shaping their children's attitudes from early childhood (Timreck and Emmons 2025). A child's perception of their parents as civic role models can directly predict their future community responsibility and civic values (White and Mistry, 2016).

2. **Families tend to get involved in civic life.**
   According to Sydney Policy Lab's Civic Engagement Index, people with children rate significantly higher on civic engagement than those without children, and younger people who grew up in a CALD home are the most engaged citizens. Family draws people into civic spaces (schools, parks, third spaces), and needs can pull individuals into public decision-making spaces. However, funders must recognise that to encourage participation in deliberative or consultative processes, childcare or stipends are essential for equitable participation (KC 2025).

3. **Healthy social ties catalyse engagement.**
   When social networks are healthy, they provide support that helps people get by and the confidence necessary to step into wider community spaces (PBDD 2025). Having friends involved in social causes and organisations makes people, especially youth, more likely to participate for the first time and stay engaged (DC 2025). Bonding social capital (ties within a similar group) helps people 'get by' and provides the norms and trust that facilitate collaborative action (Institute for Social Capital, 2018).

4. **Disadvantaged or marginalised connections can be narrowing.**
   While important, family and friends can also be "narrowing." Family systems that experience instability, trauma and disadvantage are typically less able to participate (NIH, 2010). If a person's immediate circle is disengaged, they are significantly less likely to participate themselves (PBDD 2025). "If I'm in a family with a whole lot of trauma, I'm going to have very narrow bandwidth [to engage/contribute/participate]. These people are not 'hard to engage'; they're just protecting themselves" (DH 2025).

(*See also: Historical: Intergenerational Disadvantage*).

5. **Family violence is a barrier to participation.**
   Preventing family violence is essential for community health and wellbeing, demanding long-term commitment, as recognised by the 2015-16 Royal Commission into Family Violence. Effective primary prevention necessitates a comprehensive, whole-of-community approach to drive social and cultural change, challenging and transforming norms, practices, and systems that condone or enable violence. health.vic.gov 2023. However, mainstream services frequently lack cultural safety, resulting in poor outcomes for First Nations women, children, and families, who experience disproportionately higher rates of violence ANROWS 2022.

*Note: 'Social Capital' as a concept is sometimes criticised for how it simplifies complex and multi-layered sociological understandings of social interaction and inequality (see Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group, 2007.*

**See it in action:**

- Relationships Australia is a federation of independent organisations that conducts research and provides support services across all Australian states and territories, including regional and remote communities.
- The Families and Children Activity (FaC Activity) is led by the Department of Social Services. It provides a range of early intervention and preventative support services to strengthen family relationships, improve children's wellbeing, and enhance community functioning. One of its services is the Communities for Children Facilitating Partners program, which helps support early childhood development in disadvantaged communities. It's delivered by civil society organisations like The Smith Family and Barnardos.
- Dhelk Dja serves as the country's leading Aboriginal-led strategy dedicated to addressing family violence. This activity is part of a broader activity to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal services to ensure Aboriginal peoples, families and communities are stronger, safer, thriving and living free from family violence. *(See Broader Context: Cultural Awareness).*

# Neighbours/Peers

**Neighbour** describes individuals or groups who live in close physical proximity within a specific geographical area (a street, a housing complex, or a suburb) and engage in social interactions and shared presence (NIH). **Peers** are individuals of similar age, status, or background, often connected by circumstance, who may or may not share close bonds (CK12).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Familiarity creates a sense of safety and belonging**.
   Neighbours and peers form the most immediate social environment, serving as both a mirror of our identity and a bridge to the wider world. The repeated visual encounters and short greetings among people who are recognisable as fellow residents create 'comfort zones' where individuals feel safe and accepted (Zahnow et al. 2024). These 'weak ties' can also act as bridges, connecting people to diverse information, new perspectives, and opportunities outside close-knit strong ties (Skyline). These connections require third spaces (see also: *Third spaces are central to identity and participation*)

2. **Attitudes about civic participation are contagious.**
   Especially among youth, peers' views on participation and "civic mindedness" influence their views. If a person's social circle views community involvement as a norm, that person is significantly more likely to participate. Conversely, a lack of peer trust is a barrier to institutional engagement (Tufts 2025).

3. **Neighbours can act as a safety net.**
   People who know their neighbours have additional safety nets if there are disturbances, and neighbourhoods with group chats can more quickly come to eachothers aid (CM 2025).

**See it in action:**

- GatherFor (USA) connects groups of 4–5 neighbours to share resources, provide mutual support, and hold monthly community events in order to build social and financial resilience within neighbourhoods.
- Urban Rural Action (USA) hosts "local hubs" that bring together neighbours across identity and belief to develop skills for constructive dialogue, build relationships, foster a shared understanding of local problems, and take grassroots action.
- Town Teams (Australia and globally) is a decentralised movement of grassroots community groups working to improve local communities through inclusive, positive neighbourhood activations and improvements.

# Work and School Networks

**Work and School Networks** describe relationships forged in the formal institutional environments where individuals develop their capacity to question and appraise information effectively, communicate ideas, interact with others and see things from different perspectives. These relationships may be less personal than family and friends, but they share common interests or an investment in learning and skill application (education.gov.au).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Schools serve as community hubs.**
   School networks are important ways of sharing information and distributing resources. For some families, there are multigenerational relationships with a school or its staff, making school networks more trusted than state organisations. (PBDD 2025) and the local knowledge and familiarity with families' individual needs make school staff well placed to act, but under-resourced (PBDD 2025). Australian state governments have pushed for schools to act as community hubs (Miles 2023).

2. **Workplaces enable more diverse networks.**
   In an increasingly polarised world, workplaces can be the main place where individuals regularly interact with people of different political, religious or socioeconomic backgrounds (WEforum 2019). Stable professional ties provide the socioeconomic security (See also: *Social Economic Status*) that allows an individual the mental space to care about civic life. When workplaces provide "civic leave" or support community involvement, they lower the opportunity cost of participation, and can enable employees to develop transferable civic skills which have a 'spill over effect (Pateman 1970).

**See it in action:**

- The Schools as Community Centres Program (NSW) opens schools to host locally sourced community engagement facilitators to run programming for families with young children, including playgroups, adult learning, and school transition support.

- At Maroopna Park Primary School (VIC), the principal leveraged existing connections at the SPC fruit processing company to secure free fruit deliveries for schoolchildren. The school runs an award-winning, free, comprehensive Healthy Food Program providing breakfast, morning tea, lunch, and snacks daily, prepared by a full-time chef using community donations and its own garden produce, significantly boosting student wellbeing, attendance, and focus by teaching healthy habits and offering nutritious meals and life skills through "The Park Café."

- Community Hubs Australia fosters civic participation by establishing welcoming, place-based centers within schools, focusing on engaging culturally diverse families, particularly women. They promote social cohesion and active citizenship by offering English classes, vocational training, volunteering opportunities, and direct connections to local services, helping newcomers navigate, connect, and contribute to their local community

# Communities / Clubs / Volunteering/

Participation in Communities and clubs can also be referred to as Associational Life, and describes groups of people who have something in common. Garfield 2016 breaks community down into common categories:

- **Clubs /Communities of Interest** - people who share the same interests, hobbies or passions.
- **Volunteering/Communities of Action** - people mobilising around goals like social change or addressing shared issues, such as volunteering.
- **Communities of Place**- people who form relationships and are brought together because of geographic boundaries, a specific location, or a connection to Country.
- **Communities of Practice** - people in the same profession or who undertake the same activities, build skills and share knowledge.
- **Communities of Circumstance** - people brought together at a moment in time by external events/situations.
- **Cultural Communities** - a group of people who share a common way of life, including distinct beliefs, values, customs, traditions, language, and social behaviours; often tied to shared history, ethnicity, or experiences.

**Why it matters:**

1. **Being in groups with others is good for us and good for our society.**
   Communities of action can achieve material improvements through neighbourhood clean-up drives, political advocacy groups, and local food banks – but there is also a correlation between the health and well-being of communities and how much people participate in them (MST 2025). Participating in communities has been linked to increased longevity, well-being and satisfaction (The Longevity Lab 2025).

   It's through doing things together that you see the growth in trust, connection and belonging. Getting involved with other people who care about the same thing can help individuals realise a problem is systemic, not personal, and drive collective change (ZC 2025). Uniting people around a cause is particularly important because, while people can be mobilised by fear or anger, hope and common purpose are often more sustainable motivators (LO 2025).

2. **Communities of action and volunteering create connection and resilience.**
   Groups and clubs that tap into people's interests or desire for change and meet regularly, without requiring absolute commitment or consistency, are particularly important (JD 2025). Strong volunteering cultures build trust, social cohesion, purpose and belonging. They foster intergenerational connection in an era of social fragmentation and create a more resilient community that can better respond to disasters (ABC 2025). In communities where people have worked together previously, they can pick up the phone and mobilise quickly without waiting for state-led organisations (PBDD 2025).

3. **Participation in organised activities is declining on average.**
   Only 47% of Australians report engaging in social or community activities "often" or "very often," while 39% admit to participating "sometimes," and 14% "rarely" or "never" join in such activities. While participation in civic activities remains a cornerstone of social cohesion, limited engagement suggests that opportunities to foster deeper relationships and mutual trust may not be fully realised (Menzies, 2024). This is particularly important in places where youth don't have many options for activities or places to go where they feel welcome and accepted by adults (PBDD 2025).

4. **Sports clubs and sports-related volunteering remain high.**
   Sports, in particular, have been applauded for their ability to mobilise volunteers and communities of place and to contribute to positive social and health outcomes (Ausport). Sport clubs are filling gaps in many lives as participation in organised religion declines (RG 2025), and sports volunteers are almost unparalleled, making sports an amazing tool for creating connection and inclusion (SH 2025); (PBDD 2025). Sports fans tend to become engaged when changes occur that affect their favourite teams (ESPN, 2021). (See also: *Social movements*).

5. **Individuals experience barriers to participation in community groups.**
   It is estimated that there are almost half a million grassroots associations (small groups of volunteers who come together for leisure and social connectedness) operating in Australia today. However, some people feel unable to participate. The primary barriers to participating in community-led groups are the misuse of power and internal politics, followed by a lack of time, red tape, and low self-confidence (Volunteering Australia 2022).

6. **Not all participation is formalised.**
   Practitioners suggest a need to capture the work that happens beyond formal volunteering, which still contributes to the fabric of our community (JM 2025). In community deep dives, we spoke to people who often had other families over for dinner and created spaces for cultural and religious celebration, but in informal ways that would not count as organised. (See also: *Recognise and build on the strengths of Australia's multiculturalism).*

   **See it in action:**

- The Huddle (VIC) hosts free sporting events for youth to build community across differences through the shared language and experience of sport.
- Mahjong clubs (USA) attract Asian Americans to connect with each other over shared history and also build community with others interested in the game who come from different cultural backgrounds.

# Infrastructure and Place

Infrastructure and place are the stage on which civic life plays out. These elements shape the practical, social, and symbolic conditions that enable participation in everyday life. People's ability to contribute is influenced not just by who they are or who they know but by the environments in which they live.

The built environment/civil infrastructure- elements like walkable streets, accessible buildings, public transport, lighting, and safe public spaces make it easier for people to meet, attend activities, and spend time in shared places. Urban planing can reduce or increase loneliness. Poorly designed or inaccessible environments can exclude people with disabilities, older people, carers, or those without private transport, reducing opportunities for participation.

