the good shift

Activating Civic & Community Participation

Literature Review

March, 2026

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Key Messages from the Literature

(& what they mean for funders)

Participation is a living system, not an activity

Key message
Participation, connectedness, equity, and resilience operate as one intertwined system that can generate either virtuous cycles of flourishing or spirals of harm.

What it means for funders
Invest in the whole system around participation (relationships, assets, institutions), not just discrete engagement activities. Design portfolios that strengthen positive feedback loops rather than funding isolated projects.

Treat participation as core social infrastructure

Key message
Participation functions like infrastructure: places, roles, norms, and platforms that enable people to shape their shared world, much like roads or digital networks enable economic activity.

What it means for funders
Fund participation infrastructure directly (neighbourhood houses, third places, connectors, digital tools, governance processes), and treat this as essential, long-term investment rather than overhead on programs.

Inequality suppresses participation, locking in deeper inequality

Key message
Socio-economic inequality systematically suppresses civic participation, while excluding communities from participation reinforces and deepens inequality over time.

What it means for funders
Pair participation investments with structural work on housing stability, time poverty, asset ownership, and income security, or risk reinforcing existing power dynamics and exclusions.

Everyday participation is a major asset for communities

Key message
Everyday practices of helping, caring, mutual aid, and community-led organising are powerful forms of civic participation that sustain communities and often flourish where formal volunteering looks low.

What it means for funders
Start from what already exists. Resource informal networks, everyday caring, and community-led responses without over-formalising them, and use funding to amplify, not displace, existing civic practice.

Community wealth building turns participation into power

Key message
Participation attached to community ownership of assets (land, enterprises, infrastructure) shifts communities from recipients to decision-makers and changes who benefits from wealth and investment.

What it means for funders
Move beyond short-term service grants toward capital and long-term support for community-controlled assets, cooperative enterprises, and anchor-institution procurement that recirculates wealth locally.

Digital exclusion is now a first-order participation barrier

Key message
Digital transformation has made connectivity, devices, and skills a prerequisite for civic engagement, and digital exclusion now operates as a structural barrier on par with economic inequality.

What it means for funders
Treat digital access and capability as core participation infrastructure. Invest in local digital hubs, trusted intermediaries, community-governed platforms, and design every strategy with digital inclusion in mind.

Resilience depends on civic infrastructure, not just plans

Key message
Resilience research shows that social capital, participation, and inclusive governance are often more predictive of recovery than formal plans or physical assets alone, especially under cascading crises.

What it means for funders
Shift disaster and climate funding from reactive, event-based grants to long-term, place-based investment in relationships, local organisations, and community-led governance that help communities bounce forward.

Participation must be equitable, or it can do harm

Key message
Poorly designed engagement can reproduce elite capture, burden communities, and deepen mistrust; inclusive, resourced participation can redistribute voice, protection, and opportunity.

What it means for funders
Resource participation properly (time, stipends, childcare, translation, access needs, trauma-informed facilitation), and design processes with those most affected at the centre, not at the margins.

Participation is a lifelong capability that starts in early childhood

Key message
Children's outcomes are shaped by whether families and communities have voice and agency, and participation across the lifespan builds civic skills, resilience, and intergenerational solidarity.

What it means for funders
See early years, schools, youth spaces, and family hubs as civic sites. Invest in intergenerational participation, youth leadership, and family-led governance as core to child and family outcomes.

Participation has compounding benefits across domains

Key message
Evidence shows that participation improves health, wellbeing, social cohesion, trust in institutions, and democratic engagement, creating reinforcing loops of positive outcomes.

What it means for funders
Treat participation as a multiplier. Investments that genuinely strengthen participation can unlock returns across portfolios (health, education, climate, democracy) if designed with this systems lens.

The key strategic question is how to shift power, not just increase engagement

Key message
The real differentiator is whether participation changes who sets agendas, controls resources, and shapes rules, rather than simply increasing consultation.

What it means for funders
Ask in every initiative: whose power is shifting here? Prioritise participatory grantmaking, community-controlled funds, and governance arrangements where communities most affected hold real authority.

Introduction

Purpose and Scope of the Review

Participation is not only a set of activities or programs; it operates as a system and form of social infrastructure that underpins fair futures in the same way that transport, housing, and digital networks underpin economic life. Across the literatures reviewed here, participation emerges as the connective tissue between domains often treated separately: it builds the social capital and trust that hold communities together, shapes how power is shared in democratic and economic decisions, enables more equitable access to resources and protections, and strengthens collective adaptability in the face of crises. Seeing participation as infrastructure shifts what counts as strategic work for funders: it asks philanthropy to invest not only in projects that use participation as a method, but in the enduring places, relationships, capabilities, and governance arrangements that allow people and communities to participate meaningfully over time.

This literature review has been prepared for Minderoo Foundation to inform strategic thinking and investment in activating civic and community participation. As societies worldwide grapple with compounding crises - climate disruption, democratic fragility, persistent inequities, and technological transformation - the capacity of communities to participate meaningfully in shaping their futures has never been more critical. Yet that capacity remains profoundly uneven, shaped by systemic barriers that determine who has voice, whose knowledge counts, and where resources flow.

The purpose of this review is therefore threefold:

1. To ***curate and synthesise the diverse and often fragmented evidence relevant to funders about what activates civic and community participation*** - drawing from democratic theory, community development, social cohesion, equity, and resilience literatures - to create a coherent framework for understanding participation pathways.
2. To ***surface key strategic considerations for funders navigating participation*** - such as power dynamics, processes, scale, measurement, and the persistent gaps between research and practice - without prescribing specific actions or models.
3. To ***identify bold, evidence-informed approaches that demonstrate transformative potential***: approaches that re-imagine participation by shifting relationships, decision-making power, and resource flows in ways that enable more inclusive, durable, and community-led outcomes.

This review prioritises depth in key domains that emerged as critical through preliminary literature scanning, stakeholder interviews, and strategic alignment with Minderoo Foundation's commitment to systemic change. The review deliberately centers equity, examining how participation intersects with structural disadvantage and how investments can either challenge or reinforce existing power dynamics.

Scope

The review focuses primarily on Australian and international evidence relevant to high-income democratic contexts, with particular attention to:

- Participatory mechanisms in governance and philanthropy
- Community-led approaches in disadvantaged and marginalised communities
- Asset-based strategies including Community Wealth Building
- The relationship between participation and social cohesion, equity, and resilience
- Philanthropic practice and the internal transformation of foundations

While the review draws on global scholarship, it acknowledges that much of the cited research originates in Western academic contexts. Where possible, it highlights Indigenous knowledge systems, innovations from the Global South and cohorts that are not often discussed in research, and critiques of dominant paradigms.

What this review does not cover

This review does not comprehensively address participation in corporate governance, labor organising, or formal electoral politics beyond their intersection with community civic life.

Overview of the Parts of the Review

The document is structured around an organising framework exploring four bodies of evidence:

- Participation: Democratic power-sharing, the spectrum from tokenism to citizen control, invited vs. claimed spaces, and the triangle of citizens–government–services.
- Connectedness: Social cohesion as bonds across difference, horizontal and vertical ties, evidence on what builds trust and belonging.
- Equity: How inequality depresses participation, asset-based approaches, community wealth building, and critiques of participatory practice.
- Resilience: Adaptive and transformative capacity, the role of social capital in crisis response, and emergent vs. planned resilience.

Each section summarises key concepts, synthesises evidence on effectiveness, identifies gaps and critiques. At the end of each section we pose strategic questions for funders based on the evidence of the literature review. The larger blue boxes in each section also explore literatures related to current or newer challenges relevant to each section.

The review then focuses on two areas that are critical in terms of how the Minderoo Foundation may contribute to activating civic and community participation in Australia. These relate to how this activation my contribute to better outcomes for children and families, and what role investing in design and infrastructure in communities may play in growing participation.

Finally, the Conclusion draws together key insights and make connections to other outputs from this project.

How to Use This Document in Conjunction with Other Project Outputs

This review is designed to serve multiple audiences within Minderoo Foundation:

- **For strategy teams**: The frameworks and evidence summaries provide conceptual scaffolding for designing funding initiatives. The 'Strategic Questions for Funders' boxes throughout offer prompts for refining strategy and assessing trade-offs.
- **For program teams**: The evidence on what works - and what does not - can inform grant-making criteria, assessment of proposals, and conversations with partners. The discussion of bold approaches highlights frontier practices to watch and potentially resource.
- **For leadership:** The review surfaces fundamental tensions in philanthropy's relationship to participation that require governance-level decisions, such as who should set the agenda? How do we shift power while maintaining accountability? When does funding community participation inadvertently burden communities?.

A Context for Activating Civic and Community Participation in early 2026

Several converging trends shape the landscape for civic participation as this review is written:

- ***Democratic stress and renewal***: Declining trust in institutions, rising polarisation, and challenges to democratic norms have sparked renewed interest in participatory innovations - from citizens' assemblies to participatory budgeting - as mechanisms for rebuilding legitimacy. At the same time, authoritarian trends in some democracies raise questions about the resilience of civic space itself.
- ***Climate and ecological disruption:*** The accelerating climate crisis demands transformative participation: those most affected by environmental injustice-particularly Indigenous Peoples and low-income communities - must lead transitions to sustainable economies. Community-owned renewable energy, bioregional organising, and climate assemblies represent emergent forms of participatory climate action.
- ***Digital transformation and divides:*** The pandemic accelerated shifts to digital civic engagement, creating both opportunities (broader reach, asynchronous participation) and risks (exclusion of those without connectivity, skills, or trust in digital systems; platform capture of civic infrastructure). Platform cooperatives offer alternative models, but remain marginal. Meanwhile, the digital divide itself has become recognised as a barrier to civic participation on par with economic inequality.
- ***Movements for social justice:*** From Indigenous sovereignty movements, to those seeking an end to antisemitism and Islamophobia, to disability justice organising, grassroots movements continue to demand not just representation but structural transformation. These movements challenge philanthropy to move beyond funding service delivery toward supporting community power-building, asset ownership, and governance authority.
- ***Community resilience in the face of a 'polycrisis':*** The pandemic exposed both the fragility of formal systems and the adaptive capacity of informal networks - mutual aid, neighborhood organising, cultural groups sustaining connection. Research increasingly shows that 'emergent resilience' built through everyday relationships often matters more than formal disaster preparedness, suggesting investments in long-term community development, not just episodic crisis response.
- ***Epistemic shifts in social change:*** Across fields-from place-based change to public health -there is growing recognition that complex problems require adaptive, participatory approaches rather than blueprint solutions. Concepts like 'community-led development,' 'co-production,' and 'lived experience leadership' have moved from the margins toward the mainstream, though implementation often falls short, raising questions about whether these are genuine power shifts or new forms of co-optation.
- ***Growing evidence on inequality and participation***: Research demonstrates that socio-economic inequality depresses civic

participation, creating a vicious cycle where those most affected by policy decisions have least capacity to influence them. This challenges funders to address structural drivers - housing stability, asset ownership, time poverty - not just barriers to individual engagement.

In this context, Minderoo Foundation's focus on activating civic and community participation is both urgent and contested terrain.

> *What forms of participation serve whose interests? When does funding community engagement simply extract knowledge without shifting power? How can philanthropy resource not only invited spaces created by institutions but also claimed spaces where communities set their own agendas?*

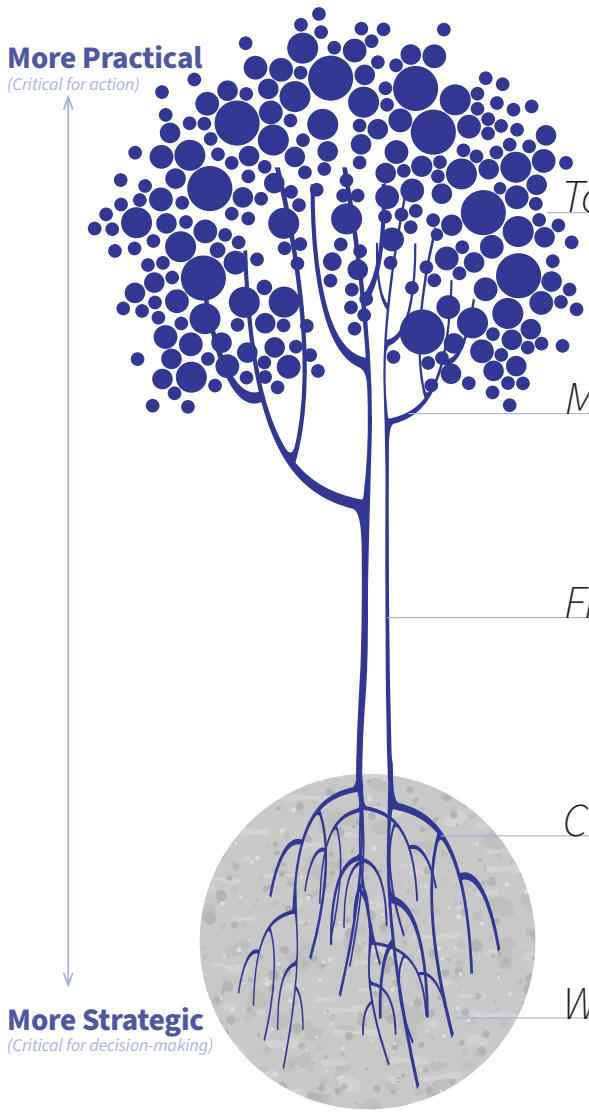
These questions run throughout the review.

The Roles of Philanthropy in Activating Civic and Community Participation

Philanthropy occupies a particular - and often paradoxical - position in relation to civic participation. Foundations are themselves unelected, unaccountable institutions wielding significant agenda-setting power, yet they also have unique capacities: patient capital for long-term organising, risk tolerance for experimentation, convening authority across sectors, and freedom from short-term political cycles.

Responding to these unique positioning features, this review identifies several distinct roles philanthropy can play:

- **Resourcing the invisible labor of participation:** Funding the processes - relationship-building, facilitation, childcare, translation, accessible venues, stipends for time - that make meaningful participation possible, especially for those facing structural barriers.
- **Supporting community-claimed spaces:** Investing in community-initiated organising, mutual aid networks, and movement infrastructure that exists on communities' own terms, not only institution-invited engagement.
- **Building community assets and wealth:** Moving beyond short-term project grants toward capitalising community-owned enterprises, land trusts, cooperatives, and infrastructure that generate ongoing returns and governance authority.



	What are they?	What's
Tools	Practical + instrumental processes, methods or techniques that extend or simplify human capabilities to perform tasks + take action.	Enabling (usually Tools ca commun
Models	Representations of a system, concept or phenomenon that help to simplify reality and describe or predict processes + relationships between them.	Enabling simulati descripti prescrib
Frameworks	Structured guides that organise concepts + processes to enable sense-making + scaffold design and/or action.	Organisi sense-m systems, adaptati
Concepts	Abstract mental constructs, that represent an idea, principle, quality or relationship. They are the building blocks of frameworks + models. Concepts anchor understanding.	Support understa phenom
Worldviews	A comprehensive set of beliefs, attitudes, values + assumptions that an individual, community or culture share about fundamental aspects of reality.	Worldvie perceive They act is unders profoun

- **Catalysing anchor institutions:** Using philanthropic leverage to shift procurement, hiring, and investment practices of large institutions (universities, hospitals, local government) toward community wealth-building.
- **Transforming internal practices:** Adopting participatory grantmaking, embedding community decision-making authority in foundation governance, and redistributing power within philanthropy itself.
- **Funding field-building and policy change:** Resourcing research, evaluation, learning, narrative change, and advocacy that shift broader ecosystems, not just individual organisations.
- **Taking on 'third-rail' issues:** Funding work that government cannot - reparations, land back, wealth redistribution, support for organising against powerful interests - using philanthropic independence strategically.

The boldest approaches integrate multiple roles. For example, a foundation might resource community land trusts (asset-building), shift its own procurement toward cooperative suppliers (institutional change), fund organising for pro-community zoning policy (systems change), and adopt participatory grantmaking so communities themselves decide funding priorities (internal transformation).

Worldviews of Change

The literature review sits alongside our earlier 'Worldviews of Change' work, which argues that how we see the world, and how we believe change happens, quietly shapes what we notice, fund, and measure. Worldviews underpin how we design, develop and use concepts, frameworks, models and tools (see figure 1).

The sensemaking framework used here: participation, connectedness, equity, and resilience, is not only a map of different evidence bases. It reflects a particular worldview in which participation is understood as living system and social infrastructure that underpins fair futures. Readers who want to explore these foundations in more depth can draw on the fuller Surfacing Worldviews of Change booklet and the companion blog, which unpack how different worldviews influence approaches to civic and community participation and why making them visible matters for funders.



Figure 1: From Strategic Worldviews to Practical Tools: understanding the layers of thinking that shape how we understand civic and community participation

Indigenous Perspectives: Context for a Dedicated Workstream

Indigenous perspectives will be funded through a separate workstream, as they are foundational to any serious strategy on civic and community participation in Australia. So, whilst we have incorporated Indigenous references and evidence where possible, we also recognise that non-Aboriginal interpretations of such evidence are not enough.

Therefore, this literature review is one component of a broader strategy process, and a separate Indigenous-led workstream will explore Indigenous perspectives on civic and community participation in depth. This section briefly signals why that dedicated work matters and how it connects to the themes of participation, connectedness, equity and resilience explored here.

Self-Determination as Foundation
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination is foundational to meaningful participation. This includes real choice over how lives are governed, control over development paths, and participation in decisions through institutions designed and led by communities themselves (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2014; Davis, 2021). A separate Indigenous-led piece of work creates space for these questions to be explored on the terms of First Nations peoples, rather than as a subset of broader participation frameworks.

Indigenous Governance in Practice
Indigenous governance and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) offer rich examples of how community control, cultural authority and corporate accountability can be integrated. The Australian Human Rights Commission notes that effective Indigenous governance is central to sustainable development and requires genuine partnership and resourcing (AHRC, 2014).