Third spaces, such as libraries, community centres, and town halls, provide formal and informal venues for participation. When these institutions are well-resourced, inclusive, and trusted, they lower the barriers to organising, volunteering, deliberating, and decision-making.

Digital infrastructure and the ease of access to online platforms are another form of infrastructure that can expand or limit participation.

Beyond infrastructure, the features of particular places - population size, density and geography - can all shape how participation occurs. In dense urban areas, proximity can support frequent interaction and diverse forms of engagement, but can also create anonymity or competition for space. In regional, rural, or remote areas, strong social ties may support participation, while distance, limited services, and travel time can make involvement more difficult.

Funders wanting to support participation need to look at the spaces and physical or social infrastructure within which participation is happening, and whether these are enabling or inhibiting contributions.

# Civil Infrastructure and the Built Environment

**Civic Infrastructure** refers to the essential physical systems and structures, such as roads, bridges, water and utility systems, energy and power systems, parks and recreation, and public and private buildings. (RMIT).
**Built Environment** describes the human-made surroundings that provide the setting for activity, designed not just for function (buildings, infrastructure, parks) but also for sensory and perceptual qualities like visual appeal, beauty, and emotional impact, influencing how people feel, interact, and experience spaces (Bregroup).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Third spaces are central to identity and participation.**
   Outside of school and work, these third spaces are the stage where participation, spontaneous interactions, and genuine connection play out (1000Libraries). They contribute to a sense of place and are seen as central to people's identities and how they live their lives (PBDD 2025). Assets such as libraries, parks, and community centres serve as the physical foundations of social capital. When these spaces and institutions are well-resourced, inclusive, and trusted, they lower the barriers to organising, volunteering, deliberating, and decision-making (Klineberg 2018).

2. **The built environment can exacerbate or level inequities.**
   When the built environment is neglected or underdeveloped, such as with broken benches and inadequate sidewalks, it further exacerbates psychological distress (AIHW.gov). People's perceptions of safety and their ability to participate are heavily influenced by physical factors, especially among young people and women (BB 2025) (See Individual: *Gender Identity)*. Inadequate infrastructure or environmental design also systematically excludes marginalised groups by limiting their access to essential services, economic opportunities, and social participation (Nicoletti et al. 2022). However, the creation and maintenance of third spaces are described as an equalising factor, as they provide free-to-use spaces for everyone, such as park barbecues, walking paths, and public playgrounds (PBDD 2025).

3. **Existing Infrastructure can be better leveraged.**
   Funders should consider leveraging the infrastructure already in place (BK 2025). Community Hubs are better attended when they are based out of primary schools because they meet people where they're at and are familiar with, rather than asking them to access another service (PBDD 2025).

4. **Rapidly urbanising populations coincide with new ideas for the built environment.** Communities in fast-growing cities are witnessing rapid population growth, often without commensurate increases in social infrastructure and services needed to maintain liveability (Infrastructure Australia). This suggests a need for more advocacy to increase state funding. There is potential to catalyse insights from the growing field of creative possibilities, such as frictional design, to provoke active engagement in public spaces, and to design for play in the built environment beyond typical parks (Play Australia), and to studies in emotional geography that examine emotional relations between people and environments.

**See it in action:**

- The Urban Commons movement (global) is a grassroots effort to reclaim, manage, and govern shared city resources (like public spaces, housing, water, and data) collectively, challenging traditional public/private divides for social benefit, equity, and sustainability, often through community-led initiatives like community gardens, land trusts, or reimagining city governance for collaborative use (Oxford 2023).
- Copenhagen's Superkilen Urban Park (Denmark) engaged neighbours from 60 countries to contribute plants, objects, and attractions they missed from home and thought could enrich the city's public space. The urban park is a functional gallery of the city's diversity, hosting public markets, providing green space, and offering ample movable and multi-use gathering spaces for the community.
- Temperance Alley Garden (USA) was founded by a group of neighbours and urban farmers to build a shared backyard, community garden, and meeting space on a multi-year lease of a formerly vacant lot in Washington, DC, while the lot's owner awaited city approvals to develop housing on it.
- 72 Hour Urban Action (Europe) brought international design and architecture teams into communities for three-day urban architecture design challenges where teams would live in the community, engage local collaborators at every step of the process, and design placemaking prototypes for public spaces based on community needs.

# Digital Infrastructure and Technology

In addition to technological innovations like Generative AI and Blockchain, **Digital Infrastructure** refers to the foundational physical and software systems that enable the flow of data, communication, and digital services. (Future Processing, 2025). This can include:

- Hardware & Connectivity such as high-speed broadband (NBN), mobile networks (4G/5G), and public Wi-Fi.
- Public Digital Assets: Open-source software, digital archives, and shared platforms for civic deliberation.
- Data Commons: Accessible, ethically governed data sets that allow communities to understand their local context (e.g., mapping heat islands or service gaps). (see *Transparent and Accessible Information)*

**Why it matters:**

1. **Online access is now a necessity.**
   Internet access provides convenient, efficient, and often cheaper ways to access services and handle daily needs (Digital life, 2022), such as banking, healthcare/telehealth, education, and government services like MyGovt, ATO, and Services Australia. It also enables participation in the digital economy through online learning, remote work, and instant access to information. However, as one interviewee notes, public servants can be too 'digital first' and expect that digital platforms can serve the whole community, when they ought to be one of multiple touchpoints (JO 2025).

2. **Digital tools can bridge geographical or access gaps.**
   Digital technologies are generally seen as enabling tools, particularly for those affected by geographic isolation or socio-economic change (Waite & Bourke, 2015). Physical attendance at council meetings or community forums can be difficult for carers, people with disabilities, or those in remote areas (Shut Out Report, 2009). Robust digital infrastructure allows for asynchronous participation (contributing when and where possible). It also enables modern community connections like (e.g., Facebook community groups and "Good Karma" networks). (See Also: *Transparent and Accessible Information)* .

3. **Digital exclusion hurts already marginalised populations.**
   While technology can certainly be an enabler of civic participation, it is important to invest in the necessary infrastructure and governance to ensure tools are sustainable and equitable (JO 2025). Digital inclusion is about ensuring that everyone can access, afford, connect, participate in, and benefit from the digital world. Yet gaps exist, with

the highest rates of digital exclusion among people aged 75+, those who did not complete secondary school, public housing residents, and First Nations people (Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2025). For older populations, only having online interactions and access to services can lead to civic isolation. Lack of access is a barrier to finding gainful employment (Denzer et al., 2021), and some services demand many hours of online applications (The Guardian, 2015).

4. **Online spaces create belonging for youth but also risk disconnection.** Younger cohorts (Gen Z/Alpha) often use digital platforms as their primary place for organising. Youth we spoke to (especially in regional areas) recognise the double-sided nature of technology as both an enabler and a barrier to connection. They shared how they meet friends through gaming from all over and often find connection through talking and playing online. They also noted that doomscrolling and being "too online" made them feel disconnected and "like I'm rotting my brain" (PBDD 2025). The internet and social media are increasingly acknowledged as having a powerful, though largely unregulated, effect on shaping and underpinning civic socialisation (Youth Foundation, 2022). It is unclear how the social media ban will affect youth in general, especially youth in regional locations.

5. **Technological innovations are modernising services and enabling engagement.** Innovations in decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs) and blockchain-enabled communal governance are creating new opportunities for communal governance and decision making (Frontiers In, 2025) as well as new capabilities for transparency and accountability in governance (Directors-institute, 2025). Digital transformation is critical to the delivery of essential public services and enabling responsive and meaningful resident engagement (CPI, 2022). But when you add 'digital' to a broken thing, you get a "digital broken thing" (DH 2025). (See also Institutions: *Transparent and accessible information).*

6. **AI can be both a bridge and a barrier.** AI is rapidly changing the nature of public discourse, as it can bring people together by processing individual voices and open responses in real time. However, some see this as leading to an 'atrophy of civic muscles' as we stop engaging critically with each other and risk losing the transformative power of face-to-face connection and relationship-building. Tech Policy (2025). AI summarises conversations but doesn't deepen them. There is a risk that using AI may lead to groups drawing conclusions too quickly while people are still weighing up and considering (NH 2025). AI-enabled misinformation, disinformation and polarised content are increasingly undermining trust in public institutions (OECD, 2024).

**See it in action:**

- ACT Government's Digital Strategy sets out how technology will help grow Canberra as an inclusive, progressive and connected city. It details current and potential initiatives to enhance community liveability and wellbeing. The strategy contains five key focus areas: Community-centred services; Valuing data; City modelling, planning and monitoring; Relationships with industry; and principles for implementing change into the future.
- An example of updating government websites to provide better information and links to services is from the digital teams in Helsinki and Vilnius, who worked with a learning partner to implement a human-centred approach. In response, the city rebuilt its social-care website to better meet user needs and connect users to services and important information. The process built more agility, partnership and enhanced collaboration across other parts of the ecosystem.
- Demos (England) has launched Waves, a €1m project that pilots digital deliberation and listening tools with local governments to make it easier for councils to engage with and codesign with residents at scale.

# Geography and Population

**Geography** is the physical and spatial context where social interaction and collective action take place. The specific characteristics of a geographical area, such as a neighbourhood, town, or watershed, directly influence the issues a community faces and the ways its members engage to address them (NIH).
**Population** is the number of residents in a place; often higher and more dense in urban centres, and less dense in rural areas (Britannica).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Geography is core to where we settle and build community.**
   In addition to shaping initial habitation and settlement, geography influences the availability of resources, ease of travel and trade, and risks or protection from adverse weather events (Immerse 2025), all of which influence population density and create enduring legacies (see History/Legacy). Mountains, oceans, and unique ecosystems become central to local stories, traditions, and a deep sense of place, or 'cultural landscape,' fostering community bonds and heritage (DCCEEW.gov). An individual's relationship to an area and sense of place can play a crucial role in a citizen's engagement (Acedo 2019).

2. **Capital cities and regional areas offer different and unequal opportunities.**
   People in regional areas are more likely to volunteer (BCEC), yet there are fewer opportunities to participate in formal volunteering (Scanlon 2025). While urban participation often includes more politically oriented activities such as boycotts, protests, and involvement in membership-based organisations (Scanlon 2025), people in more regional communities often share the expectation and experience of helping each other at a personal level due to a lack of formalised services(BD 2025).

3. **Population and service density affect community engagement.**
   Regional hubs that have enough people to support services and amenities (see also: *Civic Infrastructure*) but are small enough to foster social familiarity and for people to know their neighbours are 'just right' and to enable feelings of community belonging and grassroots engagement (PBDD 2025). Regional communities practice more self-help rather than assuming a service will do something about it (AT1 2025). Towns farther from cities already have fewer services, and if they lose critical mass (due to changing economies, natural disasters, etc.), they can experience service cuts, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of decline (OECD, 2025).

**See it in action:**

- Landcare Australia promotes community action and volunteerism by supporting grassroots organisations in restoring and protecting natural bushlands, waterways, and habitats through community-led processes.
- Shorefast (Canada) is a social enterprise operating on Newfoundland's Fogo Island, whose work includes promoting arts and cultural engagement rooted in the unique cultural history developed over generations in the remote fishing outpost.

# Institutions, Structures, Services and Skills

Institutions, structures, services and skills create the enabling environment for participation: they shape whether people have the resources, information, support, capability and influence needed to contribute consistently and meaningfully to their communities. Institutions such as community foundations, cooperatives and local media create platforms through which people can organise, pool resources, tell their stories, and influence decisions. When these institutions are trusted and locally grounded, they offer clear ways for people to contribute and be heard.