NACCHO's governance frameworks demonstrate how community control itself can be understood as a standard of good governance, with cultural and corporate dimensions working together (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), 2023). These models offer important insights for thinking about participation infrastructure in First Nations contexts, but also more broadly.

Indigenous Methodologies
Indigenous research methodologies provide distinctive approaches to participation, listening and learning. For example, Dadirri, a practice of deep listening and still awareness described by Ngan'gikurunggkurr Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, has been developed as an Indigenous place-based research methodology that centres relationships, time and cultural context (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022).

Yolgnu "both-ways" or ganma philosophies emphasise that knowledge systems can meet as equal currents under Indigenous control and leadership (Marika et al., 2009; Ober & Bat, 2007). These approaches contextualise, complement and extend the participation and co-design literatures discussed elsewhere in this review, and ground them in First Nations worldviews.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty
Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles - including the CARE Principles (Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, Ethics) and OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) - articulate Indigenous Peoples' rights to govern data about their communities, lands and resources (Carroll et al., 2021; First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). For evaluation and learning, this highlights the importance of Indigenous communities defining what counts as evidence and how it is used - themes the dedicated workstream will be well placed to explore.

Indigenous-led Philanthropy
Indigenous-led funds and movements are contributing to broader conversations about how philanthropy can support self-determination and community wealth. Indigenous fund leaders have called for resources to flow to Indigenous-led institutions, centring reciprocity and mutual investment (Cultural Survival, 2018). The separate Indigenous workstream will provide an opportunity to learn from these approaches and consider their implications for Minderoo Foundation's strategy.

Making Sense of the Evidence

A Sensemaking Framework

The research about 'activating civic and community participation' is deep and wide - spanning academic research, practice learnings, action research and project reports. In the last decade alone, tens of thousands of academic papers related to this topic appear through databases such as Scopus.

To make sense of this density and diversity, we started with dipping into different literature sources , and engaging in a sense-making process to understand and organise the various strands of concepts and theory. This has resulted in the framework depicted in Figure 2.

This framework is not meant to be a definitive picture of the field - rather, a starting point for making sense of what we see as four key entry points into this field: participation, connectedness, equity and resilience. These are by no means strict 'categories' within the literature - they are just pointers to different bodies of literature that have evolved over recent decades - sometime connected to and sometimes completely independently of each other.

The outer layer depicts the various approaches, practices, models and fields that have evolved out of or across these bodies of literature. They are not always clearly linked into the four quadrants, and often span multiple of these. Hence, the quadrants tend to bleed further out from the centre.
The diagram or framework can be seen in two ways:

First, as a way of making sense of the vastness of literature that exists around 'activating civic and community participation'. We have used this perspective to start our literature review and organise both the bodies of literature but also the questions they pose for funders. This view of the framework creates the organising foundation for this chapter.



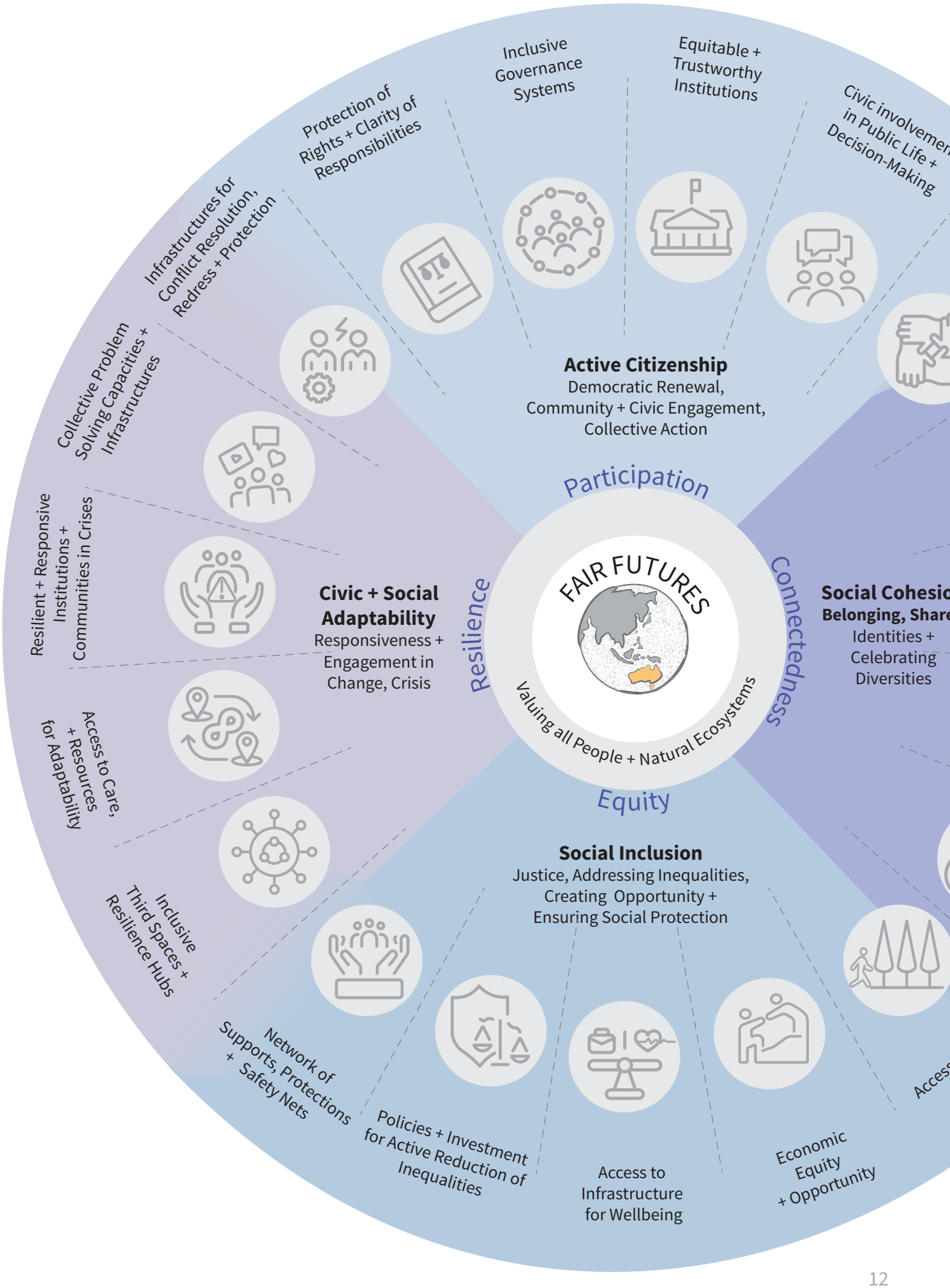
Second, we move to the outer ring, and start to get a sense of some of the core entry points into the practices related to 'activating civic and community participation'. This is not intended to be comprehensive, but points to some of key starting points, activity domains and practice frameworks that are associated with either particular bodies of literature, or which span multiple of these. This outer ring was further explored through the interviews and community research undertaken as part of this program of work (see community research and thematic summary reports).



Civic and community participation have long been considered core to many moral and cultural traditions, and are increasingly seen as a cornerstone of democratic societies, promoting social justice, collective problem-solving, and community well-being.

How participation contributes to fair futures traverses many disciplines and fields of research - with substantial bodies of literature that examine participation and engagement in different contexts and with varied purposes. There are also hundreds of models, frameworks and theories that have been developed to explain how to activate and enhance civic engagement.

The following sections explore each of the quadrants in the sense-making framework which is depicted on the next page in figure 2.


Inclusive Governance Systems
Equitable + Trustworthy Institutions
Civic involvement in Public Life + Decision-Making
Protection of Rights + Clarity of Responsibilities
Infrastructures for Conflict Resolution, Redress + Protection
Collective Problem Solving Capacities + Infrastructures
Active Citizenship
Democratic Renewal, Community + Civic Engagement, Collective Action
Participation
Resilient + Responsive Institutions + Communities in Crises
Civic + Social Adaptability
Responsiveness + Engagement in Change, Crisis
Resilience
FAIR FUTURES
Valuing all People + Natural Ecosystems
Connectedness
Social Cohesio
Belonging, Share
Identities + Celebrating Diversities
Access to Care, + Resources for Adaptability
Inclusive Third Spaces + Resilience Hubs
Equity
Social Inclusion
Justice, Addressing Inequalities, Creating Opportunity + Ensuring Social Protection
Network of Supports, Protections + Safety Nets
Policies + Investment for Active Reduction of Inequalities
Access to Infrastructure for Wellbeing
Economic Equity + Opportunity
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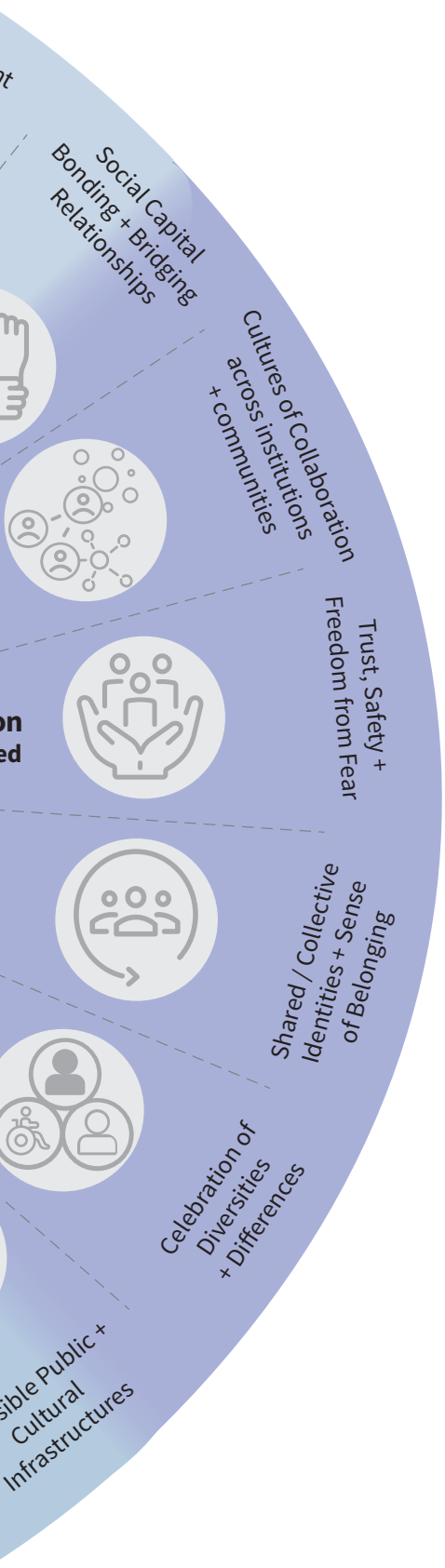


Figure 2: An Organising Framework of Literatures and Practices for Activating Civic and Community Participation

Participation

Active Citizenship
Democratic Renewal, Community + Civic Engagement, Collective Action

At its heart, civic and community participation has been defined in two related but also distinct ways:

1. From **sociological perspectives** civic and community participation relates to how people structure relationships with others, from neighbours to social groups to mutual aid networks. From this perspective participation is "***equated to social interaction***" and seen as a "vital societal force" that can "generate social cohesion and community" (Carpentier et al, 2019); and
2. From a **political studies perspective**, a narrower but perhaps more pervasive definition emerges which has roots in democratic theory, and sees participation as an expression of ***how power is shared.*** This suggests that participation centres on how citizens and communities become active agents in the decision-making processes of government and the market (Correia et al, 2023).

The first of these is more often related to the topic of 'connectedness' explored in the next section. Many have argued though, that the use of 'participation' in the context of futures of democracy is very different - because it centres specifically on the "logics of power in relation to particular decision-making" - which is distinct from looking at interaction more broadly (Carpentier, 2018).

In much of the civic engagement literature, participation is used as a broad term for t*he act of taking part (voting, attending meetings, joining activities)*, whereas engagement often refers to *the quality and depth of that participation - how sustained, dialogical, and consequential it is for decisions*. This aligns with democratic design work that distinguishes mere presence from empowered, deliberative involvement in governance (Ross et al, 2016; Hakeem and Josukutty, 2026).

This focus on power-sharing has long been captured in models such as Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation", which ranges from manipulation and tokenism through consultation to partnership and citizen control. More recent frameworks, such as Fung's "democracy cube" and the IAP2



Participation: Agency in Collective Life

Participation encompasses both the structuring of social interactions in societies; and how power is shared amongst citizens.

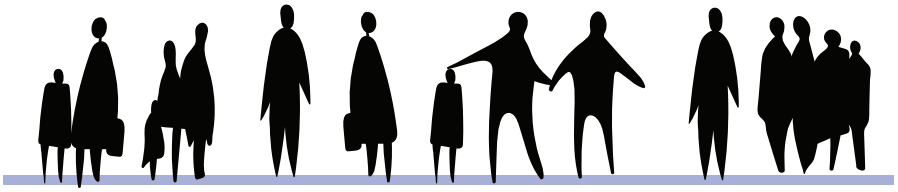
Why this matters:
Participation is both an outcome and a mechanism for social change. For those activating civic life, it is the foundation for legitimacy, accountability, and collective capacity. Without resourcing participation as a process in itself (not just a means to other ends), we risk undermining the very conditions of democracy and equity.

Evidence shows that participation generates cumulative benefits—enhancing wellbeing, strengthening community bonds, improving institutional legitimacy, and building resilience. Thus, participation is not simply a means to other outcomes: it is a catalyst for legitimacy, accountability, and systemic change.

Core Concepts Associated with Participation
- Participation as citizen/community agency in decisions (democratic power-sharing) vs. participation as social interaction — different logics that matter in design.
- Participation (citizen-initiated) vs. engagement (institution-initiated) — locus of control differs.

Main schools / subfields
- Democratic theory & design of participation (power-sharing; participation in governance/market decision-making).
- Civic engagement & institutional synergy (the "triangle of reform": citizens, government, public services).
- Participation risks & ethics (burdens of poorly designed engagement).

Links to other quadrants
- Participation strengthens Connectedness (trust/bonds) and Resilience (collective problem-solving under uncertainty)



Participation
= acts of taking part in civic/community life.

Engagement
= depth/quality indicator, + in many institutional settings engagement is used for formal, organised processes.

Quality of relationships + experience

Is there mutual respect, and space for disagreement without punishment?

Do processes build trust, connection and skills (not only harvest "input")?

Alignment with Context + Stakes

Is the level of participation proportionate to the decision's impact on communities?

Are high-stakes, high-impact decisions matched with higher-influence forms of participation (co-design, co-governance), rather than low-influence consultation?

Capacity + Support

Are communities supported to prepare, deliberate and organise (e.g. time, facilitation, mentoring)?

Are institutional actors trained and supported to host participation well (not just to 'manage' it)?

Depth + Continuity of Involvement

Is participation one-off or ongoing (e.g. standing groups, long-term partnerships)?

Do people move from low-risk, low-influence roles into deeper, shared-authority roles over time?

Inclusivity + Accessibility

Who is in the room—and who is missing (by class, race, age, gender, migration status, disability)?

Are barriers actively removed (stipends, childcare, transport, interpretation, digital access) so that participation is possible and safe for those with least power?

Transparency + Feedback

Are participants given clear information in accessible formats so they can contribute meaningfully?

Do they see how their input influenced decisions ("you said, we did / did not, because…")?

Influence on decisions

How far can participants shape agenda, options and outcomes (not just react)?

Is there a clear "promise" about how input will be used, and evidence that this happens?

Ownership + Initiation

Who defines the problem and designs the process—institutions alone, or with communities?

Are there spaces that are community-created as well as institution-invited (claimed as well as invited)?

Figure 3: Differentiating between 'participation' and 'engagement'

Spectrum of Public Participation (widely adopted by Australian local governments), similarly emphasise who participates, how they communicate, and how strongly their input is linked to decisions (see appendix one for more on these frameworks).

How and why the participation is initiated, its scope and the activities involved are important in understanding potential benefits, but also considerations of purpose and where these benefits flow. For this reason, it can be helpful to differentiate the various terms that get aggregated but actually point to quite different aspects of the process of participation (and therefore differently reflect these two definitions).

It is worth noting that in Australian and international practice, the terms 'public participation' and 'community engagement' are often used interchangeably - IAP2 itself uses both terms synonymously, and some frameworks treat 'engagement' as the broader umbrella encompassing participation, consultation and public relations. In figure 3 we outline the differences between 'participation' and 'engagement' as it is reflected in the ACCP project and more broadly in literature.

Another important distinction is, who initiates and owns the process: many forms of participation are initiated 'from below' by individuals or communities, while many engagement processes are initiated 'from above' by organisations, institutions or authorities. This suggests that the locus of control and the decision to become active (or be activated!) is different. This may, in turn, result in different benefits - but also different challenges.

Participatory governance research further distinguishes between 'invited' spaces - created by institutions to consult or involve citizens - and 'claimed' or 'created' spaces, where communities and movements organise on their own terms and then confront or negotiate with authorities. This matters because the locus of control and agenda-setting differs markedly across these spaces, with implications for who feels ownership and whose knowledge counts in the process. In Figure 4 below we outline some of these differences.

Further, if participation is to actually lead to either cohesion or to democratic society, we need to recognise how it is fundamentally linked to other factors - as Miller et al (2020) highlight:

> *"a flourishing democratic society needs a combination of good government, effective public services and a powerful role for citizens and communities - a positive triangle of reform. These three aspects of society cannot substitute for each other - they are mutually reinforcing".*

This mirrors broader findings on "state–society synergy": civic participation is most impactful where public institutions are capable, responsive, and able to integrate citizen input into how services and policies are designed. In such contexts, participation and good government are mutually reinforcing, rather than substitutes. For funders, this implies that activating participation is not only about community-side capacity, but also about supporting institutions to become better "hosts" for participation - through culture, skills and dedicated infrastructure for listening and co-production.

For this reason, the elements in Figure 4 include as many institutional practices as citizen-focused references.

Too often people and communities are seen as a resource to 'engage' (subjects of the process) rather than active agents of change. In some contexts this has resulted in a degree of resentment and negative impacts rather than benefit:

> *"If done poorly, community engagement may add to the burdens on already challenged communities, and can be detrimental to their health and wellbeing, causing exhaustion, stress, and fatigue, which can, in turn be dispiriting and disempowering (Rong, et al, 2023).*

Research on civic participation consistently finds that activation is shaped by people's resources (time, money, skills), psychological efficacy (belief that participation matters), and social recruitment networks. These factors are unevenly distributed: marginalised groups often face higher practical and emotional costs to participate, and encounter greater risks of tokenism or backlash.

Effective activation therefore requires reducing practical barriers (e.g. stipends, childcare, transport), building skills and confidence, and working through trusted local organisations and connectors.

The Cumulative Benefits of Participation

Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that civic and community participation generates substantial benefits across multiple dimensions and societal levels. From individual health and wellbeing to economic productivity, from community resilience to institutional effectiveness, and from social cohesion to societal equity, the positive impacts of civic engagement are both profound and well-documented (see figure 5).

Importantly, these benefits appear to be mutually reinforcing. Individual wellbeing enhances capacity for civic participation, which strengthens community bonds, which improves institutional effectiveness, which builds societal resilience - creating a virtuous cycle of social improvement. This suggests that investments in promoting civic participation may yield compounding returns across multiple domains that could, together, contribute to fairer futures.

Longitudinal studies of civic life show that participation also builds "habits" of involvement

	Community Participation	Civic Participation	Citizen Participation	Community Engagement	Citizen Engagement
Focus / Definition	Involvement in activities that contribute to local or social wellbeing, address community issues or grow social networks	Involvement in government, public sector + democratic processes in order to influence policy or government decisions	People participating to influence decisions affecting their community (local or identity) - can be voluntary or obligatory	Intentional events or processes or partnerships that involve community members in decision-making or consultation	Involving citizens in a two-way, engagement in feedback about ongoing or episodic decision-making processes
Initiators	Individuals / Groups	Individuals / Communities	Citizens	Organisations / Authorities	Authorities
Typical Scope	Local / community	Local to national	Local to national	Local, sometimes broader	Policy / Project Specific
Typical Activities	Local projects, volunteering, events, social groups	Voting, council meetings, activism	Voting, protests, committess, local boards / advisory	Forums, workshops, collaborative planning	Public consultations, digital feedback platforms, citizen juries

Figure 4: Defining Participation + Engagement: Community, Civic, Citizen and Stakeholder Domains

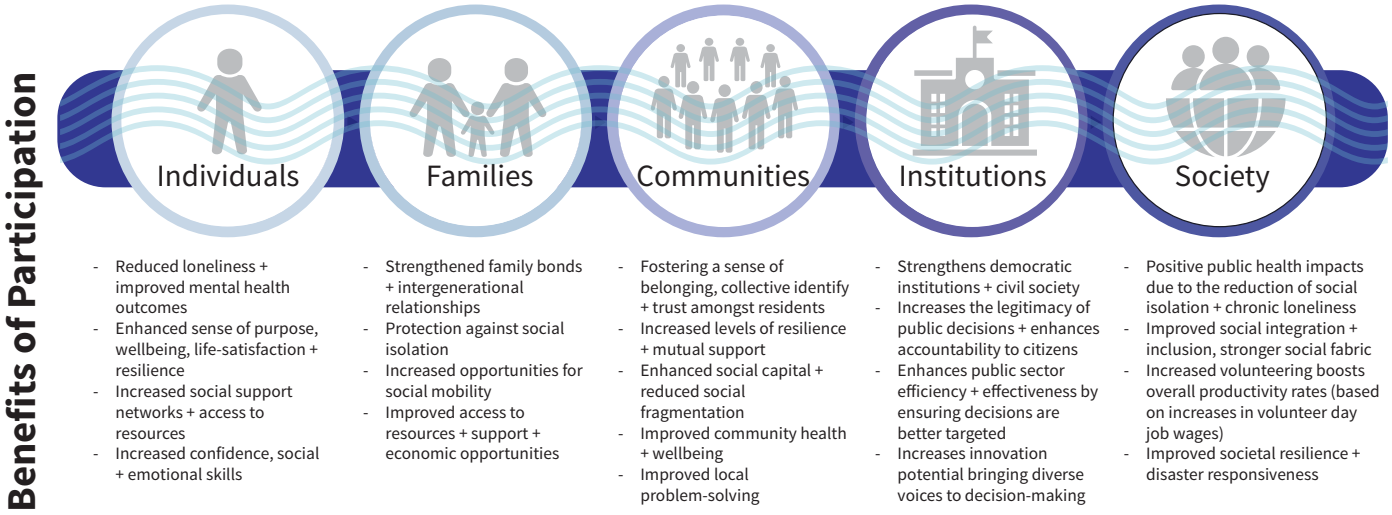


Figure 5: Benefits of Participation: from Individuals to Society

and networks that make future participation easier - creating virtuous circles of skills, confidence and mobilisation. Conversely, where participation is sporadic, burdensome or inconsequential, people can become demobilised and cynical, particularly if they see that their input rarely affects outcomes.

Assumptions + Potentials for Funding Participation

Civic and community participation is rarely the **focus** of funding or investment - rather, it is a means to another outcome (eg. improving outcomes for children and families; regenerating ecosystems etc). What that means, however, is that it is too often assumed that the processes of growing participation, supporting it and sustaining it do not require specific funding. Local government research shows that unless these processes - including stakeholder analysis, power management, appropriate method selection and evaluation - are explicitly resourced and structured (using frameworks like IAP2), they default to minimal, symbolic forms that erode trust. Further, this means that many funders remain unaware that these processes in and of themselves will generate significant and catalytic outcomes (such as self-determination and resilience, for example) that could underpin so many other impacts over time (both outcomes recognised or planned for by funders, but also other emergent outcomes and benefits beyond the interest of funders).

The civic voluntarism literature suggests that unless funders explicitly resource the enabling conditions for participation - time, skills, accessible venues, facilitation - those with more income, education and flexible time will dominate, reinforcing inequalities in voice and influence.

In addition, historically funders have assumed that participation is something that happens only in the projects they fund. Increasingly however, those exploring more transformational shifts have realised that their own processes could also benefit from greater civic and community participation. Related work on "invited" versus "claimed" spaces suggests that funding should not be limited to institutional engagement processes, but also support community-initiated spaces where people set their own agendas and then engage with systems on their own terms. Participatory grantmaking is one way of shifting some control over resources and priorities into such spaces.

Participatory Philanthropy as a Bold Strategy

Participatory philanthropy represents a fundamental shift in how foundations engage with civic and community participation - one that focuses on transforming internal grantmaking processes rather than merely directing resources to external projects. At its core, participatory grantmaking (PGM) is defined as:

> *"ceding decision-making power about funding - including the strategy and criteria behind those decisions -to the very communities that funders aim to serve"* (Gibson, 2018, as cited in Hauger, 2023, p. 635).

This approach is anchored in the disability rights movement's ethos of "Nothing about us, without us," asserting that:

> *"people affected by grants should decide, not those who have the money"* (Love, Samarasan, & Mallillin, 2019, p. 1).

Unlike traditional philanthropy, which positions foundations as external funders of community initiatives, participatory philanthropy requires

foundations to restructure their own internal operations, embedding community voices directly into organisational decision-making structures.

The internal focus of participatory philanthropy fundamentally alters power dynamics within the philanthropic relationship itself. As Evans observes:

> *"Participatory practices also alter the power dynamics in the relationships. If we decide together, then as a funder, I'm not 'doing to' you anymore, I'm 'doing with' you"* (Evans, 2015, p. 6, as cited in Hauger, 2023).

This shift requires foundations to examine and transform their internal cultures, hierarchies, and bureaucratic structures. Gibson's research found that:

> *"embedding a more participatory ethos into any organisation is hard, but it's particularly challenging for institutions with more bureaucratic, siloed structures, (since participatory grantmaking) rests on collaboration, rather than hierarchy and rigid departmental and job responsibility distinctions, and streamlined and transparent processes, rather than closed-off bureaucracies"* (Gibson, 2018, p. 49, as cited in Hauger, 2023).

The innovation here is not what foundations fund externally, but how they operate internally - making PGM a form of "process innovation" that changes:

> *"the ways that products or services are created or delivered within an organisation"* (Hauger, 2023, p. 640).

Participatory philanthropy activates civic participation by creating institutionalized mechanisms for marginalized voices to exercise genuine decision-making authority within foundations themselves. Organisations such as the Disability Rights Fund, FRIDA – The Young Feminist Fund, and the Red Umbrella Fund have developed innovative structures 'centralising marginalised voices in decision-making about grants' (Love et al., 2019).

These models range from:

- representative participation, which includes practitioners, sector experts, or individuals with lived experience into discussions or decisions; to
- rolling collectives where grant recipients are asked onto allocation committees during or after their time as grantees; to
- direct transfers that enable funds to be directly transferred to people with lived experience

(Evans, 2015, pp. 8, 11, 17, as cited in Hauger, 2023).

Rather than treating community participation as an output of funded projects, these approaches treat participation as an integral component of the foundation's own governance and operations. The transformative potential of participatory philanthropy lies in its recognition that democratic engagement must occur within philanthropic institutions themselves, not just through the initiatives they support.

Advocates argue that:

> *"the journey and process - the reckoning with power and powerlessness - is a critical impact in and of itself"* (Love et al., 2019, Abstract).

This means that foundations committed to participatory approaches must be willing to confront uncomfortable questions about their own privilege and the systems that made their existence possible (Hauger, 2023).

The Transforming Evidence Funders Network offers a parallel in the research-funding space, where philanthropies and public funders "adapt their funding practices to better support" engaged and partnered research by involving diverse partners in setting priorities and reviewing proposals (Bednarek et al., 2025, pp. 2–3).

Digital Participation as Core Civic Infrastructure

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an existing shift toward digital forms of civic participation in Australia - online community meetings, virtual council consultations, digital advocacy and platform-mediated mutual aid all became part of everyday civic life (Thomas et al., 2021). Digital connectivity, affordability, skills, accessibility and trust now operate as major determinants of who can participate in civic and community life, compounding existing socio-economic and geographic inequalities (Foster et al., 2023; United Nations, 2021). For Australian funders, digital participation is therefore core civic infrastructure: it shapes whether remote Aboriginal communities can engage in planning, whether low-income households can access online government services, whether young people organise across regions, and whether older people or people with disability can participate in public deliberation (Thomas et al., 2021; Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2023; Park, Freeman, Middleton, Allen, & Eckermann, 2017).

The Digital Divide as a Participation Barrier

Australian evidence echoes international patterns but with distinctive features shaped by geography, settlement and colonial history (Thomas et al., 2021). An ***access divide*** persists between urban, regional and remote communities, with particularly stark gaps in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where infrastructure is limited and services unreliable (Thomas et al., 2021; Park et al., 2017). An ***affordability divide*** means many low-income households ration data, share devices or rely on public Wi-Fi, limiting privacy and continuity for civic participation (Foster et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2021). A ***skills and confidence divide*** affects older adults, people with lower formal education, and some migrant and refugee communities, who may have devices but not the confidence to use government platforms or online consultation tools (Foster et al., 2023). People with disability face additional accessibility barriers, as many civic and government platforms do not fully comply with accessibility standards (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). For some communities with histories of surveillance and punitive policy, a ***trust divide*** further inhibits engagement with digital government and civic technologies (Foster et al., 2023; United Nations, 2021). This has been exacerbated with the exponential growth of AI platforms.

Community-Owned Digital Infrastructure

Alongside efforts to close access gaps, there is growing interest in community-owned digital infrastructure - platform cooperatives, data cooperatives and locally governed networks - as part of wider community wealth building (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023). International work on “democratic digital infrastructure” argues that community and public ownership of digital platforms can embed participation, accountability and local value-creation (The Democracy Collaborative, 2025). In Australia, related practice is emerging in co-operative housing, community energy and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), illustrating how democratic ownership of infrastructure and data can reinforce civic participation (Park et al., 2017; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

Intermediaries and Policy Responses

National and state initiatives, and tools like the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, have begun to map who is excluded and where (Thomas et al., 2021). Community organisations - neighbourhood houses, libraries, ACCOs, migrant resource centres, disability organisations and youth services - act as trusted intermediaries, providing devices, skills support and navigation for digital government and civic processes (SPHERU, 2012; Foster et al., 2023). These organisations are often long-term digital anchors but rely on short-term project funding, limiting their ability to plan and invest in stable digital participation infrastructure (Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2023).

Key Questions for Funders: Digital Participation

For Australian funders, key questions include:

- how to balance investments in basic access (devices, connectivity, skills) with support for community-controlled digital infrastructure such as ACCO-governed platforms or co-operative civic tech (OECD, 2023; The Democracy Collaborative, 2025)
- how to base investments in diverse contexts. Place-based digital participation strategies will need to look different in remote communities, outer-suburban corridors and inner-city public housing estates, and will depend on sustained support for the organisations that act as digital and civic intermediaries (SPHERU, 2012; Foster et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2021).

Bold approaches in the Australian context could include supporting First Nations-led digital justice initiatives, community civic-tech cooperatives, and place-based digital inclusion consortia, thereby treating digital participation as integral to fair futures (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; OECD, 2023; The Democracy Collaborative, 2025).

Digital participation and digital exclusion as core infrastructure

Over the last decade, and especially through the COVID-19 period, digital channels have become embedded in almost every dimension of civic and community life: public consultations, community meetings, mutual aid, campaigning, service access, and everyday neighbourhood coordination now routinely rely on online platforms. Connectivity, devices, data affordability, digital skills, accessibility, and trust in technology have therefore become preconditions for meaningful participation, not optional extras (see the box on the previous page).

The evidence shows that digital exclusion functions as a structural barrier to participation on par with economic inequality: gaps in access, affordability, skills, accessibility, and trust closely track existing socio-economic and geographic divides, and systematically limit who can take part in civic processes, influence decisions, and benefit from digital public services. For funders, this means digital participation must be treated as core civic infrastructure. Strategic investment is needed both in basic inclusion (devices, connectivity, skills and accessibility support, place-based intermediaries), and in community-governed digital infrastructure such as platform cooperatives, ACCO-led tools, and locally controlled data arrangements that embed accountability and local value creation. Without this dual focus, efforts to "activate participation" risk deepening existing inequities by amplifying the voices of those already well connected, while further marginalising communities who are offline, under-connected, or understandably wary of digital systems.

Strategic Questions for Funders

Outcomes or Processes: Research points to some of the challenges of supporting people and communities (particularly people who experience disadvantaged) in participatory processes - with these being described as often invisible, 'complex' and 'resource-intensive' (Janssen and Helbig, 2018). *How could funders ensure that they resource the processes of generating and sustaining engagement and participation rather than force specific pre-determined outcomes from these processes?*

Power Dynamics and Agency: Research highlights the need for funders of civic and community participation to examine how power imbalances can result in inadvertent over-shadowing of community voice and expertise (see for example, Tuan, 2024).
How could funders move towards participatory grantmaking, where the expertise and voices of communities are included and resourced at every stage of the process, from problem identification to evaluation?

Participation Across Systems: Because many funders are increasingly interested in systemic shifts and transformation, there is a need to explore what 'levels' of participation are needed - from the grassroots to the canopy of decision-makers and power holders.
How are funders understanding and engaging with 'participants' at the structural level (such as policy making and commissioning through public monies) at the same time as promoting civic and community participation on the ground?

Connectedness

Social Cohesion
Belonging, Shared Identities
+ Celebrating Diversities

Every culture around the world has shaped practices and thinking around what keeps humans connected with each other and with their environments. These are the questions that continue to occupy those interested in social cohesion:

- what connects us across diversities?
- what creates a sense of belonging? and
- what enables the development of shared identities?

Definitions across History and Cultures
Despite being associated most often with Western thought, the concept of social cohesion actually has deep historical roots that span cultures and centuries of philosophical and sociological thought. Early conceptualisations drew connections between social cohesion and cultural norms, religious beliefs, similar social and economic conditions, and strong moral codes.

These can be seen in the first recorded comprehensive defining of social cohesion that comes from the 14th Century Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun, who spoke of *asabiyyah* (social solidarity) as representing the sense of "unity, group feeling and sense of shared purpose, and social cohesion within the context of tribalism and clannism" (Arrena et al, 2023).

In Western philosophy, sociology and psychology there are extensive literatures focused on social cohesion that also draw on these themes. Perhaps the most notable early thinker about social cohesion was French scholar, Emile Durkheim, who distinguished between two types of social solidarity:

- ***Mechanical solidarity*** -in small-scale, less structurally complex contexts, where social cohesion is based on the relative homogeneity of people and their strong and unifying collective conscience; and
- ***Organic solidarity*** - in industrialised and structurally complex contexts, where people are diverse, with differing beliefs, values and lifestyles, and as a result, where collective conscience is weaker and less uniform. Social cohesion in these contexts has to be created out of a respect for diversity and mutual dependence rather than uniformity (see Schiefer & Noll, 2017).

This distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies and the 'breakdown' of the ties between people (variously linked to industrialisation,



Connectedness: The Social Glue

Connectedness encompasses the bonds that tie individuals, groups, and institutions together across difference.

Why this matters:
Connectedness provides the "social glue" that underpins trust, belonging, and collective identity. Underpinning belonging lies the capacity to collaborate across difference. Without it, participation can fragment into polarisation or exclusion.

For funders and practitioners, investing in connectedness means enabling the infrastructures, narratives, and practices that allow people to bridge divides, build mutual respect, and collaborate across differences.