Community foundations and cooperatives also enable funding, assets, and decision-making authority to sit closer to communities, enabling people to shape priorities rather than just respond to them. This increases local agency and ownership.

Well-designed government and not-for-profit services, such as social supports and arts and culture programming, also play an important role in creating the conditions for participation. While many argue that these services work against participation by creating a culture of "learned helplessness", when services are culturally safe, easy to navigate, and designed to fill the gaps that participation can't fill, they can reduce pressure on people's lives, and create opportunities to connect in different ways, thereby complementing and enabling, rather than undermining active citizen engagement.

Another enabler of participation is access to transparent information. Clear, timely, and accessible information about decisions, opportunities, and outcomes helps people understand how they can get involved and what influence their participation can have. Local media and open data play a critical role in making power, processes, and impacts visible.

People also need the skills and capability to engage effectively, as even where opportunities to participate exist, engagement is shaped by what people feel able and confident to do.

Finally, connecting and convening roles (including funded backbone teams, place-based coordinators, and informal, relational conveners) help align actors, facilitate relationships, and sustain momentum across diverse groups. By holding the "in-between" work—coordination, learning, and trust-building—these roles lower the burden on individuals and make collective participation more inclusive and effective.

Funders need to consider how a historic over-reliance on services has weakened citizen participation by reframing people as passive recipients rather than active contributors. They should explore how services can be bolstered by other forms of investment in communities and by enabling structures and institutions that grow people's power and agency.

# Charitable Trusts/ Community Foundations / Community Philanthropy

**A Charitable Trust** is a legal structure holding assets for community benefit. **Community Foundations** are a type of charitable trust that is autonomous, publicly supported and composed primarily of funds established by many separate donors for the long-term benefit of the residents of a defined geographic area (Council on Foundations). Community Foundations are often a vehicle for **Community Philanthropy**- a broader concept encompassing various local giving methods (Treasury.gov).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Community foundations leverage local knowledge.**
   Unlike national or global funders, community foundations are made up of people who understand the social fabric, know trusted leaders and current activities, and can fund more grassroots efforts and initiatives that larger institutions might miss. (CF leads.org). Giving groups also contribute to the expansion of philanthropy by cultivating new, informed donors and enhancing the capacity of the community sector (Impact100WA).

2. **Community foundations contribute to wealth building and place-based capital.**
   Capital leaves communities, leading to a centralisation of power that disempowers them (IB 2025). Yet, not enough energy has been devoted to thinking about how capital flows in and out of (particularly regional) communities (LC 2025). In addition to creating workforce opportunities (Communityfoundations.org), community foundations can be designed to increase multiple kinds of capital (The Good Shift 2023). This includes human capital (people's health, knowledge, and skills); social capital (networks, connections, and relationships between people); manufactured capital (assets that support local production); and natural capital — natural flows and resources that support life (such as regenerative communities).

3. **There is a need to learn about and increase awareness of community philanthropy.** While community foundations indicate a shift in power and resources to local people to address their own development priorities, there is limited guidance for those who wish to apply or invest in community philanthropy approaches (Global Fund Community 2019). There tends to be a prevailing mindset around community capacity that questions, "Can they really handle their own money?" (IB 2025). It can also be hard to engage people due to limited public awareness and understanding of collective-giving models (such as Impact100WA 2017). Also, the Deductible Gift Recipient framework is complex and 'mired in red tape,' creating unnecessary barriers and limiting the ability to effectively distribute and make grants within Australian Communities (Treasury.gov). (See Governance)

**See it in action:**

- In 2007, a locally owned cooperative, Hepburn Energy, was formed to develop a 5MW solar and storage energy park outside of Daylesford in Central Victoria. Community members partnered with a wide variety of external actors to design their project, including the cooperative enterprise and mechanisms to share benefits amongst the local economy and communities. Through this grass-roots approach, the cooperative raised over 9.9 million dollars in capital from community investors. These benefits are reinvested through a local fund that has more recently developed into the Z-NET Climate Resilience fund.
- Give Where You Live (VIC) is a Geelong community foundation that works to build a stronger, more resilient community through relationships, collaboration, trust, and funding.
- Community Foundations Australia supports community foundations across the country in building their capacity to serve the communities they support.
- Mirboo North (VIC) used the $5 million in proceeds from the 2010 sale of a town-owned building to establish a community foundation to preserve and strengthen community spaces and assist in disaster relief.

# Community Cooperatives

What it is: **Community Cooperatives** are an enterprise that is owned and democratically governed by members of a local geographical community to meet their shared social, economic, or cultural needs. They can be consumer-based (buying/selling goods), marketing-based (distributing members' products/services), service-based (health, assistance, housing), or community-based (information and skill-sharing) (Consumer.Vic.Gov).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Co-operatives provide material benefits to communities.**
   Communities benefit from co-operatives through the economic opportunities and reinvestment back into communities (Bccm.coop), as well as the delivery or provision of goods and services that may be lacking in lower-income areas (see Socioeconomic Status) or 'thin markets' (uow.edu). Members of a co-operative can benefit from economies of scale through the group's combined purchasing, distribution, or marketing power or influence. They share in the group's investment and operational risks and losses, as well as its benefits (Consumer.Vic.Gov). During economic downturns, cooperatives are statistically more resilient than traditional small businesses because the community has a vested interest in their survival, fostering a long-term commitment to the neighbourhood (monitor.coop)

2. **Co-operatives build belonging and attachment to place.**
   Community-owned assets frame community members as active stewards of their own futures. It lets people shape how land is used, how businesses operate, and how local value circulates (Centre for Community Capital 2025). This power and agency create more connection to place and belonging (renewal.org.uk).

3. **Co-ops reinforce democratic skills but require social capital.**
   Efforts to encourage collective co-production reveal that people are more likely to contribute when they can accomplish a task individually. However, through their efforts with member-based organisations such as cooperatives, people form connections and relationships of "mutuality and reciprocity" which makes them more likely to continue participating (Bovaird 2015). As one interviewee shared, "If there's no social capital in a community, it's hard to form a co-op. What you're looking for is at least something to build on - leaders in the community, relationships between organisations and communities." (AT2 2025). The process also provides a testing ground for building the civic skills required to participate in democratic processes more broadly.

4. **High-level governance helps with consistency, but creates red tape and exclusion.**
   The Co-operatives National Law replaced individual state laws in 2014, setting out rules for registration, outlining governance structures, and providing financial and reporting obligations. It sought to lower compliance costs by streamlining registration and requirements (BCCM). However, red tape is still a technical and psychological barrier for many communities (theMandarin). Additionally, co-ops don't generally receive the same level of regulatory support as businesses do, and they can be excluded from government grants and funding programs because eligibility criteria are often designed for other entity types (fed.coop).

**See it in action:**

- The Castlemaine Community Investment Co-Operative (VIC) brings community members together to purchase local properties and place them into community ownership to build wealth and community spaces.
- The Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative (VIC) is an Aboriginal, community-led, healthcare and services organisation providing culturally appropriate care and support with a member-owned co-operative structure.
- Hastings Commons (England) responded to neglected and derelict buildings in their community by raising funds from the community to purchase them and reimagine them as community-led spaces for community, housing, and work.

# Transparent and Accessible Information

**Information transparency** is defined as the provision of adequate and accessible information regarding a project and its decision-making processes, ensuring that involved actors understand the legitimacy of their input and how it influences outcomes. It requires consistent and fair application of procedures across all actors over time (LGA UK 2026).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Information is key for building trust, accountability and shared narratives.** Access to information (the right to know) is a fundamental freedom and a key pillar in building inclusive knowledge societies (UNESCO). In Australia, the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 facilitates transparency and accountability through rigorous reporting requirements to ensure the reliability of performance information provided to the Parliament and the public, with updated recommendations (ANO 2023). Accurate and accessible information is central to combating disinformation and to the development of shared narratives (NIH 2024). (See also: *What we believe shapes what we see as legitimate*). When government portals don't work, are hard to use, or ask for too much information, they stop serving the community and become barriers to trust-building (ZC 2025).

2. **Information justice and data sovereignty are vital for self-determination.** There are growing calls to address inequities in how information is produced, distributed, and accessed, ensuring that marginalised communities have the tools to create and use information to exercise their rights, especially with regard to health information (NIH 2025). Communities should not be passive recipients of data; they must become architects of their destiny, forging their unassailable evidence bases as economic assets for the Community (KOWA 2024).

3. **Public Information acts as a 'civic immune system'.** When official information is opaque or difficult to find, "information vacuums" are filled by rumours or disinformation (Factal 2019). Accessible, high-quality public information acts as a "civic immune system," keeping community connections healthy and grounded in truth. Promoting greater civic engagement and investing in citizens' capacity to engage with civic information and one another to solve public problems are among the recommendations for civic engagement (Knight Foundation).

4. **Meaningful engagement produces more efficient and effective services.** Meaningful engagement starts by paying participants for their time and requires closing the loop and reporting back —telling the community not just what was decided, but how their specific input influenced the outcome (KC 2025). This validates the participant's time and effort, increasing the likelihood that they will participate again (Feedback Labs, 2025). It also requires more sharing and cohesive learning infrastructure, because, despite growing recognition of the need for wraparound services, data management technology remains fragmented. This lack of connection leads to overconsultation, duplication, and the risk of overlooking more effective or relevant services (Philanthropy Round Table 2019).

**See it in action:**

- The Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 facilitates transparency and accountability through rigorous reporting requirements, ensuring the reliability of performance information provided to Parliament and the public through performance measurement and reporting obligations. The Australian National Audit Office has updated recommendations (ANO 2023)

- Aspen Institute's Policy Paper Calls for Investments in a New Corps of Young Americans to Create and Share Civic Information. This includes creating a Civic Information Corps of young people, engaging universities as community information hubs, investing in more face-to-face public deliberations, generating public "relational" knowledge and exercising civic engagement for public information and knowledge. (Aspen Institute 2011)

- The work of Far West Community Partners (SA) provides a compelling example of how community-led data collection can drive positive change. By gathering and analysing their own data, they have been able to: Identify local priorities and needs; develop targeted programs and services; measure the impact of their work; and advocate for increased resources.

# Services and Programs

While both are designed to improve the conditions and well-being within communities, **Services** often seek to solve a problem through ongoing, responsive interactions that provide immediate value, while **Programs** follow structured, goal-oriented frameworks designed to achieve specific, long-term transformation or change (BizJournal 2025). These can be funded by the government and operated by the Public Service, third-sector organisations like charities, voluntary organisations, and not-for-profits, or private enterprises.

**Why it matters:**

1. **Essential services create a safety net and space for contribution.**
   Having individual and familial basic needs met —healthcare, housing, and food security — provides the physiological and safety stability that helps residents shift their focus from "survival" to "civic contribution" (WorldBank.org). By acting as the backbone of civic life, nonprofits of all types, including service and advocacy nonprofits, give people opportunities for fellowship, companionship, sociability, and integration, which can lead to increases in the quantity and quality of social capital in a community (NIH 2008). How people feel about services also determines how they are treated by a government agency (e.g., a social security office or a public health clinic), which shapes their view of the state and their likelihood to participate in democratic and civic processes (University of Chicago 2023).

2. **Those most in need of services struggle to access them.**
   Barriers such as lower-than-average levels of education and literacy, stigma, and competing immediate priorities mean that the populations most in need of social services and safety-net programs struggle to access them (NIH 2023). People who are newly arrived or have experience with the carceral system can have a harder time accessing the services they most need. However, having connections to people who are benefiting from those programs and can share information from their experiences makes services and programs more accessible, and is sometimes seen as safer and easier than formal gateways or institutions (PBDD 2025).