Core Concepts Associated with Connectedness
- ***Social cohesion*** as the bonds, norms, and processes that enable ***belonging*** across difference (historic roots in Ibn Khaldun; Durkheim's solidarity; contemporary, processual definitions).
- ***Horizontal ties*** (between groups) and ***vertical ties*** (citizen–state relations).

Main schools / subfields
- Classical cohesion & solidarity (Durkheim; Tönnies).
- Pluralist/process views of cohesion (Jenson's focus on mediating conflict over power/resources).
- Policy/economic perspectives on cohesion that foreground inclusion, opportunity, trust (World Bank/OECD tradition).

Links to other quadrants
- ***Connectedness*** underpins ***Resilience*** via social capital and trust during shocks.
- It enables ***Participation*** by cultivating legitimacy and collaborative capacity.

colonisation, urbanisation and migration) is common across many of the early conceptualisations of social cohesion (see for example, Tonnies, Parsons).

Unfortunately this creates an unhelpful positioning of the idea of 'social cohesion' as promoting 'homogeneity' and 'uniformity' (which has been reinforced by some political ideologies in more recent times).

Contemporary definitions of social cohesion emphasise both its nested nature, and the fact that is an ongoing process rather than an end state and therefore that the concept needs active framing in particular contexts. Dimensions of power and inherent tensions around resources are also recognised as key to many definitions of 'cohesion' - as Jensen highlights:

> *"In modern plural, liberal democratic societies, where value conflicts are inherent and social choices are open, social cohesion is sometimes interpreted in terms of society's capacity to mediate conflict over access to power and resources, to accept controversy without trying to shut it down" (Jenson, 1998).*

That said, social cohesion can suffer from definitions that include platitudes and general statements. Many definitions are helpful if we seek to measure 'what is' - but fall short if we are seeking to invest in 'how to' foster more cohesive futures. The definitions below illustrate the commonalities across domains associated with social cohesion.

Researchers at the World Bank emphasise both interpersonal relationships and a citizen-state dynamic, defining social cohesion as:

> *"a sense of shared purpose, trust and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state for a common good".* (Barron et al, 2023)

Drawing from earlier work by Chan et al (2006), the IDOS (Institute of Development and Sustainability) articulates both vertical and horizontal relations as core to understanding social cohesion:

> *"the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state, which hold society together. Social cohesion is characterized by a set of attitudes and manifestations that includes trust, an inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good. It is the glue that holds society together".*

The OECD emphasises the importance of equity, opportunity and inclusion, arguing that a socially cohesive society:

> *"works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility". This definition emphasizes equality of opportunity and inclusion".*

Elements of definitions cited across the literature are represented in figure 6.

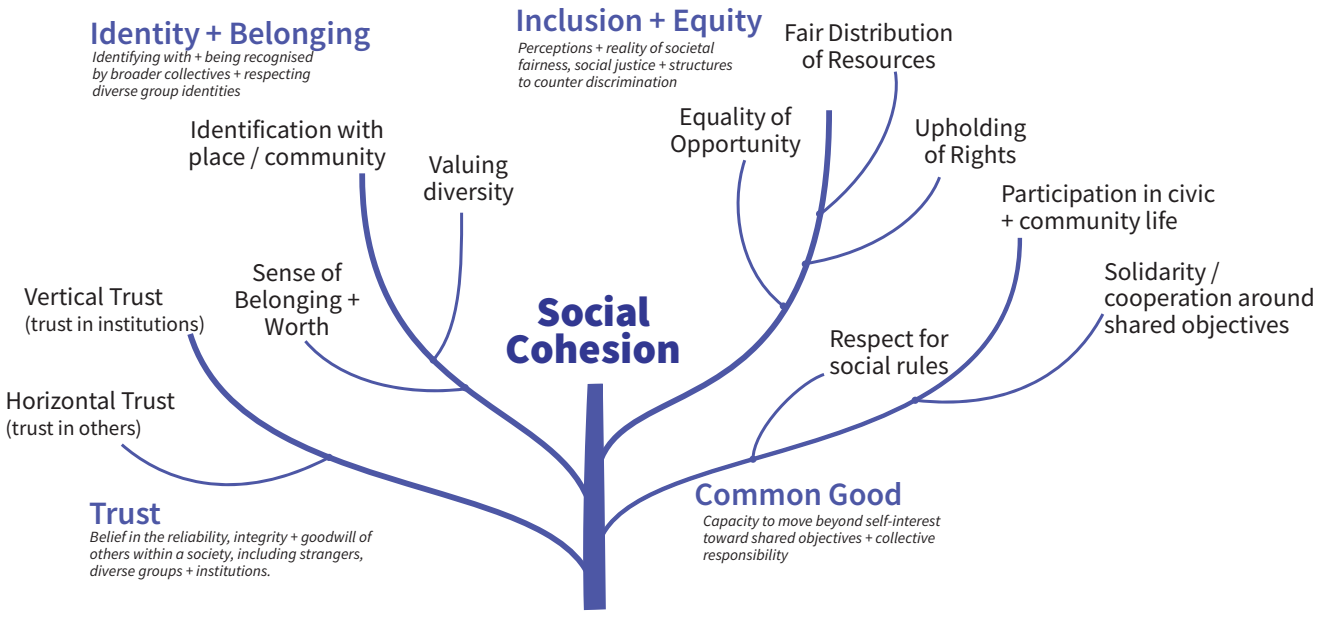


Figure 6: Elements of Social Cohesion From Across Literature

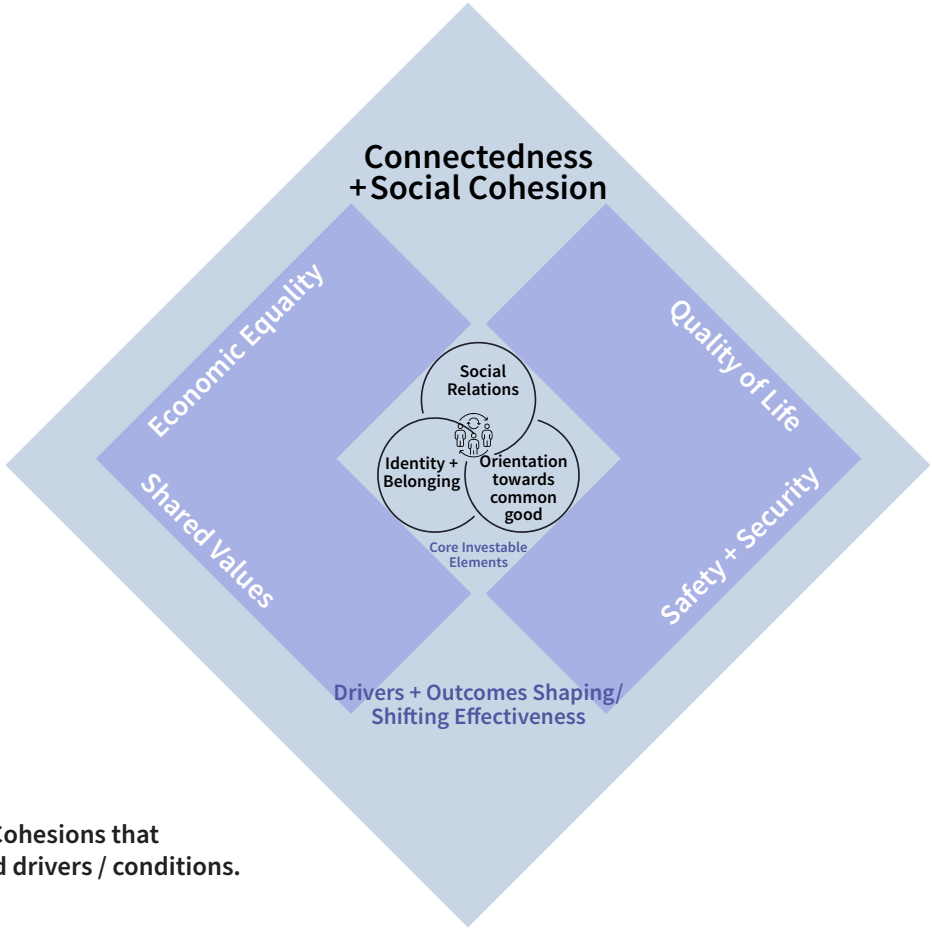


Figure 7: A Working Definition of Social Cohesions that distinguishes between core elements and drivers / conditions.

What Connectedness and Cohesion Actually Comprise: A Working Definition for Funders

Recent scholarship (see for example, Moustakas, 2023), offers funders a clearer conceptual framework by distinguishing the essential core of social cohesion from its antecedents and consequences. Three dimensions form this core:

1. **Social relations** – the quality and strength of networks, trust (both interpersonal and institutional), and acceptance of diversity;
2. **Identification and belonging** – people's felt connection to their community, neighbourhood, or nation and the extent to which they see themselves as valued members
3. **Orientation towards the common good** – willingness to participate, help others, volunteer, and respect social norms that benefit the collective

This narrower definition treats factors like economic equality, shared values, and quality of life as important drivers or outcomes of connectedness, rather than part of connectedness itself. For funders, this distinction matters: they can invest directly in strengthening relationships, belonging, and civic participation, while recognising that structural inequality and poverty will shape how effective those investments can be (see figure 7).

What Works: Evidence-Based Strategies to Strengthen Connectedness

A 2023 systematic review of 73 high-quality intervention studies identifies the most effective approaches to building social cohesion (Orazani et al, 2023). For funders seeking evidence-based strategies, the following have demonstrated consistent impact:

1. Structured intergroup contact and collaboration

Bringing diverse people together under conditions of equal status, shared goals, and institutional support reliably improves trust, reduces prejudice, and builds bridging ties (Orazani et al, 2023; Baylis et al, 2019). Effective formats include:

- Structured dialogue and exchange programmes (especially in schools and youth settings)
- Joint community projects (neighbourhood gardens, cultural festivals, repair cafés, sharing events)
- Cooperative activities in sport, arts, and leisure

With all these formats, it should be noted that evidence suggests that contact works best when it is structured and sustained, not one-off 'diversity days'. Further, the evidence points to better outcomes in formats with clear facilitation, multiple sessions, and follow-up activities (see Baylis et al, 2019).

2. Awareness-raising and counter-stereotyping initiatives
Educational programmes that explicitly address misinformation, challenge stereotypes, and humanise 'others' are particularly effective in school and workplace settings. These work by reducing intergroup anxiety and perceived threat (Baylis et al, 2019).

3. Co-designed, bottom-up participation
Interventions where community members themselves identify priorities, co-design solutions, and have genuine ownership show stronger engagement and sustainability. This approach also builds vertical trust (in institutions) because people feel heard and valued. Examples include:

- Participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies
- Community-led service provision (childcare co-ops, time banks, mutual aid networks)
- Youth councils and neighbourhood planning forums(Orazani et al, 2023).

The mechanism that operates in all these examples centres on people participating in designing initiatives, not just receiving them, through which they develop stronger identification with the community and greater commitment to its success.

4. Third-sector and social economy infrastructure
Supporting organisations that facilitate reciprocity, sharing, and mutual aid can strengthen social ties and solidarity (Orazani et al, 2023). Examples include:

- Community cooperatives and social enterprises
- Volunteering infrastructure and coordination bodies
- Sharing platforms and resource libraries

In relation to these examples, an important caveat is that these initiatives can inadvertently reproduce inequality if they primarily serve already-connected, resourced populations. So, in supporting such initiatives, funders should ask:

- Who is not showing up?
- Whose unpaid labour is being relied on?
- Are material as well as social benefits fairly distributed?

5. Leadership development for inclusive norms
A striking finding from the intervention literature is the near-absence of initiatives that work through leadership and shared identity, despite strong research grounds for their effectiveness. Social identity research suggests that leaders who articulate inclusive norms ('we value all voices here', 'diversity is our strength') and model cross-group collaboration can contribute to shifting community-wide attitudes and behaviour (see Baylis et al, 2019). Investing in training community, civic, and organisational leaders to craft and communicate inclusive identities, facilitate difficult conversations across difference, and model cooperative rather than competitive intergroup relations has potential to contribute significantly to increasing cohesion in local contexts.

Realism About Measurement and Context
Evidence from around the world suggests that funders should approach social cohesion measurement with appropriate caution. A comprehensive UK rapid review found that across 23 data sources, over 300 different measurement items were used to capture 23 distinct constructs - with no single source covering all of them and inconsistent wording, formats and levels of locality across surveys.

Most variation in cohesion scores exists between individuals, not places, and results are highly sensitive to which contextual unit (street, suburb, city, region) is chosen (Abrams et al, 2023). What this means for funders includes the following:

- **Exercise caution around single measures** : It is prudent to exercise a degree of scepticism of measurement approaches that promise a single 'cohesion score'. Existing measures have not been validated to produce comparable, reliable indices at neighbourhood or city level; different surveys define 'local area' differently, and even small changes in question wording can produce sizeable differences in responses.
- **Support mixed-methods evaluation:** Quantitative surveys should be combined with qualitative, ethnographic and other sources to capture how relationships and participation are shifting, not just static snapshots. A layered approach- measuring connectedness and cohesion more frequently and fluidly at local levels, with periodic alignment to regional or national timetables - is recommended.
- **Match the intervention to a clear context:** Are you trying to build cohesion in a school, a workplace, a suburb, or across a city? The appropriate strategies and measures differ. Researchers caution that the greatest value in measuring cohesion is not the potential to compare or rank different areas, but to identify the particular challenges and opportunities relevant for different places and levels of aggregation Oberndorfer et al, 2022).
- **Distinguishing within-group and between-group ties**: A recent UNECE Task Team report highlights a critical gap in that most cohesion measurement focuses on within-group ties (connections with family, friends, neighbours, sense of belonging), while far fewer questions assess between-group ties - how people relate to those in other networks, groups or communities. Yet it is

precisely these bridging ties that distinguish social cohesion from narrower concepts like social connectedness or social inclusion (MacIsaac et al, 2024).

Navigating Complexities when Funding Connectedness and Cohesion

The challenge for funders and philanthropists in this context is to decide where to invest if they are seeking to amplify the enablers of or counter the threats to social cohesion. The complexities of these decisions cannot be underestimated as it requires a navigation of many factors, tensions and layers - an a making visible of different worldviews - as Gluckman (et al; 2023) highlight:

> *"Complex interactions involving many factors underpin or can undermine trust in government, within communities, and between individuals. ... A society's resilience to stresses and rapid changes such as those wrought by the climate crisis, technological developments, natural disasters, and pandemics, is not simply a function of the effectiveness of local and central governance. It is also a matter of the psychological, social, and economic well-being of the community; and individual societal members' sense of agency, their ability to respect and work with each other and the degree of trust they have in institutions – informal, formal and societal – that connect and support citizens. When trust is undermined, individual's anxiety, anger and frustration are elevated, and social cohesion is threatened".*

Internationally philanthropists have responded variously:

- Some have asked how they could best leverage their resources - for example, the Council of Foundations has created a variety of resources around the question: ***In a time of polarization and mistrust, how can philanthropy bridge across difference?*** (see: https://shorturl.at/G7heA);
- Others have challenged themselves to ask hard questions internally (see for example: SiX in Canada who ask questions such as ***"What are practical methods to promote social cohesion? How is this reflected in grant making practices and portfolio? What's the soft power of foundations and how is this being exercised?"*** *(*see https://shorturl.at/rgm1Z)

From a review of the literature around social cohesion both in Australia and internationally some key questions arise that could help shape strategy and investment related to social cohesion. These are outlined in the box below.

Strategic Questions for Funders

Scale and Approach: Research suggests different approaches may be needed at different scales. *Should interventions focus on building cohesion at community, regional, or national levels?*

Economic Foundations: Given that "economic opportunity should be thought of as the bedrock upon which a civic infrastructure is built" (Ibison & Hunter, 2026)):
How should funders balance a direct focus on social cohesion with a broader focus on underpinning economic opportunity initiatives?

Avoiding Unintended Consequences: Because social cohesion involves complex ecosystems of action: *How can funders minimise the potential for inadvertently creating increased competition between entities or groups within communities and/ or replicate inequity or inter-group tensions?*

Field Building vs. Direct Programming: Because programs in single organisations have relatively limited influencing power on complex dynamics such as social cohesion: *Would resources be better allocated to building an ecosystem of organisations working on cohesion or funding singular initiatives or direct programming?*

Operational Questions for Assessing Proposals

- **Outcomes**: What specific changes in social relations (especially bridging across differences), belonging, and acting for the common good does the initiative aim to produce?
- **Theory of change**: Is there a clear, evidence-informed pathway from activities to those outcomes, and does it acknowledge structural drivers like inequality and exclusion?
- **Participation and co-design:** Have those most affected by disconnection helped set priorities and design the work, and are there roles for participants beyond simply turning up?
- **Equity and unintended effects:** Who benefits, who carries the work, and how will the project avoid reinforcing existing hierarchies, competition between groups, or tokenistic inclusion?
- **Scale, context and measurement:** Is the target 'community' defined by participants within the context and are there light-touch ways to track changes in connectedness at that level (beyond counting attendance)?

Investing in Social Cohesion: Responding to Rising Hate and Division in Australia

Australia is experiencing a sharp rise in antisemitic, Islamophobic and racist incidents, including arson attacks, threats and violent assaults, particularly since late 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2025; Human Rights Law Centre, 2025). National leaders have acknowledged that Jewish, Muslim, Arab and Palestinian communities are feeling less safe and that existing responses are insufficient (Prime Minister of Australia, 2025). This escalation reflects deeper fractures in Australia's social fabric and presents an urgent challenge for funders committed to civic participation and fair futures (Orazani, Chin, Leidner, & Reynolds, 2023).

Evidence on What Works

Intergroup contact theory shows that sustained, structured contact between groups - under conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support - can significantly reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). A recent review of interventions to strengthen social cohesion in Australia finds that the most effective approaches are those that:

- counter stereotypes and misinformation;
- create opportunities for positive contact and cooperative problem-solving; and
- build bridging social capital across lines of difference (Orazani et al., 2023; Putnam, 2000).

International evidence also indicates that well-designed social protection and community programs can support cohesion by reducing hardship, building trust in institutions and providing shared spaces for diverse groups to interact (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021).

Bold, Evidence-Informed Roles for Funders

1. **Long-term place-based bridging programs:** Fund 5–10 year initiatives in suburbs and regions experiencing high levels of antisemitic, Islamophobic or racist incidents. These should create structured opportunities for Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Palestinian and other communities to work together on shared projects - youth arts, local services, climate resilience, community safety - designed explicitly around Allport's conditions for effective contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Funding should support local co-governance and monitoring of outcomes on trust, attitudes and participation (Orazani et al., 2023).
2. **Core support for community-controlled safety and solidarity infrastructure**: Provide flexible, multi-year funding to Jewish, Muslim, Arab and Palestinian community organisations and anti-racism groups to strengthen community-controlled infrastructure: incident reporting and monitoring, legal assistance, trauma-informed counselling, community safety planning, and shared spaces for reflection and solidarity (Human Rights Law Centre, 2025). Supporting these organisations recognises that communities themselves are central actors in sustaining social cohesion and responding to harm (Orazani et al., 2023).
3. **Counter-narrative and media literacy at scale:** Invest in coordinated counter-narrative efforts that challenge dehumanising rhetoric and conspiracy theories, and in media-literacy programs that equip people - especially young people - to recognise and resist online hate and disinformation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025; Orazani et al., 2023). This can include independent journalism, storytelling and arts that centre Jewish, Muslim, Arab and Palestinian voices, combined with school- and community-based digital literacy programs (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).
4. **Youth-led dialogue and leadership:** Support youth-led programs that bring together young people from communities currently being set against one another to build relationships, co-design local projects and develop shared leadership skills (Australian Parliament, 2025). Evidence suggests early, repeated contact in structured settings is particularly powerful in reducing long-term prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Putnam, 2000).
5. **Leveraging philanthropic voice and practice:** Use philanthropic influence to support stronger institutional responses to hate - effective enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, transparent reporting systems, and accountability for platforms that host hate speech (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025; Human Rights Law Centre, 2025). At the same time, funders can model the principles of social cohesion by involving affected communities directly in strategy and grant decisions, aligning funding practices with the shared-power ethos that underpins successful cohesion interventions (Orazani et al., 2023; Putnam, 2000).

Together, these roles position philanthropy not as a short-term crisis responder but as an investor in the relationships, institutions and infrastructures that allow diverse communities in Australia to live together with dignity, safety and mutual respect (DFAT, 2021; Orazani et al., 2023).

Equity

Social Inclusion

Justice, Addressing Inequalities, Creating Opportunity + Ensuring Social Protection

Research from across the world increasingly demonstrates that equity, social and economic justice, social inclusion, and civic participation, form a mutually reinforcing framework for the activation of civic and community participation (Schroder & Neumayr, 2023; Baxter et al, 2022; Szreter, 2024). **Participation serves as both a *pathway* towards greater equity and a *mechanism* for addressing systemic inequalities. Similarly, social inclusion functions as both a *prerequisite for* and an *outcome of* equitable participation** (see figure 8).

Socio-economic inequality reduces civic and community participation for both people and places and this reduction holds over time. A systematic review of 70 studies exploring this link found that higher inequality is most often negatively related to civic engagement (Schroder & Neumayr, 2023). This pattern has implications for the long-term sustainability of civil society institutions and democratic participation in places where there are higher levels of inequality - and has profound implications for funders seeking to undertake place-based work in communities experiencing multiple types of disadvantage.

Economic Stability and Asset Ownership

Conversely, economic stability is recognised as a foundational element that enables meaningful participation. Individuals and communities with greater economic stability (including housing stability) have more capacity to participate in civic and community activities - and this in turn increases opportunities, and can influence decisions in structures and systems that effect their lives (see Desmond, 2017; Shin & Yang, 2022).

However, equity extends beyond income stability to encompass who owns and controls assets and how economic value is generated and retained in communities. While economic security enables participation, community ownership of productive assets - through cooperatives, community land trusts, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, or social enterprises - creates pathways for wealth retention, democratic governance, and intergenerational equity that income support alone cannot achieve. This distinction is critical: asset ownership transforms communities from recipients of external investment to owners of their economic futures, fundamentally shifting power dynamics and creating ongoing returns rather than dependency on short-term grants or external capital.



Equity: Shaping Fair Participation

Equity is not just about ensuring access to participatory processes but addressing the systemic inequities that shape them.

Why this matters:

For those seeking to activate participation, centring equity means addressing both immediate barriers and deeper systemic inequalities, shifting power as well as outcomes.

Evidence suggests that equity in participation matters because when those most affected by decisions are meaningfully included, policies and investments are more just, effective, and responsive to real community needs. Inequitable engagement, by contrast, reinforces existing power imbalances and can deepen exclusion, mistrust, and harmful outcomes for already marginalised groups.

Core Concepts Associated with Equity

- Inequality depresses civic/community participation over time; stability (e.g., housing) enables it.
- Informal volunteering/mutual aid often high in disadvantaged places (important for funders to recognise and support).

Main schools / subfields

- Inequality → participation link (systematic review evidence on socio-economic inequality &civic engagement).
- Informal participation & community-led problem-solving (beyond formal volunteering; First Nations, migrant, persistently disadvantaged communities).
- Critical reflections on participatory practice (risks of elite capture; need to avoid naïve/technical fixes).

Links to other quadrants

- Equity is precondition and outcome of Participation; it deepens Connectedness (inclusive identity) and is foundational for Resilience (fair access during shocks).

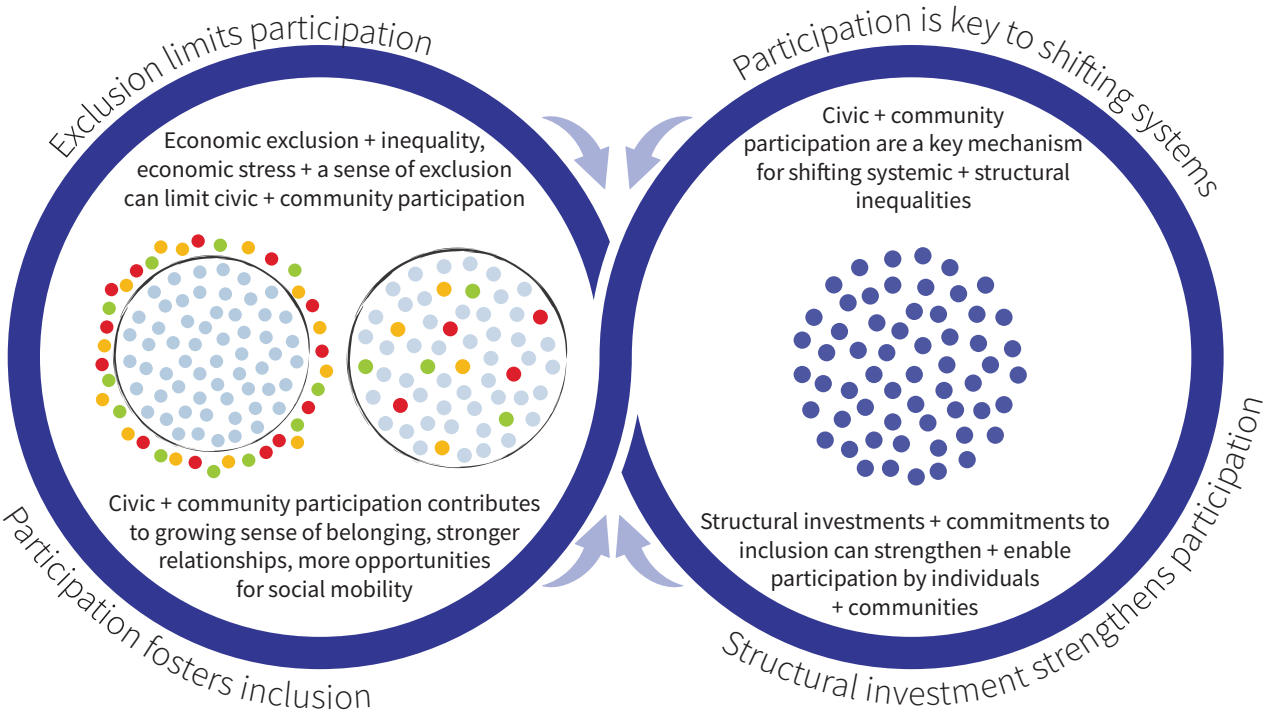


Figure 8: The interconnection between strengthening participation and shifting systems

Informal Participation and Community-Led Responses

Interestingly there is also contradictory evidence that socio-economic inequality can lead to an increase in certain kinds of community participation (see for example, John et al, 2011). From this perspective it is evident that in places where socio-economic disadvantage is persistent, forms of **informal volunteering, helping and mutual aid** can be high even if formal volunteering or other forms of civic participation may be judged to be low (Hendriks et al, 2023). These informal activities are an often invisible to funders but, according to some researchers, may actually have much more potential for increasing participation in communities experiencing disadvantage:

> *"...giving one's time outside of the formally organised structures of volunteer-involving organisations is vital in the day-to-day operation of social life, especially in poorer communities, where close family and mutual volunteering are strong neighborhood characteristics helping people cope with poverty, unemployment and wider processes of social exclusion. These benefits are allied with ones that show informal volunteering to have much more significant outcomes for increasing participation rates for people at risk of social exclusion" (Dean, 2022).*

In funding and promoting the activation of civic and community participation it is important, then, to **start with what already exists in terms of informal and voluntary support infrastructure**, and:

> *"learn from informal volunteering's importance in communities in which high levels of formal voluntering are not recorded" (Dean, 2022).*

Communities where this could be particularly important include First Nations communities; migrant and humanitarian settler communities; and communities who have experienced persistent inequities and disadvantages. Importantly, in these contexts, "care should be taken not to stifle the informality, responsiveness, creativity and agency" of the groups who are effectively engaging in 'community-led' responses to address their needs (Hendriks et al, 2023).

Community Wealth Building and Asset-Based Equity

This asset-based orientation- recognising the social and cultural wealth embodied in informal support systems - connects to broader frameworks for understanding equity through community wealth building (Lacey-Barnacle et al, 2023). Community wealth building approaches reframe communities not as sites of deficit or service delivery, but as holders of assets- material, social, cultural, political - that can be strengthened, redistributed and governed to advance collective wellbeing and self-determination (Guinan and O'Neill, 2019; Lacey-Barnalce and Boucher, 2025) (see the large blue box on page 30 for further discussion on Community Wealth Building).

The everyday practices of care, reciprocity and shared labour that sustain families and neighbourhoods

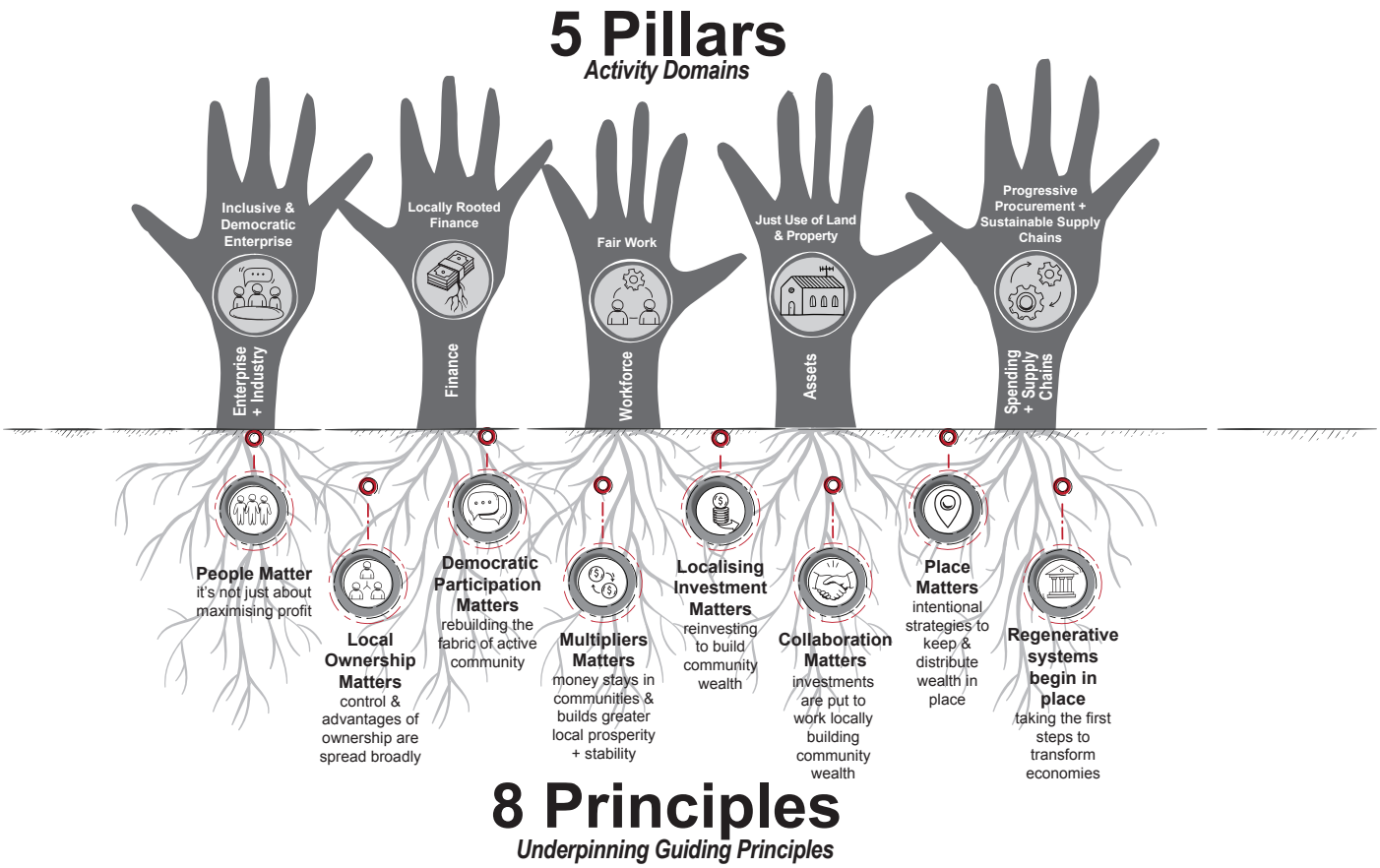


Figure 9: The five pillars and eight principles of community wealth building approaches

are forms of social and cultural wealth that formal economic accounts rarely recognise (Saleheen and Barela, 2025; Lumpkin and Bacq, 2019). In First Nations communities, migrant and humanitarian settler communities, and other groups facing longstanding structural inequities, these forms of wealth often emerge from collective identities, kinship systems, language, and relationships to Country or place (Lumpkin and Bacq, 2019). Activating participation in these contexts means supporting the infrastructures, organisations and assets that communities themselves identify as critical- not imposing external models or extracting local knowledge without accompanying shifts in ownership or control (Saleheen and Barela, 2025; Redwood, 2023).

Community wealth building strategies that support equity include community ownership models (co-operatives, community land trusts, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, migrant-led associations), local and social procurement by anchor institutions (councils, hospitals, universities), investment in community-controlled infrastructure (cultural centres, hubs, enterprises), and governance arrangements that embed community decision-making power (Guinan & O'Neill, 2019; Lacey-Barnacle & Boucher, 2025) (see figure 9).

International evidence from models such as Preston in the UK and Cleveland in the US demonstrates that when anchor institutions redirect procurement spending locally, measurable improvements in employment for people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, and those with lower education levels can result (Guinan & O'Neill, 2019; Rose et al., 2023). When participation is linked to the development and control of assets in this way, it is more likely to produce durable shifts in power and opportunity, rather than short-term projects that leave underlying inequities unchanged (Lumpkin & Bacq, 2019; Lacey-Barnacle, et al, 2023).

For funders, this perspective implies moving beyond resourcing discrete engagement activities to examining how funding, investment and partnership practices can build community wealth and asset bases over time (Lacey-Barnacle, et al, 2023). This includes longer-term flexible funding for community-owned organisations, capital for asset acquisition, support for governance and leadership capacity, and procurement and investment decisions that redirect resource flows towards community-defined priorities (Lumpkin and Bacq, 2019). It also requires recognising and learning from the informal, community-controlled infrastructures that already exist, rather than inadvertently undermining them through overly prescriptive funding models that prioritise formal accountability over community agency (Redwood, 2023; Saleheen & Barela, 2025)

Compounding, Intersecting + Reinforcing Inequities

Access to civic resources and opportunities to participate are not uniform, even within marginalised communities and groups. Intersecting and reinforcing inequities present significant barriers to civic and community participation, often leading to lower engagement and perpetuating cycles of exclusion (See for example, Saleheen and Barela, 2025; Stopka et al., 2022).

These intersecting inequities operate across multiple dimensions: economic disadvantage compounds with linguistic exclusion, disability access barriers, housing insecurity, and racialised exclusion from asset ownership and decision-making power (Saleheen and Barela, 2025; Stopka et al., 2022).

Critically, the extraction of wealth from disadvantaged communities - through external ownership of local businesses, property speculation, and procurement that flows resources out rather than circulating them locally - perpetuates multiple forms of exclusion simultaneously (Lacey-Barnacle and Boucher, 2025). Communities experiencing persistent disadvantage often face not only income poverty but also asset poverty: lack of community-controlled land, infrastructure, enterprises, and capital that could generate ongoing returns and enable collective self-determination (Lumpkin and Bacq, 2019; Lacey-Barnacle et al, 2023).