3. **Programs are only part of a broader system and can cause harm.**
   Programs only address a small part of a problem, which often require engagement with a much broader web of services. For instance services might focus on mitigating difficulties at an individual level, like supplemental payment for utility bills instead of addressing why rates are so high, or network areas are under served (AT2 2025). Some of those generic top down programs are actually harmful and aren't centered around people and their needs (DH 2025), or see people as clients– not as co-creators of their own futures (AT1 2025). Top down programs can also diminish self-determination and reinforce harmful power imbalances especially in already marginalized and First Nations communities (KOWA 2025).

4. **Afterschool programs create horizon-broadening opportunities.**
   Especially for youth in regional areas, opportunities to co-design and participate in programs provide opportunities to experience and learn about things they otherwise wouldn't have exposure to through more immediate networks like family and friends (PBDD 2025). A mix of structured activities promotes learning, while unstructured time that is responsible for youth needs creates a chill environment where youth who are being supported to live out of home feel supported and live with their family (PBDD 2025).

**See it in action:**

- **For examples of 'shovel ready' Investment opportunities and programs surfaced through this research, please see The Good Shifts "Investment Opportunity Framework" and opportunities.**

- Opportunities and Life Links for Youth (VIC) is a community space by and for young people in Shepparton, focused on support and capacity building for youth including mock elections and community engagement activities.

- Programs that focus on upskilling, giving back to the community, and also honor different types of wisdom and knowledge, like Wise Well Women (VIC) are an important way for people who are newley arrived to create feelings of belonging.

# Arts and Culture

Arts and culture encompass the creative activities, shared beliefs, values, and customs that define a community, manifested through artistic expression and heritage. Cultural and creative engagement is a fundamental part of living in Australia's vibrant democracy. You can see each states' current cultural policies at ANA.

**Why it matters:**

1. **Arts and cultural programs promote vitality and well-being.**
   Art is essential to the economic and civic vitality of cities (Knight Foundation 2025). Participation in arts and cultural programs, whether as a creator or an audience member, is linked to increases in individual well-being, social cohesion, and collective efficacy (UPenn 2017). Cultural programming has increasingly been engaged by the public health sector to enhance social cohesion, health, and well-being, as well as to address the significant health risks posed by social isolation and loneliness (NIH 2025).

2. Arts and Cultural events can activate existing physical and civic infrastructure
   Increasing interest is being shown in participatory arts programs which are low-cost, flexible and responsive to local needs. This use of the arts coincides with a shift in emphasis in regeneration strategies towards seeing local people and activation as the principal asset through which urban renewal can be achieved (The art of regeneration 2012).

3. **Performing as well as attending arts events builds belonging and trust**
   Shared cultural experiences (festivals, community choirs, or public art projects) break down social barriers. Research from Creative Australia shows that 84% of Australians believe the arts make for a more cohesive society by building belonging and trust.

4. **Creating art together creates bridging and bonding opportunities.**
   Cultural activities provide a "safe space" to engage with complex or challenging ideas. They allow marginalized groups to tell their own stories, transforming them from passive observers into active co-creators of their community's identity (J&R Press, 2025). The arts were viewed as a means for facilitating understanding between divisive and disparate group. The desire for and capacity to execute arts activities and events was dependent on the availability not just of interested people but also on support from governance and funding authorities to build capacity to sustain these activities (ScienceDirect, 2011).

5. **Imagination is becoming a critical capability**

   As Un Global Pulse, (2023) shares, art, imagination, and creative practice can create an open space for connection between previously disconnected people or elements; for emotions and values to be expressed and explored; for a different mode of continued enquiry; for multiple ways of knowing; and for something new to emerge. This becomes increasingly important as experts like Geoff Mulgan diagnose a current crisis of social imagination and ability to picture more just and thriving worlds and communities, and embody the steps to get there.

**See it in action:**

- Milk Crate Theatre (NSW) uses arts education and programming to help underrepresented voices be heard within their communities, develop community-led arts and culture programming, and shape the conversation on pressing community issues.
- Art for Action (Switzerland) creates artistic interventions to centre voices that are excluded from civic debates, activate artists as civic participants, and help young people imagine new futures together.
- Minderoo's Artist-Fund is designed to elevate the professional practice of mid-career artists in Western Australia. The projects are intended to engage local audiences, tell diverse stories, and activate conversations on local issues. The funding strengthens regional work in the arts and provides mentorship and stability to up and coming artists.
- Social Imagination approaches like Canopy (UK) are increasingly being recognised as a core capability and process for enabling social connectedness while addressing complex social challenges.

- **For more on how arts and culture can enable civic participation** and what intentionally designed programs can look like see The Good Shift's *Community Researcher Artefact* which documents programs like Forest of Hope- an installation of Palestinian embroidery on display in Logan, South East Queensland.

# Local Media and News

**Local Media and News** refers to the network of institutions, individuals, and platforms that provide news and information to a specific geographic community, including local newspapers, digital sites, public radio, and hyper-local social media groups (Knight Foundation).

**Why it matters**:

1. **Healthy community media and information ecosystems promote engagement.** Communities that have relevant, quality news and information have greater levels of civic engagement, more community cohesion and greater government accountability (Knight Foundation). When local radio stations, neighbourhood newsletters, and hyperlocal online platforms highlight community events, volunteer opportunities, and local decision-making processes, visibility encourages direct involvement (PBDD 2025).

2. **Public-powered journalism and crowdsourcing get citizens involved.** Media that invites citizens to contribute stories, data, and insights positions them as co-creators. By becoming involved, they gain greater agency to influence the news they consume and greater insight into the reporting process (Hearken 2018). Websites or apps that connect volunteers with projects, crowdsourced planning tools, and civic reporting platforms empower citizens to act and track outcomes (Shin 2024). (See also: *Transparent and Accessible Information)*.

3. **Stories of success inspire collective agency**. Media campaigns that celebrate collective problem-solving, local activism, and neighbourhood initiatives reinforce the idea that participation is meaningful and achievable. It is important to see stories of success to show people what is possible and instil pride of place (PBDD 2025). Negative news cycles can lead to anxiety and despair (Independent Australia.net). If the only stories are about decline and despair, it can lead to apathy. We need spaces where people can show that good things are happening, help build a movement, and make room for people to connect and nourish each other. Find what people are already doing and celebrate it (JA 2025). (See also: *Shared Narratives).*

4. **Local news unites, where social media enflames.** Social media is increasingly under fire for promoting division, spreading misinformation (ACC 2018) and promoting engagement with hyper-partisan blogs to generate engagement and income (NIH 2020) (BBC 2019). Local news, however,

features familiar journalists covering relevant local issues with professional fact-checking, which fosters a stronger sense of shared identity and combats misinformation (Lina.org). It is important to note however that social media amplifies political hostility but doesn't necessarily create it- online conflict appears to be largely the product of the interplay between particular personalities and social contexts (TheConversation 2024).

5. **A healthy local Information Economy is vital for enagged citizens and disaster response.** In addition to Social Media, respondant's in in the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience survey reported that htey relied heavily on local information from community in flood events. Themes that emerged from the interviews highlighted the need for local information, changing information expectations and the role of communities in preparedness and response.

**See it in action:**

- The Junction publishes journalism by university students across Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific with a focus on producing public interest reporting that tells stories in "news desert" areas and promoting collaboration and community between student journalists across the region.

- Santa Cruz Local (USA) is a nonprofit news outlet that was founded as the local newspaper eliminated journalism roles, and covers stories requested by readers with a focus on helping residents access community resources and engage with local government.

- The Portland Observer (Vic) When residents in the small city of Portland voiced concerns about losing healthcare services, the local newspaper produced a series of reports highlighting the impact on the community—including stories of residents forced to travel long distances for care and a baby being born in a carpark. This sustained local coverage attracted broader media attention, putting direct pressure on politicians to act and helping to secure the services. Read more from the Conversation.

# Civic Competencies, Capabilities, and Capacities

**Civic competencies** are the set of skills ( such as communication, collective decision-making, digital literacy, and organisational ability) that enable people to participate in the civic and social life of their community (Tufts 2019). These skills contribute to **capability,** the power to use skills, knowledge, and resources to achieve an outcome. **Capacity** describes how much potential to act there is, and can be limited due to factors like time, resources, competing priorities, and energy (Synergy.net).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Civic knowledge is foundational and at risk.**
   People may wish to participate but not know how to chair a meeting, read a municipal budget, or submit a public comment. When funders invest in activities that promote skill building (including soft skills like collaboration, conflict resolution and communication), they transform participation from a daunting task into a manageable activity for neighbourhood leadership (Fronteer Economics). However, in Australia, only 38% of Year 10 students met the required standard of civic knowledge in 2019. Without stronger investment in education about civics, the next generation risks being less prepared to participate meaningfully in Australia's democratic system (Menzies 2024).

2. **Leadership makes a personal and communal difference.**
   Community leadership programs not only upskill individuals to achieve better job outcomes and economic benefits (Social Venture.org), but they also equip participants with tools to build community resilience, navigate complexity, and lead local action with confidence (Fairly Leadership Program). One interviewee shared that the Hubs that work well are those where the school leader understands the importance of community and is comfortable dealing in the grey and ambiguity to get things done for children and their families (BK 2025). People who have been through leadership programs have the self-confidence, social connections and relationships, social standing and competencies that help them play a more active role in their communities (PBDD 2025). Poor leadership negatively affects regular members' attitudes, commitment, and the recruitment and retention of future leaders (Volunteering Australia).

3. **New ways of working demand new capabilities.**
   Noting that the challenges faced by philanthropy in today's environment require significant adaptive capacity, as well as collaboration within and across sectors which requires *relational capacity*: the ability to understand your ecosystem and to structure yourself to be adaptive as it evolves (TCCGRP). Current ways of working, including bureaucracy and red tape, can cause problems in collaborative projects with experimentation, as adherence to budgets and planning horizons can make collaborations more fraught (ANZSOG.edu).

4. **Participating in community forums leverages and builds existing skills.**
   People experienced in community development recognise that everyday people in communities hold a lot of capability, knowledge and skills. They see the main limitation as the authorising environment (BD 2025). At the same time, there are arguments to be made for core funding for capacity building in communities, training in soft skills, and creating space for new groups to form (AT1 2025). Deliberative processes can build participation skills for democracy and arm people with the skills they need to engage (EF 2025).

5. **Constructive discussion and dialogue across difference**
   Constructive discussion and dialogue across difference is a critical capability for civic and community participation because democratic life fundamentally depends on people with divergent values, experiences, and priorities being able to work together toward shared outcomes. We can see this in practice through initiatives like *More in Common* in the UK, which researches and mobilizes the "exhausted majority" who want to bridge divides, and *Dare to Be Grey* in the Netherlands, which encourages people to resist the pull of black-and-white thinking and instead sit with the complexity and nuance that real civic engagement demands. This capability is becoming increasingly important as contentious issues create divides between and within communities.

**See it in action:**

- Australian Democracy runs a range of skills development programs, including a Government Relations Masterclass (see this video) and a training program they have developed to support communities facing disinformation campaigns with skills to assess and respond to disinformation.

- Wise Well Women (VIC) builds skills and capabilities while recognising the expertise and lived experience of community members. They work to celebrate, leverage and build upon existing community skills and capabilities while also building capacity in communities to contribute and providing a mechanism by which people feel responsible and able to give back to their community.