However, research consistently finds that when excluded communities are supported to participate - particularly through inclusive, co-created, resourced and sustained engagement - such participation can become a powerful tool for addressing inequities, fostering resilience, and driving systemic change (see for example - Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Stopka et al, 2022). What is clear from this research, however, is that the focus cannot only be on fostering participation in communities - it has to engage those with power, resources and influence on addressing structural inequities (Aye, 2019). Participation without structural shifts risks merely reinforcing inequities over time (Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Aye, 2019) .

Inclusion + Equity in Participation

Over the past two decades the rise of more equitable engagement and participation processes has led to a number of methodologies and approaches gaining traction. Approaches such as co-design, the valuing lived experience as expertise, and community-led approaches, have made substantial contributions to making civic and community participation more inclusive and equitable (see for example, Blomkamp, 2018; Attygalle, 2020). These approaches have democratised knowledge production, established frameworks for equity-centered design, and generated documented improvements in policy and service outcomes (Blomkamp, 2018). Their emphasis on authentic relationship-building and power-sharing represents a genuine paradigm shift from traditional expert-driven approaches.

However, the increasingly ubiquitous inclusion of these processes has led to a number of critiques by both those engaged in communities, and by practitioners and researchers. The critiques highlight significant implementation and structural challenges that cannot be ignored (Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Redwood, 2023) - including:

- a persistence of elite capture whereby non-community-based professionals or more advantaged locals occupy key leadership positions within ‘community-led’ processes or are engaged in the co-design processes;
- resource constraints that limit genuine co-design and community control;
- the complexity of managing competing interests in contexts where there are complex and divergent equity issues which can result in significant power dynamics and conflict;
- an inability from a community-based or lived experience initiative to tackle some of the systemic and structural barriers that result in persistence of socio-economic inequities at the local level.

These critiques point to two key reflections that need to be grappled with if equity is to be centred in the activation of civic and community participation:

1. **Context is everything** when it comes to fostering participation- and this means that all approaches to centre equity require nuanced contextual adaptation rather than being seen as technical fixes or as universally applicable approaches. Learning from international experiences with approaches such as community-led development and participatory practices over many years (where many initiatives have not resulted in the promised changes) should alert us to applying approaches or models uncritically, as Mansuri and Rao (2004) argued almost two decades ago:
   "naïve application of complex contextual concepts like "participation", is endemic among project implementers and contributes to poor design and implementation" (p. 1).

2. **Change is always multi-dimensional** - and so, any change needs to ensure that there is 'participation' that spans not only 'community level' but also engages those who hold structural decision-making power in exploring their own organisational contexts and changes they might steward to support greater equity, aligned with community priorities. Structural change requires both community voice but also other tools and levers, as Aye (2019) highlights:
   "those with the most power tend to be furthest away from the issue, and those closest to the issue tend to have a least power"

Strategic Questions for Funders

Breaking Cycles: Research suggests that those most affected by public and market decisions have the least capacity to influence them, perpetuating systemic exclusion. *How could funders develop grant-making and investment that confront both immediate barriers to participation and the structural inequalities that sustain them, and the reciprocal links between health, wealth and civic power in the places where they work?*

Asset-Building Beyond Service Delivery: Research suggests that grant dependency can perpetuate rather than resolve structural disadvantage. *How could funders shift from short-term service grants toward building community-controlled assets that generate ongoing returns, employment, and wealth retention in disadvantaged communities?*

Intersecting or Compounding Inequities: Research suggests that complex inequities are usually approached in relatively simplistic ways, with funding focused either on singular issues or narrowed understandings. *How could funding criteria account for intersecting structural barriers - such as linguistic exclusion or disability access and economic asset poverty - that compound economic inequities?*

Anchor Institution Leverage*: How could funders catalyse anchor institutions (councils, hospitals, universities) to redirect procurement spending toward local enterprises, cooperatives, and disadvantaged communities, creating systemic economic pathways rather than individual opportunities?*

Just Transitions and Energy Poverty: *How might funders support anchor institutions and community organisations to co-design local energy and climate initiatives that prioritise those most vulnerable to energy poverty, embed community ownership of green assets, and avoid reproducing existing inequities?*

Navigating Tensions: Research suggests that community participation can be emotionally traumatic when groups with differing perspectives, histories and goals are involved. *How might funders invest in participatory processes that grow respectful and courageous conversations across groups and support healing and conciliation.*

Community Wealth Building in an Era of Unprecedented Wealth Transfer

Over the next two decades, Australia will see an unprecedented intergenerational wealth transfer of an estimated $3.5–$5.4 trillion, largely via housing and superannuation (Productivity Commission, 2021; Morningstar, 2025). Annual inheritances, currently around $120 billion, are projected to approach $500 billion within 25 years (CPA Australia, 2023). These transfers are highly unequal: families with significant assets can provide large gifts or loan guarantees for home purchase, while families without wealth cannot, entrenching divides in housing security, education and opportunity (Manly Financial Services, 2025; CPA Australia, 2023). Rising property and asset prices have already pushed wealth inequality to twenty-year highs, with asset growth far outpacing wages and inflation (Morningstar, 2025; University of Sydney, 2024).

Wealth shapes security, health, educational attainment, and the ability to weather shocks and influence institutions (Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Killewald, Pfeffer, & Schachner, 2017). When wealth is included in measures of wellbeing, disparities between groups become much larger than income measures suggest, and patterns of asset ownership strongly predict intergenerational advantage (Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Killewald et al., 2017). Many forms of wealth, especially owner-occupied housing, provide household security but not meaningful control over investment or employment decisions, leaving real economic power concentrated in a relatively small set of actors (Atkinson, 2015). Without deliberate intervention, the coming wealth transfer will therefore amplify existing inequalities in both wellbeing and civic influence.

Community Wealth Building as an Equity Lens

Given that the preceding section has already defined community wealth building (CWB) in depth, here it is enough to emphasise its equity contribution. CWB focuses on who owns and controls productive assets, and whether the returns from those assets circulate locally or are extracted. By expanding democratic ownership -through worker cooperatives, community land trusts, community development financial institutions and community-controlled enterprises - CWB creates shared, intergenerational assets in communities that are currently asset-poor. This shifts the emphasis from temporary program funding to building balance-sheet strength for communities themselves.

Bold Roles for Funders in the Wealth Transfer Moment

- **Treat foundations as anchor institutions with an 'asset justice' mission:** Foundations can adopt an explicit anchor mission for equity through:
    - Investment: Commit a share of any corpus to impact investments in community finance, cooperative enterprises and affordable housing vehicles, not only listed markets (Community-Wealth.org, 2019).
    - Real estate: Use property holdings to support options for long-term community ownership (Atkinson, 2015).
    - Governance: Include community representatives in investment and strategy decisions, aligning asset management with equity goals (University of Sydney, 2024).
- **Multi-generational, place-based wealth-building compacts:** Create 10–20 year compacts in selected communities - particularly those locked out of the housing market or facing historic dispossession - where funders, local government, anchor institutions and community organisations commit to a shared wealth-building agenda. Compacts could synchronise: acquisition of land and premises into community ownership, development of cooperative and social enterprises, local procurement strategies, and financial capability building, with clear metrics on asset growth, household security and civic participation (Productivity Commission, 2021; Community-Wealth.org, 2019). Governance should be community-led to ensure strategies reflect local priorities and intergenerational aspirations.
- **Back structural reform and public narrative change on wealth**: Alongside direct investment, funders can support research, advocacy and public storytelling that make asset inequality visible and build support for reforms such as more progressive inheritance and wealth taxation, support for employee ownership, and housing policies that enable community land trusts and shared equity models (Atkinson, 2015; Productivity Commission, 2021).

The coming intergenerational wealth transfer will either lock in a new era of asset-driven inequality or become a lever for building shared, democratic forms of wealth that underpin more equal wellbeing and participation. Community wealth building provides a practical, evidence-informed lens for funders to help ensure that at least some of this historic transfer is converted into durable, community-owned infrastructure for fair futures (Community-Wealth.org, 2019; University of Sydney, 2024).

Resilience

Civic + Community Adapability
Responsiveness + Engagement in Change + Crisis

Tracing the history of 'resilience' as it relates to civic and community participation is a story of conceptual evolution and interdisciplinary cross-pollination. Deriving from the Latin 'resilire', meaning 'to leap' or 'bounce back', the concept of resilience was originally related to physical action. From the 17th Century it started to be applied to physics (strength of materials), ecology (ecosystems recovering from disturbances) and psychology (individual capacities to recover from adversity) (Graveline and Germain, 2022).

However in the 20th Century, resilience shifted into the realms of risk management and disaster recovery, where it started to be understood as the ability to resist, cope with and recover quickly from hazards (Graveline and Germain, 2022). The initial reactive understandings of resilience gradually shifted to more proactive approaches - emphasising prevention, preparedness and eventually adaptive and transformative capacities.

Despite the dominance of 'management', 'planning' and 'risk assessments' in the early research, the importance of civic and community participation grew out of practice and analysis of local responses to shocks (disasters, but also economic restructuring) where local actors were key to both responses and to recovery and rebuilding.

'Community resilience' is now recognised as a critical field of practice that looks at how people and places are preparing, responding and recovering from significant disasters and other shocks (war, economic restructuring etc). Most definitions of community resilience are framed around how people respond to uncertainty - resilience from this perspective being about the:

> *"existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise." (Magis, 2010)*



Resilience: Adapting + Transforming

Resilience in this context is about how communities build the capacity to withstand shocks, adapt to change, and 'bounce forward' by drawing on strong relationships, local knowledge, and shared action.

Why this matters:

In an era of cascading and compounding crises (climate disasters, pandemics, social upheaval), resilience cannot be built solely through technical planning. It requires investing in the social capital, participation, and equity that enable communities to adapt and even transform in the face of uncertainty. Civic and community participation are not peripheral to resilience — they are its engine.

Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that crises become more frequent and compounding - from climate disasters to pandemics - the capacity of communities to adapt and even transform rests on their civic infrastructure, social capital, and equity of participation.

Core Concepts Associated with Resilience

- Shift from "bounce back" to adaptive and transformative resilience; community resilience requires both planned and emergent elements.

Main schools / subfields

- Planned resilience (risk assessment, emergency planning, preparedness; policy & strategy lens).
- Emergent resilience (informal networks, local leadership, improvisation; community development lens).
- Socio-ecological & adaptive governance (community capacities to adapt/transform over time).

Links to other quadrants

- Resilience depends on Connectedness (networks/trust) and Equity (inclusive processes), and is strengthened through Participation (collective problem-solving).

However more recent definitions have included a more forward-looking perspective, looking at 'adaptation' as a key element:

> *"the ability of place-based or interest based communities to proactively cohere and develop abilities to be able to adapt in the face of different kinds of shocks and stressors" (Carmen et al, 2022).*

And further still, others propose that community resilience could generate transformative potentials - so that communities could not only adapt to, but "influence the course of environmental, social, and economic change" (Farney & Dentoni, 2025). Transformative capacity is now seen as the collective ability to realize transformative impact, associated with decentralized and bottom-up processes that emerge from within communities rather than being imposed from outside (Othengrafen et al., 2024). This reframing moves beyond recovery to emphasize transformability - the capacity to fundamentally alter structures when existing systems become untenable (Folke et al., 2010; Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013).

Philanthropic funders are well positioned to resource this shift toward adaptive and transformative resilience, underwriting the experimentation, learning and risk-taking that public budgets often cannot - especially in emergent resilience work involving informal networks, local leadership and improvisation.

Community Foundations are a key player within a broader ecosystem of actors, capacities and actions within a community, and during disasters can play diverse roles as intermediaries that either mitigate or accelerate impacts in disparate ways (Conway, 2024). Philanthropic funders are well positioned to resource this shift.

The Role of Civic & Community Participation in Community Resilience

As societies face increasingly complex challenges - from pandemic recovery to disaster recovery and climate adaptation - the evidence suggests that strengthening civic participation may be one of the most effective strategies for building the resilience, creativity, and collaborative capacity needed to thrive in uncertain times. Research consistently demonstrates that civic engagement is integral to community resilience not merely as a tool but as a process that develops capacities over time - what scholars describe as achieving agency through participation in collective remaking of systems (Kirby, 2025; Brons et al., 2022). Further, the experiences of Australian communities in disaster recovery over the past decade particularly, offer critical insights into how civic and community participation can be structured, sustained, and scaled to address the complex challenges posed by climate crises (see figure 12).

Across the literature, several key themes consistently emerge that point to what elements of civic and community participation are critical to developing community resilience (see figure 10).

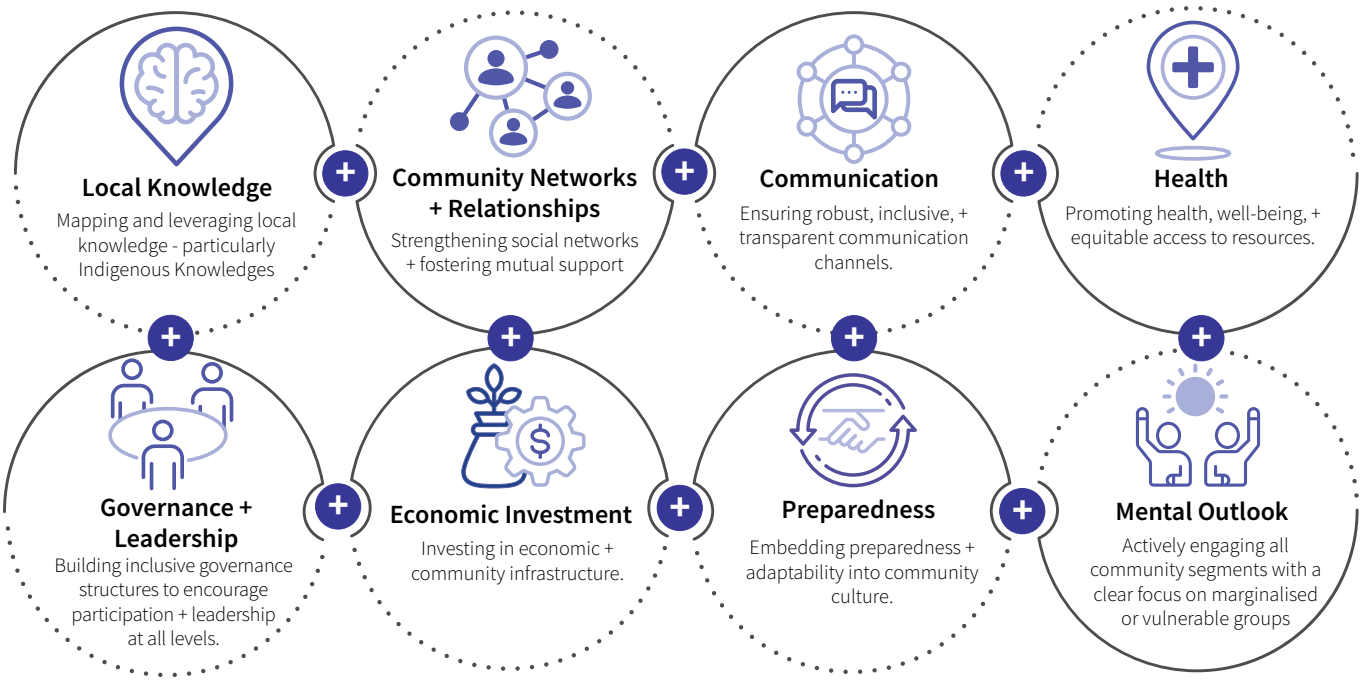


Figure 10: Key themes from research that point to elements of civic and community participation underpinning Community Resilience

Further, research consisently identifies the importance of links to the other quadrants of our sense-making framework:

- **Social Capital and Networks**: Active community involvement builds social capital, enhancing collaboration, cooperation, and information sharing among diverse stakeholders, which is crucial for effective disaster response and recovery (see for example, Liu et al, 2022). Social capital is now widely recognised as perhaps the most important component of community resilience - sometimes deemed more important than physical infrastructure - because it facilitates collective action, self-organisation, learning and the development of adaptive capacities (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015; Carmen et al., 2022; Bhandari et al., 2010). Research shows that when communities are struck by natural disasters, strong social capital helps bring community constituents together and encourages civic engagement that leads to mobilizing resources and achieving effective disaster recovery (Hwang & Joo, 2020).

- **Social Cohesion and Trust**: Civic engagement fosters social cohesion and trust, creating supportive networks that are essential for collective action during crises (see for example, Marinucci et al, 2024). Social cohesion describes the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members by minimizing inequalities, creating a sense of belonging and promoting trust - and is increasingly recognized as both a precondition for, and outcome of, community resilience (Eurofound, 2018; OECD, 2011).

- **The Role of Equity and Inclusion:** Inclusive civic engagement is necessary for achieving equity and ensuring that all community voices are represented, which is foundational for community resilience (see for example, Howard, et al, 2020). However, research reveals significant equity concerns in both participation and philanthropy: community philanthropy frequently focuses its interventions on organisations rather than on individuals who experience the greatest risks, and certain groups - poor, racialized, those with disabilities, and very young and very old - face systematic exclusion from various forms of capital within communities (Conway, 2024). This becomes exacerbated in disaster pre-planning, response and recovery, where there are often disproportionate impacts on vulnerable and excluded groups and cohorts of people.

Where are Bold Practical Responses Needed?
What stands out across the literature, however, are two critical areas that require bold, practical responses and learnings that funders could contribute to:

1. **Ongoing and Emergent Resilience** - Civic and community participation as part of growing community resilience is both ongoing and emergent - so whilst 'plans', 'training' and 'assessments' are critical at all stages, on their own are not enough to grow community resilience. There is a need to grow relationships, strengthen social capital, form informal support networks - in other words, community resilience requires longer-term 'community development' that enables the formation and strengthening of strong bonds across communities (Cavaye & Ross, 2022).

As the key focus of resilience research and practices remains on what could be termed 'planned resilience' (Davis and Davidson, 2018), there is a need for further development and recognition of 'emergent resilience' (see figure 11) - and funders could play a significant role in this development (see for example, Dekker, 2020; Cafer et al, 2019).