- The Barnraisers Project (USA) is a free online cohort-based training and coaching program for budding organisers to learn how to become better neighbours, build community, and promote belonging and inclusion in their communities.

# Connecting and Convening Roles

Connecting and Convening Roles describe people or organisations like backbone teams or boundary spanners who facilitate the exchange of information and coordinate activity and relationship building across organisational or social boundaries (Williams 2022). Their role is not (necessarily) to do the work – but to provide the vision, coordination, and administrative support that allows others to work together (Kania and Kramer 2011).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Intermediaries lend legitimacy to often excluded voices.**
   Bringing in diverse voices and experiences (especially ones marginalised by existing systems) is critical not only for strengthening community connection and participation, but also benefits programs and services (BD 2025) and contributes to a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector (DSS 2023) . Trusted people or institutions (like a community foundation or backbone organisation are well placed to invite in and champion marginalized voices, lending those perspectives institutional legitimacy. This makes it safer and more effective for those individuals to participate (NIH 2023).

2. **Intimate knowledge and experience create 'galvanising leadership'.**
   Galvanizing leadership can come from many places in a community and does not always sit with those in the role of senior leader in an organisation or government department. Individuals with personal credibility and a commitment to engagement can inspire people to act (Tamarack 2022) . Employing "community connectors" who are already living in the community is directly attributed with the success of programs (BD 2025). Recognising and creating roles like this help leverage intimate knowledge and follow the advice that "You need to go where the community is already organised" (AT 2025).

3. **21st century challenges require collaborative ways of working.**
   Types of collaboration, whether internally; between government and community; across agencies and levels of government; or externally with stakeholders such as experts, private firms, user groups and interest groups are becoming increasingly necessary in the face of 21st century challenges but also increasingly tricky to navigate because of increasingly complex perceived or real red tape (ANZSOG.edu). Philanthropic orgs could be the "apolitical glue" – bringing people who wouldn't otherwise collaborate together and making the invisible visible (NH 2025). (See also governance).

4. **Not-for-profits and backbone groups often play connecting and advocacy roles.** The nonprofit sector, therefore, collectively advocates for groups that may not otherwise have the "resources, opportunities, and motivations" (NIH 2021). However, navigating when funders need to foreground their expertise and when they need to recede into the background and foreground community is one of the productive tensions that needs to be navigated (CM 2025).

5. **Conveners reduce competition through collaboration.** Competition between community orgs or groups erodes connection and resilience, creating a toxic environment in which some organisations or groups become resentful of other aligned groups receiving grants (BD 2025). The most effective catalysts position themselves as bridge builders, connecting actors and strengthening the whole field rather than competing for territory (Demnext.org).

6. **Democracy requires both local and global connections.** While sustainable, place-based efforts need to be small, local and open (Manzini 2009), they also need to be connected to and inform larger scale efforts. Behind every successful scaling story sits a constellation of organisations doing the essential, often invisible work of building capacity, establishing networks, advocating with decision makers, and ensuring quality standards. Bridging the local and global is a key function for catalyst organisations (DemNExt.org).

**See it in action:**

- The Tamarack Institute (Canada) offers courses, online resources, coaching, and connections to help communities develop local initiatives based on community-defined needs to deliver community-defined impacts.
- The Hive (NSW) serves as the backbone organisation for the Mt Druitt community, helping facilitate community engagement, break down silos across community organisations, and empowering communities to collaborate effectively to promote children's wellbeing.

# Beliefs, Values, and Knowledge Systems

**Ideologies, norms, values, narratives, and place-based wisdom shape the shared meaning system that defines who people are, what is expected of them, and whether their participation is legitimate and valuable.**

**Ideologies and values** influence what people prioritise, how they see themselves, and how they consider their agency as citizens. Where dominant ideologies emphasise individualism or deferring to experts over collective action, people may feel that participation is "not their role." In contrast, values that emphasise mutual responsibility, stewardship, or inclusivity support active contribution.

**Stories** communities tell about themselves—such as "we look after each other," or "nothing ever changes here"—shape whether people believe participation will matter. Empowering narratives can inspire engagement and persistence, while deficit or fatalistic narratives undermine collective confidence.

The dominant ideologies and stories told help reinforce **social norms**, which determine whose voices are encouraged and what forms of participation are considered appropriate. If norms privilege confidence, technical skills, or formal meeting styles, many people—particularly those with different cultural traditions—may self-exclude.

The dominant ideologies and stories told help reinforce social norms, which determine whose voices are encouraged and what forms of participation are considered appropriate. If norms privilege confidence, technical skills, or formal meeting styles, many people—particularly those with different cultural traditions—may self-exclude. Finally, **local, cultural, and place-based wisdom** helps people understand what has worked before, what matters now, and what is realistic in a specific place. When this knowledge is recognised and respected alongside professional expertise, people are more willing to contribute because their experience is valued rather than overridden.

These less tangible elements of civic participation are often overlooked by funders, but there are ways to invest in shifting stories and cultures. Organisations such as Frameworks Institute and The New Citizen Project offer practical pathways to engage with these elements.

# Ideologies and Values

**Ideologies** are the systems of ideas, ideals and beliefs that determine how individuals and groups understand the purpose of government, allocate power, develop public policy, and define citizenship.(GNED500). From this, individuals establish **values,** the principles or standards of behaviour and judgement about what is important in life (Oxford).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Ideologies are the broader systemic waters in which internal narratives are formed.** (See also Individual: *Internal Narrative and Mindset,* and Beliefs: Shared Narratives:*Shifting from a consumer story to a citizen story).*

2. **What we believe shapes what we see as legitimate.**
   Ideology shapes what we consider to be real, valid and trustworthy. Confirmation bias leads people to seek out perspectives that match our beliefs, and may discount certain media and news sources, leading to increased polarization (Psychology Today). If the prevailing ideology in a community (based upon historical treatment or shared narratives) is one of distrust in institutions, traditional government-led programs and interventions will be unwelcome. Additionally those who did not vote for the incumbent government may reflect propositions and are statistically less likely to trust it (OECD 2022).

3. **Values and civic service are self reinforcing.**
   Longitudinal studies indicate a bidirectional relationship between values and civic service, where participating in civic activities can lead to changes in an individual's values, and pre-existing values can influence the type and extent of participation (Fronteers 2024). Because participation costs time and energy, it is sustained by values like altruism, solidarity, or religious duty (see religion and spirituality). If a funder's program aligns with the existing values of a community, or individual (motivation-experience congruence), participation is organic and often enduring ( Kim 2017). If it clashes, or there is a mismatch between espoused values and practice, participants will disengage or the program will likely fail.

**See it in action:**

- Original Power is a First Nations organisation that works with mob to promote self-determination with regards to siting and operation of renewable energy projects to move beyond the legitimate distrust of major energy projects sited on Native lands, and instead allow clean energy to be a community-directed investment in the health and resilience of mob.

- Rural Assembly (USA) fosters relationships among rural communities and rural leaders, and provides a national platform for rural voices to communicate the nuanced values and needs of rural communities and move beyond traditional distrust between urban and rural communities.

# Shared Narratives and Social Norms

**Cultural narratives** are the deep, shared stories, values, and histories defining a group (like myths and traditions).
**Societal narratives** are the broader, evolving, and often unspoken stories within a society about how things should work or how people should behave (e.g., hard work leads to success) (bmg).
**Social norms** are what become acceptable or unacceptable to do, think or believe within these broad narratives (fiveable). These are the broader contexts in which individuals make sense of the world (see mindsets and internal narratives).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Narratives shape culture and contribute to collective action and possibility.**
   Cultural narratives play a critical role in shaping collective memory, influencing how communities remember their past and view their present and future, even if they aren't explicitly articulated (NarativeInitiative.org). They can serve as tools for social cohesion by promoting common values and goals among members of a culture, reinforcing a sense of belonging (Sustainability-directory 2025).
   Many people have a feeling right now (particularly young people) that life is harder (climate change, housing insecurity, working multiple jobs to go to school), and this leads young people to feel like they don't have the capacity to get engaged (DC 2025). Surfacing, exploring, disrupting and challenging deeply held narratives can enable collective action, intentional change, and open up possibilities for people to understand the world differently and live into new stories (Rye, 2022) .

2. **Stories and storytelling are important and undervalued.**
   The creation and sharing of stories can build empathy, shift mindsets, heal, build new connections, teach, open new possibilities and help people understand the world in different ways. However, technical, structural and institutional barriers can get in the way of good storytelling (CPI, 2024). Stories are critical for social learning, deliberate persuasion, and collective action, yet feature only peripherally in formal government policymaking. (NIH, 2023). Stories and language can encourage different ways of being, as one interviewee asked, what language or stories can activate collective belonging or dreaming? (CR 2025).

3. **Shifting from a consumer story to a citizen story encourages participation.**
   In a world of challenges that demand collective action, the power of individual choice and the logic of self-interest (what Alexander calls the consumer story) are increasingly insufficient, and a new story needs to emerge, in which citizens are more

active and hold agency in their communities (Alexander, 2022). This framing transforms "citizen" into a verb, in which "to citizen" means showing up, valuing, and working towards shared outcomes, understanding power, and recognising our interconnectedness (HowtoCitizen.com).

4. **Small public actions can build civic agency.**
   Many practitioners working in the community hold a view that the Government has taken responsibility for communities by saying 'we'll do everything for you - you can just be a consumer of policies, programs and services' (EF 2025). Participation in community efforts and programs that encourage people to do things together helps them realise their ability to act and question what they can and can't do. They suddenly realise "Are we allowed to do this? I thought the Council had to do that?" (BD 2025). The opportunity here is to work with communities in ways that support and enable them to do the work they feel needs to be done, and to get involved beyond consultation.

5. **Social media creates shared narratives but can amplify polarisation.**
   Social media can serve as an equalising force for disenfranchised individuals (through transparent and accessible information and digital infrastructure); however, social media platforms benefit from increased engagement driven by fake news, and algorithms tend to amplify the spread of disinformation and propaganda (NIH 2023). (See also: *Local news unites where Social Media enflames*).

6. **Social norms about free time and leisure influence how we spend our time.**
   Whether individuals view their off-work hours as a scarce resource to be protected for rest, "Time poor", or as an opportunity for personal fulfilment, social connection, and community contribution (active leisure) influences their participation in civic life. (Kalenkoski 2012). Youth at an after-school program shared because they feel so busy, when they are relaxing, they feel like they only have energy to scroll on their phones instead of going out and doing things (PBDD 2025). While sometimes connecting, perpetually being online can have downsides as well. (See also: *Youth and online spaces).*

**See it in action:**

- The Foundation for Young Australians reverses narratives that young people don't have political power through the Student Representative program that aims to build young people's capacity to advocate for change on the issues that matter to them in their schools, and the Young Mayors program that enables young people to participate in, and understand the significance of, voting at the local government level.

- TimeBanking (global) supports place-based hubs of reciprocal volunteering and service provision to move services from being impersonally ordered via an app (consumer story) to instead being done in the community with neighbours (citizen story).

# Place-based Wisdom and Knowledge

**Place-Based Wisdom** refers to the accumulated knowledge and practices developed by communities over generations in response to their specific environmental and social contexts. This understanding is vital for crafting sustainable solutions that are both effective and culturally appropriate, ensuring long-term resilience and stewardship of local resources. It acknowledges that solutions cannot be universally applied but must be adapted to the unique characteristics of each place (sustainability-directory).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Cultural respect leads to well-being, belonging and increased cohesion.**
   Torres Strait Islander and First Nations peoples hold unique cultural nuances, and the stories and cultural practices play a central role in shaping community identity. Traditional knowledge exchange (through art, storytelling, and yarning) is integral to cultural preservation and passes on essential knowledge about land, resources, and cultural practices. This sharing strengthens wellbeing as well as a sense of cultural identity and belonging for younger generations who are often considered 'at risk' (Berkeley.edu). It also fosters respect, understanding, and empathy, which are necessary for greater social cohesion (Unesco).

2. **Learning from lived experience improves programs and enables communities.**
   People who have lived in places longer understand how natural disasters play out and can provide helpful forewarning and guidance for responses. (PBDD 2025). When people in communities are listened to and empowered, funders will find that they have the wisdom, creativity, and strength to go beyond merely surviving each new crisis (Resilience Canopy). The model shifts from government-led, top-down responses to supporting communities in leading their own journeys with their shared experiential knowledge.

3. **Complex challenges call for honouring local wisdom.**
   In Seeing Like a State, James C Scott argues that government interventions fail because there is a conflict between two distinct types of knowledge, Techne (universal, scientific knowledge) and Mētis (local, practical knowledge). The state often prioritises techne while ignoring or suppressing mētis, which is essential for managing complex, real-world systems. Experts can be dismissive of certain ideas that emerge, thinking that community members didn't understand the nuance. While that may be true, this view often dismisses local knowledge and collective wisdom (RG 2025; KC 2025).

**See it in action:**

- The Indigenous Desert Alliance facilitates a network of First Nations desert rangers to exchange and promote traditional knowledge of care and stewardship of the Australian desert.
- Farmers in Banda (India) have spread traditional practices to conserve rainwater across the region, resulting in farmers who had left for rainier areas returning home as well as greater local collaboration on building shared community infrastructure.

# Broader Systemic Context

**People's ability, opportunity and willingness to participate** are also shaped by the broader systemic context in which they live. Governance approaches, laws, regulations and policies provide the overarching frameworks that guide participation. These shape whether people have the protection, legitimacy, and confidence to actively engage in their communities, by setting out the implicit goals, expected behaviours and boundaries around participation. The stories they hear from mainstream media or the degree of cultural awareness they experience can either strengthen or erode their sense of belonging and trust.

**Governance approaches** signal whose voices are valued. Shared decision-making, participatory funding models, and inclusive policy processes empower people to contribute meaningfully, while top-down approaches restrict agency, reduce ownership, and can foster cynicism.

**Social, planning, and economic policies,** such as childcare, employment and housing, create the base conditions and safety from which participation becomes more or less feasible, while the ways in which policy is created and enables or dissuades participation and agency and indicates whose voices and experiences are legitimate and important.

**Law and regulations** set the rules and incentives for engagement. Clear legal frameworks that protect rights to association, expression, and consultation create enabling conditions, while restrictive laws and bureaucratic hurdles can inhibit participation.

**Cultural awareness and literacy** within institutions and systems influence whether participation is genuinely inclusive. When decision-makers understand and respect diverse cultural practices, languages, and traditions, people feel valued and confident to participate. Lack of cultural competence, in contrast, can make participation alienating or unsafe.

**Mainstream media** can discourage citizens from seeing themselves as active contributors by promoting individualism, positioning people as observers rather than participants, and failing to represent diverse voices and perspectives. The stories that the media tells influence the stories that people tell themselves about what is - and is not - possible.

While many of these elements may lie beyond funders' control, it is still important to pay attention to them and understand their potential influence. Naming and recognising these elements encourages funders to look at the whole system, better anticipate unintended consequences, and identify more powerful leverage points.

# Mainstream Media

**Mainstream Media** refers to traditional media, such as newspapers, television, and radio, that reach and influence large numbers of people and are likely to reflect generally accepted beliefs and opinions (Cambridge.org).

**Why it matters:**

1. **A focus on deficits and sensationalism discourages participation.**
   **"**If it bleeds, it leads." When the media overemphasises problems, scandals, and crises, it can reinforce a sense that "nothing works" and that citizens' efforts are futile. This can erode trust in public institutions and government. Dramatic and sensationalised stories overlook the importance of small-scale local efforts, and create a sense that people are observers rather than actors: reading, watching, or commenting on events.

2. **Public Media provides verified information and trusted voices.**
   Reliable information and trusted voices, such as public service media, have traditionally played a crucial role in supporting democracy and civic participation, providing up-to-date information and centring shared cultural experiences. In the words of director-general Tim Davie, the BBC is a vital resource for the UK
   Public broadcasting, such as PBS in the US and the BBC in the UK, is seen as a vital resource for addressing our current democratic challenges and achieving a future in which trusted information strengthens democracy (BBC 2025).

**See it in action:**

- ABC Heywire is an annual competition for regional youth to share untold stories with a focus on building capacity among youth and their communities. Winners receive support from ABC staff to adapt their story pitch into a professional-quality news piece.
- WBEZ Curious City (USA) invites listeners to pitch stories to the newsroom and vote on which audience-submitted stories they're most interested in having reported. The listener who pitched the story often accompanies the reporter in reporting the story,

# Governance Approaches

**Governance** is the broad system for directing and making decisions. It encompasses the structures, principles, and practices that guide how authority is exercised, how various stakeholders are involved in decision-making, and how people are held to account. Ethics, risk management, compliance and administration are all important elements of governance (Governance Institute of Australia).
*(For specific tools of governance, see Laws and Regulations)*

**Why it matters:**

1. **Governance is a foundation of public trust.**
   Good governance ensures transparency, accountability, stewardship and integrity (Governance Institute of Australia). As highlighted by the ACT Wellbeing framework, for citizens to engage, they must first perceive institutions as reliable, open, and fair. Shared decision-making, participatory funding models, and inclusive policy processes empower people to contribute meaningfully (PlaceAustralia 2025), while top-down approaches restrict agency, reduce ownership, and participation without the redistribution of power can be manipulative and disempowering (Arnstein 1969) (See also: *Participatory policy as catalyser).*

2. **Changing governance for changing times.**
   Calls for shifts in governance, power sharing and participatory decision-making are called for to better enable civic and community participation in light of 21st century challenges (Indy Johar 2018). Cross-cutting tasks (from pandemics and emergencies to handling data or homelessness) require new methods for organising horizontally (Mulgan 2026). Critical looks at why "top-down" or "elite-led" funding and governance often fail to foster genuine civic participation, suggest we must focus on building the local capacity to manage resources and assets directly (Górriz-Mifsud et al., 2016). Community energy gets zapped by the desire to fall in line and mimic what they think is needed (as set out by gov't or big philanthropy) rather than what the community needs (IB 2025). At a broader scale, this looks like a call for communities to become more active citizens (See Also: *Shifting from a consumer story to a citizen story*).

3. **More than timelines and contracts, a shift in mindset is needed.**
   Grants are often short-term, tied to specific isolated projects, and focused more on activities and outputs rather than longer-term outcomes. But, place-based work is long-term, adaptive, and centred on relationships, which evolve over time and it requires deep trust and local leadership (Greater Melbourne Foundation). More

'networked governance' or 'collaborative governance' approaches require funders to stop viewing community leaders as mere "grant recipients" and start treating them as co-creators of solutions (AT1 2025). This is especially true when working with Aboriginal communities, to allow for genuine trust and collaboration to mature (AT1 2025) (See also ). The opportunity here is to build the "connective tissue" and shared information flows that allow government, philanthropy, and community to address complex problems that can't be solved alone (AT1 2025) or in a one-off pilot.

4. **Effective governance honours local wisdom.**
   Effective governance is not a binary choice between "top-down" or "bottom-up." One of the paradoxes surfaced in the creation of this guide is not about being either community-led or institution-led, but rather about "when to foreground community and background institutions" and vice versa (CR2 2025). High-impact funders know when to be led by local wisdom (*see Honouring Metis)* and when to use the institution's power to provide invisible support, grants, facilities, promotions or advice (Institute of Community Directors Australia 2025).

5. **Governance can ensure consistency and rigour at a high level and create trust.**
   While the goal is community agency, top-down governance and standard setting are still important. Federal-level governance ensures consistency and works towards ease of data sharing. The Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 provides the transparency and accountability standards that serve as the "underpinning legislation" for major initiatives such as Closing the Gap. These frameworks ensure that even decentralised, place-based work remains measurable, fair, and trustworthy.

6. **Reporting can be co-opted by a need to validate programs.**
   If a program has met an immediate need and participation dwindles, this can be seen as a programmatic failure rather than a success for the community, and leads to skewed reporting (DC 2025). This reflects a broader pattern in which recipients of philanthropic grants feel they have to report positively. Instead, funders need to build relationships, foster trust, and value learning (DH 2025). Philanthropy can do this by getting out into communities and talking to the people impacted by the funding, and by ensuring their reporting processes and governance support learning and reduce the burden (Philanthropy.org 2023).

**See it in action:**

- There are examples of successes (See Participedia.net) and failures in collaborative governance. When it goes wrong, it can be due to undermining moves by other parts of connected institutional systems. For example, a three-year-long collaboration in the Northern Territory between a Binninj community and local government was "disastrously undermined" by an unexpected media release from the Federal government announcing that it would take control of a large number of Aboriginal communities and impose a number of control measures (From collaboration to coercion, Smith 2008).

- The Community Planning Framework in Scotland is a successful example of collaborative governance. It is a statutory, collaborative model in which public bodies (councils, NHS, police, etc.) and communities work together through Community Planning Partnerships in each council area to design and deliver better, more integrated local services that focus on outcomes, tackle inequalities, and empower local voices through shared planning and resources. (Gov.Scot, 2025)

- The Real Deal is a project coordinated at the University of Sydney (School of Geosciences) and based in places across Australia, designed to give local communities a real say in the changes and transitions they are facing by deploying participatory research, community organising, and other relationship-based research strategies.

- Our Town is an 11–year, $15 million mental health initiative funded by the Fay Fuller Foundation, implemented in partnership with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation and Clear Horizon. Shaped with regional communities for regional communities, Our Town aims to build the capabilities of regional towns in South Australia to develop community-based responses to mental health and wellbeing with an eye to scaling what works, and influencing regional policy. Crucially, they did not fund specific "programs"; they funded the community's governance and coordination capacity.

# Cultural Awareness and Cultural Literacy

**Cultural awareness** involves recognizing and respecting differences between cultures, while **cultural literacy** goes further and involves the specific knowledge, skills, and ability to effectively navigate diverse cultural contexts, and enable respectful interaction, communication, and collaboration across different backgrounds (IJLLC 2024).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Cultural literacy is critical for belonging and inclusion in civic life.**
   Especially for people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities (See Ethnic Background), learning the unwritten rules of the dominant culture (e.g., how to speak in a meeting, how to dress, or how to disagree respectfully) are key for participation in community life and success. This happens through a combination of formal education, community integration, media, and connecting and convening roles (WA.gov).

2. **Cross cultural understanding takes time but improves services and access.**
   Professionals who are self reflexive and exposed to different cultures are important for promoting civic engagement and can help build a more respectful, collaborative, cohesive, and culturally sensitive service provision and community (Singh 2020). But this requires time and building trust, as well as staff that have basic cultural competency (Multicultural NSW). One participant born abroad shared that because they've worked with the same group within the council several times, they see how the council is improving in how they work with their specific cultural community and "once they get it, they get it. They invite us more and know how to work better with us" (PBDD 2025).