New research on participation and resilience demonstrates that bottom-up civic initiatives positively impact individual coping capacities and bonding social capital, but other dimensions of resilience depend on the responsiveness of government actors to sustain impact over time (Kirby et al., 2024). Philanthropic funders are particularly well positioned to resource the slower, less visible work of building emergent resilience – such as neighbourhood-level organising, leadership development and cross-sector relationship-building. This is ultimately the work that underpins communities' capacity to adapt and 'bounce forward' over time.

Transformative capacity in communities encompasses three critical dimensions: widening (expanding reach to involve further people, places and contexts), deepening (achieving fundamental changes in rules, values and discourses), and lengthening (ensuring continuity, acceleration and evolution over time) (Strasser et al., 2022). Philanthropy can act as patient, risk-tolerant capital for building civic infrastructure (local associations, anchors, connectors) that enables communities to negotiate more equitable arrangements with state agencies and markets over the long term.

However, this literature also suggests that community resilience cannot be achieved solely through person- or community-focused interventions if broader policy, funding and governance settings remain fragmented, short-term and event-based. Research

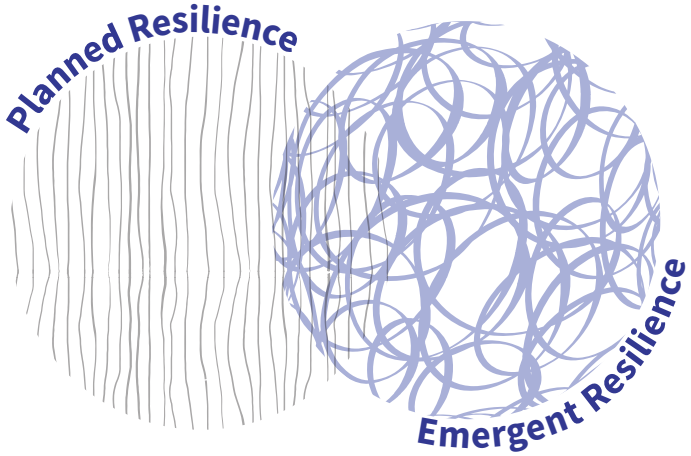
demonstrates that the success or failure of community development depends on its ability to mobilize different resources and to activate self-organized processes, which requires institutional support and conducive governance arrangements (Celata et al., 2019; Edelenbos et al., 2021). Resilience therefore demands structural shifts in how disaster risk, climate adaptation and social protection are planned and financed, including longer-term, place-based investment and power-sharing with affected communities.

2. Cascading, compounding and recurring Disasters. Whilst significant climate related natural disasters are still often described as 'exceptional', 'extraordinary', 'once in a hundred years', it is the case that:

> *"A growing number of communities in Australia are already experiencing cascading, compounding and recurring disasters including drought, the 2019-20 'Black Summer' bushfires and repeated floods in 2021 and 2022, with some communities experiencing up to 9 declared disasters in a 12-month period" (Leppold et al, 2025).*

Yet many of the emergency management interventions and programs that are funded in the recovery process, but also in the preparedness space, still frame support in terms of singular events or episodic programs. The traditional approach to disaster philanthropy has been simple and predictable: disaster strikes, followed by media attention and an outpouring of generosity, then attention shifts - often to another disaster - and generosity is directed back to 'business as usual' (Layton et al., 2023). This timescale of compounding disasters - up to nine declared disasters in 12 months - stands in stark contrast to the short-term grants, pilots and recovery programs that dominate current funding approaches.

The philanthropic infrastructure of disaster philanthropy has grown more sophisticated in its response, but funding for preparedness and resilience-building efforts has remained stagnant - accounting for only about 2% of total disaster grantmaking (CDP & Candid, 2022). Corporate philanthropy in particular tends to be reactive rather than anticipatory, concentrated during the high-profile response phase where community and media attention is highest, with little regard for how resources can be channelled into recovery, preparation and mitigation (McKnight & Linnenluecke, 2016). There is a need for private sector giving to shift from reactive to proactive approaches, embedding disaster planning and



'Work-as-Imagined' (Plans)

- Formal planning to absorb + anticipate shocks (disaster + emergency plans + protocols)
- Risk Assessments
- Staff Training
- Preparedness Activities (contingency plans + scenarios)

Indicators / Characteristics

- *Existence of formal emergency plans + documented preparedness activities*
- *Pre-defined roles + responsibilities for emergency response*
- *Regular training + drills for emergency personnel + community members*
- *Risk assessments + hazard mapping*
- *Clear communication protocols + designated communication channels*
- *Access to resources (Eg. emergency kits, shelters, medical supplies)*
- *Integration of resilience into land use + urban planning*
- *Use of scorecards, indices, toolkits to measure preparedness*

'Work-as-Done' (What actually happens)

- Emergent behaviours
- Adaptive Capacities
- Self-Organisation
- Learning from Experience
- Transformative Capacity
- Improvisation, collective sensemaking, coordination

Indicators / Characteristics

- *Strong social capital + connectedness among community members*
- *Presence of informal support networks + community-led inititatives*
- *Ability to adapt + improvise in response to new challenges*
- *Collective problem-solving + decision-making during crises*
- *High levels of community competence, trust + inclusion*
- *Dynamic information sharing + learning from past experiences*
- *Reflective + aware community culture*
- *Evidence of transformative or adaptive capacity in the face of shocks (eg. innovation, flexibility, resourcefulness)*

Figure 11: Community Resilience needs both 'planned' and 'emergent' elements

preparedness as a core business risk rather than a discretionary philanthropic response.

It is, however, increasingly recognised that climatic changes and fragile social and economic conditions require greater focus on growing investment into community resilience for recurrent or ongoing change (see for example: https://www.mtresilience.com/). Philanthropic capital is uniquely placed to fund work between events, across cycles and over many years, rather than only during acute response phases. Research shows that disaster assistance from community-focused organisations often eclipses support from

	Effective Community Actions	Common Failures / Tensions	Lessons for Future Practices
 Preparation	• Inclusive, accessible + interactive local forums • Hazard Mapping is enhanced with local knowledge	• Exclusion of resident voices • Lack of funding for grassroots efforts • Lack of learnings shared from previous events	• Invest in programs that build local networks and trust, including education, forums, and community champions
 Response	• Local volunteer mobilisation + follow-up support is critical • Informal rescue networks are core - locals are usually first responders	• Disconnection between formal agencies + local knowledge can create confusion • Vulnerable cohorts + communities overlooked	• Bridge gaps between formal agencies + informal networks • Local leadership + engaging local knowledge can help identify + support vulnerable people
 Recovery	• Community-driven recovery initiatives (e.g., arts and culture) fosters unity and healing • On-the-ground, personal support is crucial • Existing community networks aid recovery	• Bureaucratic grant + recovery processes can overwhelm traumatised residents • Recovery support often lacks long-term planning	• Simplification of support processes + engaging locals in the process can assist early recovery efforts • Local knowledge + insights can help make recovery more equitable by prioritising community rebuilding efforts
 Resilience	• Inclusive, interactive + ongoing training • Community champions from all parts of a community foster resilience • Flexible funding • Inclusive leadership	• Short-term, context-free resilience efforts waste resources • Lack of a systemic + structural focus hampers local resilience	• Trust, social capital + transparent communication supports resilience • Resilience requires redundancy - especially in local communications and support infrastructure

Figure 12: Analysis of key disaster reports in Australia since 2000 focused on key lessons about civic and community participation.
Source: TGS, 2025 (A high level review of major reports following major natural disasters in Australia since 2000 was undertaken by Ingrid Burkett, and then checked with a focused use of machine learning (Chat GPT).

government, but philanthropic response depends on donor knowledge and empathy with the affected population, and is reflective of disaster scale, media coverage and timing (Phillips & Pue, 2024; Eckel et al., 2007).

Bridging the Implementation Gap

The charitable and philanthropic sectors face barriers and limitations to implementing durable systems change - many disasters are the result of decades of invasive damage from humans, yet the charitable sector often responds to problems with band-aids rather than addressing root causes (Conway, 2024). Changes to how systems are designed - not just better community participation - are essential to closing this gap.Conway (2024) identifies five vexing problems that must be addressed to generate deeper systemic change:

1. barriers to implementing durable systems change,
2. focus on organisations rather than individuals who experience greatest risks,
3. lack of coordination across the charitable sector during disasters,
4. insufficient investment in pre-disaster planning and scenario thinking, and
5. systematic exclusion of certain groups from community planning processes.

If this gap is to be bridged there is a need for engagement with specific communities, growing long-term, applied learning and research approaches and a commitment by funders to support this work particularly in disaster 'hot spots', across more diverse contexts and amongst particularly vulnerable communities. New assessment frameworks for community resilience suggest that participation can strengthen resilience across multiple dimensions - individual coping capacities, adaptive and transformative capacities, and social capital - but that this requires ongoing responsiveness from governance structures to fully realise (Kirby, 2025).

The evidence on cascading, compounding and recurring disasters underscores that resilience is a

long-term endeavour that must be cultivated across cycles of preparation, response and recovery, rather than 'delivered' through time-limited programs. Philanthropic funders seeking to contribute meaningfully to resilience therefore need to commit to sustained, place-based investment, support for ongoing learning and reflection, and flexibility to adapt as local conditions and relationships evolve.

Community foundations, as place-based, long-term philanthropic actors, are evolving into on-the-ground leaders in preparedness, response coordination, and laying the groundwork for resilience and rebuilding - though the need for strengthening and increasing support for both philanthropy-serving organisations and community foundations will only increase as the consequences of climate change become more daunting (Layton et al., 2023).

Resilience work must be understood as multi-decadal, iterative practice that needs longitudinal learning partnerships between communities, governments and funders.

Beyond supporting discrete projects, philanthropic funders can help re-shape the institutional architecture of resilience – for example, by backing community-led advocacy to reform planning, insurance and recovery regimes in disaster 'hot spots', embedding community voices into formal emergency management, and co-designing new funding mechanisms that enable flexibility and long-term commitment.

Strategic Questions for Funders

Adaptive Approaches: Research suggests that funding and practices are skewed towards planned resilience and that emergent resilience is either assumed or remains invisible (and unfunded). *How could funders invest in fostering emergent resilience activities, particularly in vulnerable communities, to support local wellbeing before, during and after disasters and other shock events? How might funders invest in activating accessible social infrastructure (eg. neighbourhood centres, sports clubs) in ways that foster participation and build the connections that enable emergent resilience?*

Bouncing forward, not just back: Research suggests that resilience work often focuses on recovery from discrete events, helping communities "bounce back" into systems that may already be untenable. *How could funders instead resource communities to "bounce forward", supporting efforts that change the underlying conditions driving risk and vulnerability ?*

Polycrisis and recurring shocks
Research suggests that communities are living through cascading and compounding shocks that reflect a wider 'polycrisis', not isolated disasters. *How could funders define more clearly which risks and stressors they are resourcing communities to live with, and align strategies and timeframes with this broader risk environment ?*

Participation, power and responsibility
Research suggests that participation frequently stops at consultation, while resilience agendas can also shift responsibility for systemic risks from governments and markets onto unpaid community actors. *How could funders design programs and governance arrangements that give affected communities meaningful control over priorities and resources, while keeping duty-bearers on the hook for structural responsibilities ?*

Equity, representation and social capital
Research suggests that those most exposed to shocks – including poorer, racialised, disabled, young and older people – are often under-represented in formal initiatives, and that bonding, bridging and linking social capital all matter for resilience. *How could funders reshape outreach, eligibility and modalities so that these groups can lead, and deliberately invest in new bridges across groups and stronger links into institutions, not only deepen bonds within familiar circles ?*

Between events and over the long haul
Research suggests that the quieter "in-between" periods are when relationships, civic infrastructure and capacities that underpin emergent and transformative resilience are built, yet these activities are hardest to fund. *How could funders normalise long-term investment in organising, civic learning, living labs and local institution-building as core resilience work, rather than treating them as discretionary extras around short-term, event-based grants ?*

Young People, Climate Crisis, Resilience and Participation

Young people in Australia are at the forefront of climate action, yet remain marginal to the formal decisions that will shape their futures. Youth-led organisations and networks such as the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Seed Mob and School Strike 4 Climate have built a multi-strategy movement combining mass protests, lobbying, community education and strategic litigation (e.g. Sharma v Minister for the Environment), framed around climate justice, intergenerational equity and Indigenous rights (Hickey et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2023). Many young people describe climate protests and collective action as legitimate civic participation and as a form of public health intervention, aimed at compelling governments and corporations to act commensurately with scientific evidence (Richardson et al., 2023).

At the same time, young Australians are carrying a significant emotional and mental health burden from climate change. Studies with regional youth and clinicians highlight eco-anxiety as a rational, functional response to cumulative crises - bushfires, floods, heatwaves - rather than a pathology, and identify three key dimensions: distress about current impacts, fear about the future, and moral injury associated with perceived adult inaction (McGushin et al., 2024; Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2024). Research emphasises that social connectedness, collective efficacy and opportunities for meaningful climate action are protective factors, linking directly resilience: when young people feel able to act with others and see institutions respond, climate distress can be channelled into agency and adaptation rather than despair (Ojala et al., 2022; McGushin et al., 2024).

How Young People Participate Differently

Young people's climate participation often occurs outside traditional civic channels and is deeply entwined with digital practices. Social media and messaging platforms enable rapid mobilisation, peer-to-peer education, and direct engagement with decision-makers at multiple scales, supporting decentralised, networked forms of organising that differ from party politics or formal consultation (Politics & Society, 2025; Sosyal Araştırmalar, 2024). Youth-led conservation and climate groups also use digital tools to counter isolation and bring young Australians back into nature through local restoration projects, citizen science and on-Country work, especially following disasters (Biodiversity Council of Australia, 2026). However, young activists frequently report that institutional processes - advisory councils, inquiries, consultations - are slow, opaque and dominated by older adults, which undermines trust and can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness highlighted in resilience research (Hickey et al., 2023; Ojala et al., 2022).

Bold Roles for Funders

- Fund youth-led climate and resilience infrastructure: Provide multi-year core funding to youth-led organisations and networks to govern their own climate and resilience strategies, including digital infrastructure, training and stipends. Evidence shows that leadership development within youth movements sustains engagement and builds long-term civic skills (Hickey et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2023).
- Share real decision-making power with young people: Create youth advisory boards or participatory grantmaking processes with genuine budget authority over climate adaptation, disaster preparedness and youth mental health funds. Giving young people a say in how resources are used aligns with resilience findings that collective agency and voice are key buffers against eco-anxiety (McGushin et al., 2024; Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2024).
- Invest in place-based youth climate–mental health hubs: In regions facing repeated climate impacts, support integrated hubs where young people can access peer support, mental health care, creative practice and climate organising in one place. Research suggests that combining social connection, professional support and avenues for meaningful action is more effective than clinical responses alone in addressing climate-related distress (McGushin et al., 2024; Ojala et al., 2022).
- Support youth-driven narratives and intergenerational dialogue: Back storytelling, journalism, arts and digital campaigns led by young people that legitimise climate concern, highlight diverse youth leadership (including First Nations youth), and open intergenerational conversations rather than deepening divides. Public narratives that recognise youth climate activism as responsible civic engagement, not alarmism, can shift institutional attitudes and create space for more inclusive resilience planning (Hickey et al., 2023; Biodiversity Council of Australia, 2026).

Young people are not passive recipients of climate risk but central actors in building social and ecological resilience. Strategic funding that strengthens youth-led infrastructure, shares power and links climate action with mental health and community resilience can turn climate anxiety into a driver of fairer, more adaptive futures (Hickey et al., 2023; McGushin et al., 2024).

What Activating Civic and Community Participation Means for Fairer Futures for Families and Children

This review has explored civic and community participation across four interconnected dimensions - participation as power-sharing in decision-making, connectedness as social capital and belonging, equity as the reduction of structural barriers and redistribution of resources, and resilience as the capacity to adapt and thrive through crisis.

For Minderoo Foundation's work with families and children, these literatures offer a fundamental insight: children's wellbeing and life chances are profoundly shaped not only by what happens within families, but by whether families themselves have voice, agency and economic security within the communities and systems that surround them. Activating civic and community participation is therefore not peripheral to children's outcomes - it is a core strategy for building the relational, economic and institutional conditions in which children and families can flourish across generations.

Why civic and community participation matters

Civic and community participation is critical for better outcomes for Australia's children and families because it strengthens the conditions that shape development in the early years: connection, trust, belonging, safety, and access to supports that fit local needs. Children's participation is not merely a beneficial practice; it is a legally enshrined right.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Australia in 1990, establishes every child's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Several influential frameworks have been developed to operationalise this right. Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation distinguishes degrees of genuine participation from non-participation, including manipulation, decoration, and tokenism. Lundy's (2007) model identifies four essential elements -Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence - that must all be present for Article 12 to be meaningfully implemented.

Grounding participation in these rights-based frameworks shifts the conversation from whether children and families should participate to how participation can be made genuine and effective.

This is increasingly urgent in Australia given recent evidence of worsening early childhood development indicators. The 2024 AEDC results show more children starting school developmentally vulnerable than in 2021, including increases in vulnerability in one domain and in two or more domains (Mitchell Institute, 2025).

Recent Australian policy and system reform is explicitly moving toward coordinated, community-facing approaches. The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy (First Action Plan 2024–2027) sets an outcomes framework intended to track progress in children's, families' and communities' wellbeing, and includes an explicit focus on working with communities and strengthening coordination and accountability (Department of Social Services, 2024). Contemporary Australian evidence syntheses also describe place-based approaches as a promising strategy for improving early childhood outcomes and reducing inequities in local communities (Centre for Community Child Health, 2022).