3. **Social cohesion in the 21st century must include cultural awareness and celebration.**
   Social cohesion has been a unique strength in the Australian context, particularly at the local and neighbourhood level (Scanlon Foundation 2025). However, while social cohesion is described as a national asset, yet it also has a troubled history of encouraging conformity and veiling racism in Australia (The Conversation 2025).

   There is a growing call to redefine social cohesion not as the absence of disagreement, but as the ability to manage disagreements, embrace pluralism, and actively combat discrimination (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2026). Some nations like New Zealand recognise cultural differences as central to their frameworks for social cohesion (msd.gov); while some like Australia focus more on harmony (DHA.Gov) and diversity is framed as 'a reality' rather than a strength (APH.gov).

Increasing violence towards marginalised groups has placed strain on the safety and belonging of diverse communities in Australia (AlJazeera).

4. **Celebrating and honouring First Nations' culture and contributions**.
   A federal inquiry into *Strengthening Australia's Democracy* calls for learning from Indigenous Australia's democratic histories, including complex and consultative governance and legal structures, extended deliberative processes, comfort with uncertainty and conflicting stories, and the 'networked system of trust (Home Affairs 2024). This cultural literacy at a community level includes recognition of and accommodation for old traditions such as ceremony and Lore, modern traditions such as NAIDOC week, women's business (experiences and knowledge of females), men's business (knowledge and experiences of males) and sorry business (grief and loss) (UNSW).

**See it in action:**

- Waijungbah Jarjums (QLD) connects families with a First Nations midwife and child health nurse from conception through to age 5 to provide healthcare, as well as cultural connection, yarning circles, and welcome-to-community events.

- Stan Daniels Healing Centre (Canada) is a halfway house for conditionally released Indigenous inmates to reintegrate into society through the practice of traditional culture and ceremonies and connection with the Indigenous community.

- ANROWS 2023 Culturally designed practice frameworks to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children exposed to domestic and family violence. Resulted in two new research reports and one practice framework.

# Laws and Regulations

**Laws** are formal rules created by federal, state, or territory parliaments (through acts or legislation) or by courts (common law).
**Regulations** are made by government ministers or state departments to define and implement the details of those laws (PEO.gov).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Anti-discrimination regulation acts as basic yet protective guardrails.**
   Federal and State anti-discrimination laws (e.g., the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, Racial Discrimination Act 1975, Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Age Discrimination Act 2004 ), and State level human rights legislation in Victoria, ACT and Queensland, allow individuals from LGBTQ+ and CALD backgrounds to participate in public life with legal recourse if they are excluded. This creates the "safety" required for Individual Level participation (See Ethnic background/CALD; Gender Identity; Sexual Orientation). While policy is flexible and changes with governments, law is more stable and provides the "hard" boundary for what is permitted in civic life, protecting groups even where public sentiment is not in favour.

2. **Threats to social cohesion are driving new laws.**
   The "Combatting Antisemitism, Hate and Extremism Bill 2026" (APH.gov) comes in the wake of the Dec 2026 Bondi attacks on the Jewish community and is an attempt to reduce hate speech and division. The move towards this law has already contributed to the disbanding of the Nationalist Socialist Network (ABC.net). However, some groups worry it will be used to limit freedom of speech, assembly, and the right to protest (ABC.net).

3. **Regulatory red tape impedes innovation and needs an uplift.**
   From federal to macro-level regulations of state and local government's 'red tape' is frequently reported by people in the community as making volunteering (and starting up co-operatives, community-led organisations or land trusts) too difficult, their work too complicated, taking too much time and as "a significant impediment" (Volunteering Australia, 2022). This can create "Civic deserts" as smaller, grassroots community groups often "opt out" of formalising because the reporting laws are too complex. This resonates with Indy Johar's appeal to funders and policymakers to move past easy, visible fixes and invest in the institutional and regulatory infrastructure, which he describes as the unglamorous but essential "plumbing" that enables systemic, democratic, and sustainable transformation (Dark Matter Labs, 2022) (see also Governance Approaches).

**See it in action:**

- Local governments have used the General Power of Competence (England), which empowers local authorities to assume authority to take any actions within their jurisdiction that are not specifically prohibited, to offer pop-up government services in community spaces and support community provision of local services.

- The Community Use of School Facilities Policy (ACT) obliges principals to make school facilities available for community use afterhours, and empowers principals to waive or reduce fees at their discretion.

- The 2023–2024 Vibrancy Reforms (NSW) reduce review and application requirements for street performances and festivals, community events on public land, and other local activations of public space; and empower councils to approve local event applications that use state roads without requiring state review.

- Bendigo's Islamic community faced opposition to building a mosque, but because Victoria has laws protecting human rights, freedom or the case community succeeded in court and the mosque is being built today (Amnesty.org).

# Policy (Social, Planning and Economic)

**Policy** is a set of ideas or a plan for what to do in particular situations that has been officially agreed to by a group of people, a business organisation, a government, or a political party (Cambridge). It articulates the goals of a vision set through governance and is enacted through laws and regulations.

- Social Policy guides government actions, regulations, and services designed to improve citizen well-being, reduce disadvantage, and meet human needs across the life course (LSE).
- Planning Policy provides the high-level, overarching rules and guidelines for land use and development. It sets the strategic direction for how land is used, protected, and developed to meet population growth, economic, and environmental goals (Infrastructure.gov).
- Economic Policy includes the fiscal, monetary, regulatory, and structural measures that influence productivity, employment, the distribution of wealth, and long-term prosperity (OECD).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Health and social equity are the foundations of a healthy civic society.** Achieving health goals contributes to broader societal objectives, including population well-being, economic development, environmental sustainability and social cohesion (NIH, 2024). In countries like Canada or the UK, universal healthcare (or partial coverage like Medicare in Australia) frees people from worrying about medical costs (see Individual: Socioeconomic Status), helps them manage chronic conditions (see Individual: health/ability) and gives them more capacity to engage in local initiatives. However, subsidies for global services and funding have been stalling in recent years (World Bank, 2025). Austerity measures or high unemployment can limit participation, as people must prioritise survival over community engagement (Third Sector Research Centre, 2012).

2. **Economic policy impacts multiple levels of the system from individual to national.** Policies like Australia's Child Care Subsidy or Paid Parental Leave reduce the burden of caregiving, enabling parents, especially women (see Individual: Gender), to participate in the economy as well as volunteering, local committees, or civic activities (the Conversation 2024) . Regional development programs, such as the UK's Levelling Up Fund or Australia's 2018 Regional Growth Fund, invested in local infrastructure and economic opportunities, giving communities the resources and places to organise and participate in civic life (See Infrastructure and Place).

3. **Planning policy can prioritise community connectedness or create sprawl.**
   Urban planning that creates walkable neighborhoods, public parks, and community centers (like Copenhagen's bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure). enables easy gathering and impromptu social interactions (see Civil Infrastructure: Third spaces). In contrast, sprawling suburban developments with poor public transport can isolate residents, making participation in local decision-making or volunteering more difficult both physically and psychologically (sustainability-directory).

4. **Policy coherence requires genuine participation.**
   Policy coherence is one of the critical factors in ensuring alignment among different policy domains such as education, health, housing and employment to address the multifaceted needs of communities, and to avoid conflicts or unintended policy consequences. (ICSW ). While engagement and consultation are important, people designing and implementing policy and programs have to actually incorporate the findings in order for those activities to be meaningful (KC 2025).

   James C. Scott analyzes governments' efforts to impose order and make their societies more legible through high-modernist planning. He examines how states simplify natural environments and complex social systems for the purposes of control and resource extraction. However, this often fails to account for the intricate, nuanced knowledge and practices that develop through lived experience.

5. **Participatory policy requires power sharing and cultural awareness.**
   Participatory policymaking processes can reframe people in communities as active participants who have something to contribute (AT1 2025) and New Citizen Project). However, in order to support people to participate, they need cultural awareness and trauma-informed practice (BK 2025). Equipping policymakers with a lens that they can bring to their work and see their work differently though is helpful (See also: *Cultural Literacy*.

**See it in action:**

- Singapore's LUSH policies incentivize developers to incorporate communal gardens and shared urban greenspace into high-rise apartments by exempting these amenities from the taxable area of a building and allowing them to count towards urban greening mandates.

- Italy's Marcora Law allows workers of a shuttering business to pool their unemployment benefits to purchase the business and re-establish it as a worker-owned cooperative, with matching funds from the government.

- Local councils in Victoria are authorised to charge developers a community infrastructure levy that uses development fees to fund the construction of community facilities such as community halls, libraries, senior centres, and sporting facilities.

- Paris' participatory budgeting process allows any resident to propose uses of municipal funds, with 1,345 proposals being funded since 2014 including community spaces, public art, and shared public assets.

# Historical, Environmental and Societal Dynamics

**Historical, environmental and societal dynamics influence a person's ability to participate because they shape the broader temporal and societal conditions that enable or constrain engagement, often beyond individual control.**

The **history and legacy** of a place or community (such as colonisation, migration patterns, or historical exclusion) shape trust, norms, and expectations. Communities with a history of disempowerment may be sceptical about participating in formal systems, while those with strong civic traditions may have established pathways for involvement.

**Political cycles** affect participation by influencing stability, priorities, and access to decision-making. Frequent elections, changing governments, or shifting policy agendas can disrupt programs, create uncertainty, and make people feel that their contributions have limited impact.

**Intergenerational disadvantage**, including systemic inequality, poverty, or exclusion, can reduce access to resources, confidence, and networks, making participation more difficult and reinforcing patterns of marginalisation.

**Natural and climate disasters** disrupt lives, infrastructure, and social networks. However, they can also act as a catalyst for strengthening collective action and resilience, particularily when funders support locally led efforts.

Finally, **social change and movements** open new possibilities for participation by challenging norms, amplifying voices, and creating networks of support. They can empower people to engage in advocacy, volunteering, or collective problem-solving, while also reshaping what kinds of participation are valued or recognised.

While the durational and implicit nature of these elements make them hard to influence in away that can be measured, paying attention to how they shape the broader dynamics and context in which participation occurs is important. Understanding how they are expressed in a place for a group of people can help to illuminate why certain challenges feel intractable and offer alternative pathways and ways to think about how to engage certain communities or cohorts.

# History/Legacy

**History** is the systematic study, recording, and interpretation of past events, documenting and making sense of what has happened in a place.
**Legacy** is the lasting, intangible impact and values, as well as tangible inheritance (such as property or traditions), passed down to future generations (Gee 2025).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Past decisions are the 'silent architecture' of our modern world.**
   How communities come together and participate takes place within a prefabricated system of past decisions and their legacies. (Sustainability Directory 2025). From decisions about infrastructure such as energy grids, community centres, and roads that physically shape places (see Civil Infrastructure), to the impact of policies, laws, and events (see Broader Systemic Context), past decisions become active, present-day forces that influence behaviours and enable or constrain opportunities. In a regional community where the state's first mosque was constructed in the 1960s (Shepparton Albanian Society), many residents and elected officials still took pride in its construction and saw it as a sign that they welcomed refugees and cultural diversity (PBDD 2025).

2. **Place-based approaches require widening the lens to historic and structural factors.**
   Collective memory and social memory are formed and reinforced by the schemas, scripts, and social roles enacted in a place (NIH 2023) (See also Mindsets and Internal Narratives). Place-based approaches must take into account historic and structural factors. Rather than narrowly targeting individual issues, a place-based approach addresses systemic issues. It widens the lens through which problems are viewed by considering the historical and structural factors that contribute to them (Greater Melbourne Foundation 2025).

3. **Legacies of harm must be acknowledged and addressed in order to heal.**
   Poor relationships must be acknowledged and healed. There's an underlying mistrust of government officials (even when they're doing good work) because they leave when they get their next job, while people in the community stay and remember (BD 2025).

4. **Short-term pilot programs can leave a legacy of distrust.**
   Many people working in place-based ways feel that pilots don't leave a good legacy and long-term sustainable, funded programs are needed (PBDD 2025).

**See it in action:**

- The Floyd Country Store (USA) creates shared identity, education and music and cultural programming that is place-based and celebrates a shared history. When new owners acquired the venue, they intentionally worked with people who had historically come to the venue, built trust, and have succeeded because they work to honor that legacy.
- The Local Trust's Big Local program (UK) gives unrestricted £1 million grants to local communities to guarantee long-term funding that can build sustained capacity and lasting infrastructure rather than short-term investments, transferring trust to the community by letting resident groups decide the allocation.

# Intergenerational Disadvantage

**Intergenerational disadvantage** is a cycle in which hardships such as poverty, poor health, low education, and/or limited opportunities are passed from one generation to the next, creating persistent challenges for families and communities (Berry Street).

**Why it matters:**

1. **In order to address invisible barriers, we must become aware of them.**
   People working in place-based ways have noticed that many deliberative processes screen for housing type, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status. However, we don't necessarily think deeply enough about how to address other barriers to engagement, for example, due to trauma, systemic racism, loss of trust in institutions and increasing polarisation, and how to ensure we reach across the full political spectrum (RG 2025). They argue that better enabling participation requires examining structural conditions that are hidden from sight and discourse, and we need to drag those things into the light and make it someone's job (TL 2025).

2. **Family systems that have experienced trauma have a lower bandwidth.**
   Families subject to external, uncontrollable situations can experience difficulty sustaining an organised, stable daily schedule and finding energy for activities beyond basic tasks (NIH 2010), which can result in lower bandwidth to engage in civic activities. Funders and service providers need to understand this - they are not hard to engage; that is their body protecting itself. People who have been harmed by the system feel they can't expect any different. But if they can build agency, things can start to shift (DH 2025). Building relationships and meeting people on their terms can help address the risk of consultation fatigue and suspicions that the process won't have a closed feedback loop. This means funders need to be clear on the purpose of engagement and close the feedback loop; otherwise, they may further erode people's trust (RG 2025) (See also: *Changing governance for changing times*).

3. **Long-term funding can build trust and opportunities to shift disadvantage.**
   The relationships and social infrastructure that support partnerships between communities and services take time, particularly when families may have a historical distrust of government and service providers (PLACE 2025). Long-term financial investment in programs allows local people to be involved again and again, providing an ongoing opportunity to build trust and get involved (BD 2025). However, this serves a different purpose and should complement the smaller funding pots that address immediate needs, come with less red tape (see *Regulatory red tape*) and are seen by some as more helpful than large injections of funding (FM 2025).

**See it in action:**

- Ngahere Korowai (New Zealand) is a community-driven project to reforest the hills of Porirua East, initiated by a group of disadvantaged Pasifika male elders who built a community coalition to restore the ecological heritage of the hills.
- The Family Independence Initiative (USA) allowed low-income families to organise into self-selected peer groups, set personal goals for what metrics would be meaningful for their families (e.g., paying down debt, raising children's grades), and then receive cash payments based on their progress on their communally defined goals.
- The Healing Foundation's Collective Healing Grants support survivors and descendants of the Stolen Generations to engage in community, heal, and invest in future generations.

# Politics/ Political Cycles

**Politics** is the activity associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power in a country, state, or organisation.
**Political Cycles** describe the recurring patterns of economic and social policy changes driven by election timing, partisan ideology, and voter behaviour (Britannica).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Political polarisation translates into community division.**
   In addition to global trends in political polarisation, the way Australia handled the 2024 referendum and discourses around The Voice to Parliament magnified and emboldened people to say more inflammatory things (NH 2025). Some professionals have observed that more progressive people are too busy calling the far right wrong and don't understand why certain radical or polarised communities exist, suggesting that there should be investment in understanding why such communities exist (LO 2025).

2. **National and local politics encourage different types of participation.**
   When asked to name the most important aspects of a good community, access to high-quality local services and local councillors who work hard are ranked highly (renewal.org.uk). (JD 2025) notes that where there are local members who are engaged and involve broad groups of people in policy, you see support for kitchen-table conversations, mustering thousands of volunteers, and positive outcomes for both civic participation and social connection. We don't have a population that's disengaged from politics; we have disengagement from major political parties (JD 2025). Additionally, if people believe the government can't or won't act on their recommendations, they're less likely to actively participate in participatory decision-making processes (JO 2025).

3. **Recognising grassroots agency is inherently political.**
   People working in and around government have suggested that you can't 'activate civic participation' without it also being political, because neoliberalism defines all important relationships as transactional, and this approach challenges that (TL 2025). There are also concerns that the systems, structures and mindsets that are prevalent in government make it difficult for politicians and officials in State and Federal governments to recognise and engage with communities as equal contributors and decision-makers (LC 2025) (See also *History /Legacy* ).

4. **Global politics and shifts in priorities impact Australia's NGO and charity sector.** USAID funding freezes and cuts significantly strained Australian NGOs, reduced health services in the Indo-Pacific, and forced Australian charities to cut staff and close offices. This weakens Australia's ability to support essential health services in Pacific and Southeast Asian nations and also reduces opportunities to meaningfully participate and volunteer (see Relational and Social Ties: Communities). It also creates more competition for charities seeking funding and puts additional pressure on Australia to step up its funding (GT Law 2025).

**See it in action**:

- Since 2015, the Frome Town Council (England) has been exclusively composed of members of the Independents for Frome movement, a group that practices "flatpack democracy" based on greater public collaboration, listening over confrontation, and power with rather than power over.
- Organisers of the Uluru Statement from the Heart engaged in 12 regional dialogues across the country to reach and involve First Nations people in deliberative dialogue to achieve unified political goals.

# Natural/ Climate-led Disasters

**Natural disasters** are severe disruptions to a community's functioning caused by hazardous events related to weather, climate, and water, which exceed the community's ability to cope using its own resources (ACS). While "natural" disasters were historically considered uncontrollable, we now recognise that many of these events are exacerbated by changes in climate, land-use, and poor infrastructure planning (CSIRO).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Social solidarity and belonging increase through environmental justice movements.**
   These movements foster unity by highlighting that environmental degradation and social, economic, and racial injustices are deeply interconnected and driven by similar systemic forces (Friends of the Earth, 2025). Environmental sustainability requires collective, community action and creates opportunities for active participation, a core principle of environmental justice movements (NIH, 2024). (See also *Communities of Purpose).*

2. **Community-led adaptation empowers local decision-making.**
   Locally led adaptation is essential for helping state and local governments respond to compounding crises (Parliament, Vic, 2025). Enablers to locally led adaptation include flexibility, investments in community leadership and local institutional capacities, and the reinforcement of adaptation across scales and programs. Barriers to locally led adaptation financing include a lack of investment in local capacities to manage funds and adaptation processes, low levels of accountability from funders and implementing entities to local actors, and insufficient funding (WRI, 2021). (See also *Shifting from a consumer story to a citizen story,* also *Honouring Metis*, and *Changing governance for changing times).*

3. **Disasters can bring people together or devastate communities.**
   Competition among community orgs or groups erodes connection and resilience, even in the face of a disaster. People working with communities describe seeing communities go through major disasters or major events, where it becomes a toxic, adversarial environment.

4. **Compounding crisis calls for and creates opportunities for innovation.** Born out of the dual crisis of the 2019 bushfires in Victoria and the 202 global pandemic, Regen Melbourne is an example of how new types of institutions can bridge the current state to a potential future that is better equipped to deal with compounding crises (Regen Melbourne), (See also Broader context: Governance approaches).

**See it in action:**

- The Australian Red Cross Communities initiative places disaster preparedness staff in two-year assignments in communities to provide capacity building and knowledge sharing for the community to develop its own disaster preparedness plan based on local wisdom and community connections.
- Community-Based Disaster Learning Reviews empower communities to come together in the immediate aftermath of a recent disaster to reflect on and act on how they can learn and strengthen from the experience, taking a no-blame, trauma-informed approach to understanding how community engagement can enhance disaster preparedness.

# Social Changes and Movements

**Social change** refers to changes in society over time, influenced by social movements and external factors such as environmental shifts and technological innovations. Any disruptive shift in the status quo, be it intentional or accidental, human- or natural-caused, can lead to social change (Lumen).

**Social movements** are purposeful, organised groups striving to work toward a common goal, including creating change (Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring), resisting change (anti-globalisation movement), or providing a political voice to those otherwise disenfranchised (civil rights movements) (Open TextBC).

**Why it matters:**

1. **Social movements bridge the gap between people and power.**
   Often, formal political systems feel distant or slow (See Broader Context: Governance: *Bureaucracy and Red Tape* and also *Historical Dynamics: Political Cycles).* Social movements provide a direct channel for community members to express their needs. Formal and Informal movements can both raise awareness and highlight issues that mainstream politics might ignore. They can help uplift marginalised groups' voices and put pressure on local and state leaders by reminding them that the community is watching and organised (OER.edu 2026).

2. **Social movements can be places to forge unexpected relationships.**
   Many social movements combine participation by grassroots "outsiders" who bring time, energy, and commitment, and "insiders," such as political officials and executives who have political and economic capital and connections (NCBI 2014).

3. **Movement spaces can unlock new ways of patterning participation.**
   Mass mobilisation can advance justice and resist authoritarianism (SSIR 2025), and how we mobilise matters. Some practitioners who have worked in communities point to a deeper need: not just new forms of participation, but a shift in the worldview that shapes how we participate. Many ways of engaging simply repattern existing systems and logics — reproducing harms and circling around the same challenges, while the root conditions remain stubbornly in place. What's needed is the invisible infrastructure work: a re-routing of our sense of who we are in the world, before we can genuinely participate in reshaping it (CR 2025).

4. **Rapid social changes may leave already marginalised groups behind.**
   Social change can advance societies through the adoption of new norms, ideals, and technologies; however, it creates exclusion when the structural, technological, and cultural foundations of society change faster than certain groups can adapt.
   As society shifts, the "normative" standard for participation changes, often leaving behind those with lower income, limited education, or those in rural areas (The Conversation 2023). For example, new technologies resulting in a "digital divide," and widening economic disparities (*See also Digital Infrastructure: Digital exclusion*).
   Currently 1 in 4 people in Australia are digitally excluded, particularly from people on low incomes, people with a disability, First Nations people, new migrants and refugees and people aged over 65; 11% of Australians need but cannot afford a new computer, tablet, smart phone, while 16% of Australians report unreliable internet connectivity (Good Things Australia, 2025).

**See it in action:**

- The #MeToo Movement (US and Global) used social media to turn a private issue into a public, collective action, prompting millions to share their stories. This created a supportive, viral community, lowering the barrier to participation and making it safer to speak out against harassment. The result was increased awareness, public discourse, and, ultimately, changes in workplace policies and accountability.

- Fridays for Future/ Schools Strike for Climate (Global) was started in 2018 after Swedish pupil Greta Thunberg staged a protest at her school. It encourages civic participation by empowering young people to act as political agents, fostering leadership, and bypassing traditional, age-restricted political systems to directly challenge policymakers. The movement in Australia mobilised over 150,000 participants at its peak, shifting the national discourse on climate change from debate to a demand for immediate action, and evolving into a call for climate justice (Deakin 2023).