At the program level, recent Australian evidence indicates that place-based and community-partnered initiatives can be cost-effective and linked with improvements in parenting, child development and wellbeing, and community cohesion. A 2024 evidence paper reviewing Children, Youth and Parenting programs found clear evidence of positive improvements for child, youth and parenting outcomes and notes evidence of positive impacts for Communities for Children Facilitating Partners in parenting and child outcomes as well as community cohesion (Department of Social Services, 2024). Complementing this, the 2025 *Restacking the Odds Impact Report* describes a systems-change approach that combines integrated service hubs with community-led place-based initiatives and reports improvements in participation outcomes and data-informed service improvement processes (Restacking the Odds, 2025).

International evidence strengthens the case that participation and integrated community-based early years supports can generate large, measurable benefits. The 2025 Institute for Fiscal Studies evaluation of the UK Sure Start program reports positive effects across education and health outcomes, with reduced hospitalisations and sustained improvements through age 16, alongside cost-benefit estimates showing substantial lifetime value relative to up-front costs (Carneiro et al., 2025). OECD evidence also recognises that services led in collaboration with community members and targeted outreach can build trust and improve engagement with early childhood education and care for families who are hard to reach (OECD, 2025).

Figure 13 illustrates the types of participation that work, the mechanisms that support change and the evidence of outcomes that have been demonstrated when children ***and*** families actively participate in civic and community realms.

How Participation Supports Child + Family Wellbeing

The relationship between civic participation and child outcomes operates through multiple, reinforcing pathways.

- First, ***parental and community participation builds social capital, which is consistently identified as a protective factor for children.*** Studies show that children who grow up in families embedded in trusting, reciprocal community networks - through neighbourhood groups, schools, faith communities, sports clubs and mutual aid - have better developmental outcomes, even when families face economic hardship or other stressors (Runyan et al., 1998; Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). Research on 'bowling together' demonstrates that the density of community social institutions - places where families regularly interact and build relationships - directly predicts children's resilience to adverse childhood experiences, because these institutions provide practical support, monitoring, mentoring and a sense of collective efficacy (Ports et al., 2021). When parents participate in civic and community life, they simultaneously build their own networks and model democratic engagement for their children, creating what Kim and Lee (2024) describe as 'childhood social capital'- the relationships with diverse caring adults and the sense of community membership that predict wellbeing and cognitive performance decades later.

- Second, ***participation gives families a voice in the decisions that directly affect children's lives - from school policies and local services to housing, transport, environmental hazards and climate adaptation.*** Parent involvement in schools, when it includes genuine participation in decision-making rather than token consultation, improves children's social and emotional outcomes and strengthens the relationship between families and institutions (Hill & Tyson, 2009; McWayne et al., 2004). More broadly, when families participate in community planning, service co-design and local governance, they can advocate for the resources and policies their children need (safe play spaces, accessible childcare, affordable housing, protection from pollution and climate impacts) and hold institutions accountable when these are lacking. The participation literature reviewed here shows that without mechanisms for families to exercise power, not just 'have their say,' the structural inequities that harm children - poverty, discrimination, inadequate services, unsafe environments - remain unchanged (Arnstein, 1969; Mansuri & Rao, 2004).

- Third, ***civic participation addresses intergenerational inequity, which is increasingly central to children's futures***. As the equity chapter highlights, rising wealth inequality, driven by housing and asset concentration, means that children born into families without property or financial assets face vastly diminished life chances compared to those who inherit wealth (Productivity Commission, 2021; Atkinson, 2015). Community wealth building and participatory approaches to economic development offer pathways to interrupt these patterns by creating community-owned assets - affordable housing, local enterprises, cooperative childcare - that benefit all families, not only those with inherited advantage (Community-Wealth.org, 2019). Similarly, the digital participation discussion earlier shows that as civic life, education and services move online, children in families without reliable connectivity, devices or digital skills are excluded from learning, information and participation, compounding disadvantage (Thomas et al., 2021; Foster et al., 2023). Activating participation therefore requires addressing the material and structural barriers (like housing insecurity, digital exclusion, poverty) that prevent families from participating in the first place.

- Fourth, ***participation strengthens family and community resilience in the face of compounding crises.*** The resilience literature reviewed here emphasises that communities with strong civic infrastructure - trusted local organisations, networks of mutual aid, inclusive decision-making - adapt more effectively to disasters, economic shocks and health emergencies, and that children's outcomes in these contexts depend heavily on whether families feel supported and able to shape collective responses (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; National Academies, 2025; Cavaye & Ross, 2022). For example, young people's climate anxiety (discussed in the youth participation box on page 39), is mediated by whether they have opportunities for collective action and feel their concerns are heard; children whose parents and communities are engaged in climate planning experience less helplessness and greater agency (McGushin et al., 2024; Ojala et al., 2022). Participation is therefore not only a mechanism for influencing decisions but also a source of psychological safety and collective efficacy that protects children and families during prolonged stress.

Family engagement in children's learning environment (incl. pre-school), is associated with stronger social-emotional development in children, school attendance + completion

(ARACY, 2024; Kunthamas et al, 2025; Kantova, 2024)

Stronger informal support networks (social capital) reduce isolation + support parenting - recognised as protective for children, + are linked to better childhood outcomes generally

(OECD, 2025, Rady + Hahn, 2022; Brown et al, 2025; Piquero et al, 2025)

Growing evidence for an intergenerational transmission effect where informal community engagement by parents fosters civic capability in children

(Azmeraw, 2023; Meeus, + Kern,2020)

Young people w
more connecte
willing to partic
contribute to
neighbourhoo
significantly les
to endorse o
violence

(Smith et al, 2013; L
2018)

Neighbourhood connectedness, trust + informal networks significantly improve cognitive + socio-emotional skills in children

(Qianyao, 2026;)

Diverse community relationships in childhood (beyond the family) have been found to contribute meaningfully to developmental trajectories

(Hosoda et al, 2024)

***The effects are strongest w
place-based, culturally grou
community life rather than del***

The Outcomes Participation of

Participation is Strongly Linked to Better Outcomes for Children + Families

Participatio
Young Peop
Stronger

Knowledge + Skill Development
Participation exposes families to information, resources + skills that improve their capacity to support children's development

Increased self-efficacy
Families who participate in decision-making develop greater confidence in their parenting + advocacy capabilities (which is associated with positive child development)

Mu
beh

Strengthend attachment + relationships
Participation builds trust, strengthens family + community bonds + increases communication between adults (parents + others) + children

Agency + Empowerment
When children + parents are positioned as active agents rather than passive recipients, motivation, engagement + ownership of outcomes increase

Socia
From early childhood
media introduce chil
norms + moral code
education + co

How Participation of Children



Everyday Relational Participation

Informal engagement through shared meals, community gardens, playgroups, cultural events, neighbourhood spaces, playgrounds that build trust + belonging over time

Early-Years Focused Participation

Engagement with early years settings, childcare, schools, parent groups in ways that increase connection, confidence, decision- making + the capacity to navigate systems

Community + C Participation

Families, children + y
people engaging in c
activities, volunteerin
governance, neighbo
initiatives, cultural ac
local economies

What Participation of Children

Intergenerational bonding + bridging social capital improves school performance, moderates bad behaviour + reduces youth crime / arrests

(Lesiak + Coutts, DEMOS, 2025)

Youth civic activities + democratic structures are bidirectional: institutions shape opportunities+ youth-led initiatives can contribute to shaping to democratic reforms+ policy priorities

(Ramos et al, 2026)

Participatory, community-based support reduces demand on acute + statutory services, generating savings that can be redirected towards further preventative investment - creating an economics of prevention

(OMNI Institute, 2021)

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Levine,

Active co-design of youth- + family-friendly spaces + events are associated with reduction of crime in neighbourhoods

(Child Poverty Action Lab, 2022)

Early investments in activating civic + community participation through early childhood + family initiatives create the foundation for participation across lifetimes

(Centre for Excellence in Child + Family Welfare, 2020)

School-based civic initiatives can promote long-term civic +political participation + thereby strengthen social trust + create foundations for democracy + cohesion

(OECD, 2025; Trust for Civic Life, 2024)

when participation is sustained,
unded, and embedded in everyday
livered as time-limited interventions

Children + Families Generates

on of Children + ple is Linked to Communities

Participation of Children + Young People Grows Stronger Democracies + Economies

Collective Efficacy

tual trust and shared expectations among residents create the capacity to regulate aviour, maintain social order and intervene when they notice suspicious activity

Agency through Practice

When children participate in citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting or community decision-making, they develop practical skills + confidence that sustain lifelong democratic habits

Social Trust

Founded on belief in the honesty + reliability of neighbours + community members, built through informal voluntary initiatives such as neighbourhood associations + interfaith networks

lisation

, family, peers, schools + dren to prevailing social es, shaping their moral gnitive nurturing.

Migating Trauma

Higher social capital reduces the likelihood of childhood mistreatment; + supportive social networks can break the link between trauma + criminal behaviour by providing ongoing support + attachment

n + Families Produces Change



ivic

oung
ommunity
ng, local
urhood
ctivities +

Cultural Governance as Participation

First Nations community control + culturally grounded governance models, strengthen cultural safety + trust + can increase effective engagement with early years supports

Co-Design + Co-Production as Participation

Children, young people + families working alongside professionals to research, design, deliver + evaluate services + programs.

+ Families Looks Like

Figure 13: Tracking evidence of outcomes from active participation of children and families

Connection to First Nations children & families

Participation is particularly significant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families because community control and self-determination shape trust, cultural safety and the legitimacy of service systems (Phillips et al., 2020). Recent Australian program evidence includes SNAICC's Connected Beginnings approach to supporting communities to lead and shape how local services work together (SNAICC, 2026). An independent review of SNAICC's Early Years Support reported high effectiveness, with most services describing stronger culturally safe connections, reduced isolation and improved service quality when Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations lead early years work (SNAICC, 2025).

Participation of Children AND Families is Key

An important conceptual distinction must be drawn between children's participation and family or parent participation. While the two are related, they operate through different mechanisms, engage different literatures, and involve distinct power dynamics. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) identify a continuum from parental involvement - where parents participate in institutional activities such as volunteering or attending meetings - to parental engagement, where parents actively engage with their children's learning and development. This distinction matters because children hold participation rights under the UNCRC that are independent of, and sometimes in tension with, the participation of their parents or families. When 'children and families' are treated as a single unit of analysis, there is a risk of subsuming children's distinct voice and agency within adult or family perspectives. Effective participation frameworks recognise that children, even very young children, are social actors with perspectives that may differ from those of their parents, and that creating space for children's own voice requires deliberate design rather than assuming family participation automatically encompasses children's participation.

But Not All Participation is Equal

Not all participation is equally valuable, and the distinction between meaningful and tokenistic participation is critical to achieving the outcomes described in this report. Hart (1992) identified three forms of non-participation - manipulation, decoration, and tokenism - that frequently masquerade as genuine engagement. Tokenistic participation occurs when children or families are given a nominal voice but no real influence over decisions, or when their participation serves primarily to legitimate pre-determined outcomes. Lundy (2007) argues that 'voice' alone is not sufficient: meaningful participation requires that children have safe and inclusive spaces to form views, facilitation to express those views, an audience with responsibility to listen, and evidence that their views have genuinely influenced outcomes.

Without these feedback loops and accountability mechanisms, participation risks becoming extractive - taking participants' time and emotional energy without reciprocal benefit. Lundy (2018) offers a nuanced perspective, acknowledging that tokenistic beginning points may sometimes be a necessary step on the path to genuine engagement, provided there is institutional commitment to progression. For the participation approaches described in this report to achieve their intended outcomes, attention to quality, power-sharing, and genuine responsiveness to participants' views is essential.

Ecological Foundations for Systemic Outcomes

The argument presented here - that participation operates across and connects family, community, service, and policy domains- is well supported by the seminal work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). His ecological systems theory, is a foundational framework for understanding how children's development is shaped by nested environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner identified the microsystem (immediate settings such as family and early childhood services), the mesosystem (connections between microsystems, such as the relationship between a family and a childcare centre), the exosystem (settings that indirectly affect the child, such as parent workplaces or local government), and the macrosystem (broader cultural, economic, and policy contexts).

Participation, as described in this report, operates at every level of this ecological model: relational participation strengthens microsystems; co-design and family engagement connect microsystems and mesosystems; community governance engages the exosystem; and civic participation and policy influence operate at the macrosystem level. This ecological lens helps explain why participation at multiple levels produces compounding benefits, and why interventions at a single level may be insufficient without complementary action across the system.

What Quality Participation Changes (mechanisms & outcomes)

Participation matters because it changes how problems are defined, how decisions are made, and how supports are designed and delivered. When participation is meaningful, it shifts power and agency so that children, families and communities influence priorities and co-own outcomes, rather than being consulted after key decisions are set (The Good Shift et al., 2026). This aligns with Australian evidence that community-partnered and place-based approaches are most relevant for complex challenges affecting children and families because they can coordinate responses across sectors and adapt to local conditions (Centre for Community Child Health, 2022).

In practice, participation improves outcomes through several interlinked dynamics:

- **Trust and fit**: Community participation increases the fit between services and local priorities, which can improve engagement and uptake, particularly for families who have been underserved or harmed by systems (OECD, 2025).
- **Social connection and cohesion:** Participation builds social capital through repeated opportunities to collaborate and support each other, which reduces isolation and strengthens informal support networks that matter for parenting and family wellbeing (The Good Shift et al., 2026).
- **Better coordination**: Place-based approaches work best when they strengthen cross-agency collaboration and create shared accountability for outcomes, reducing fragmentation across the systems families must navigate (Department of Social Services, 2024; Restacking the Odds, 2025).
- **Stronger evidence and learning**: Participatory approaches can surface access barriers and local determinants that standard evaluations miss, improving the design of early years initiatives and making responses more equitable and effective (Chadd et al., 2025).

The ACCP Investment Opportunities Framework helps name what to invest in if the goal is better child and family outcomes:

- social infrastructure and local connectors;
- approaches that make participation materially possible; and
- long-term, place-based work that grows trust, belonging, resilience and cohesion over time.

Intergenerational Effects of Investing in Participation of Children

Young children also enact community building through everyday, embodied and relational civic actions when environments and pedagogies are designed to notice and nurture these contributions (Phillips et al., 2020). This widens the frame from "participation in services" to participation as a developmental pathway: ***building children's belonging, empathy and civic agency in the early years supports stronger outcomes for children now, and strengthens the foundations for community wellbeing over time*** (Phillips et al., 2020).

An Intergenerational Lens: Participation Across the Lifespan

While Minderoo Foundation's focus is children and families, an intergenerational approach recognises that children's wellbeing is inseparable from the wellbeing and participation of young people, parents, grandparents and Elders. Research on intergenerational dialogue shows that structured opportunities for different generations to reflect together on shared challenges - climate change, social cohesion, community safety - strengthen family communication, reduce intergenerational conflict, build solidarity and create shared visions for the future (Interpeace, 2025). For children, growing up in communities where multiple generations participate together in decision-making means they inherit not only assets or liabilities but also civic skills, relationships and a sense of collective agency. This is particularly important in Indigenous contexts, where intergenerational knowledge transmission, governance and connection to Country are central to child and family wellbeing, and where self-determination depends on all generations having authority over decisions that affect their lives (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; AHRC, 2014).

Strategic Implications for Minderoo Foundation

Taken together, the literatures reviewed here suggest that Minderoo Foundation's work with children and families can be strengthened by treating participation as key civic infrastructure, not only as a project outcome. This means:

- **Resourcing family and community governance, not just programs**: Investing in the organisations, networks and processes that enable families to govern their own services, advocate collectively and shape local systems - parent-led organisations, family resource centres, school councils with genuine authority, community planning processes, and participatory evaluation where families define what success means (Evans, 2015; Gibson, 2018).
- **Building civic and social infrastructure in the places where families live:** Funding neighbourhood houses, libraries, community centres, youth and family hubs, sports clubs and cultural spaces as long-term civic anchors, not short-term projects, so that families have places to connect, organise and build the trust and reciprocity that underpin resilience (Putnam, 2000; Ports et al., 2021; National Academies, 2025).

- **Addressing structural barriers to participation:** Ensuring that strategies to activate participation include concrete measures to address the barriers that exclude families - digital inclusion support, affordable childcare during meetings, stipends for participation, translation and accessible formats, trauma-informed facilitation, and protection from retaliation or surveillance for families in precarious situations (Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Foster et al., 2023).
- **Adopting participatory grantmaking and co-governance:** Sharing decision-making power with families and communities throughout the funding cycle - from setting priorities to designing interventions to evaluating outcomes - so that Minderoo Foundation's own practices model the participatory, equitable relationships the organisation seeks to support (Love et al., 2019; Hauger, 2023).

Linking child and family work to structural change
Connecting investments in parenting, early childhood and family support to broader campaigns for affordable housing, living wages, community wealth building, climate justice and anti-discrimination - recognising that individual and family-level interventions, no matter how evidence-based, cannot overcome structural inequities on their own (Atkinson, 2015; Productivity Commission, 2021; Hickey et al., 2023).

Children do not experience participation directly in most civic contexts; they experience it through whether their families have a voice, whether their communities are safe and connected, and whether the institutions that shape their lives - schools, services, governments - listen and respond. Activating civic and community participation is therefore essential to creating the conditions in which all children, not only those born into advantage, can thrive. By investing in the relationships, governance structures and economic security that enable families to shape their own futures, Minderoo Foundation can help build the foundations for more equitable, resilient and participatory societies - fairer futures not as an aspiration but as a lived reality for children and families across Australia (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Kim & Lee, 2024; National Academies, 2025).

How Infrastructures & Design Support Community & Civic Participation

Why design & infrastructure matter for participation

Civic and community participation does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in places: on footpaths and in parks, at school gates and library desks, inside neighbourhood houses and around community garden beds. The quality of those places, and the systems that connect people to them, profoundly shape who participates, how often and on whose terms.

A rich body of international research underpins this. Jane Jacobs (1961) showed that mixed-use, walkable streets generate what she called a "sidewalk ballet" of casual encounters that build familiarity and trust among strangers, and that this everyday social contact is the foundation of neighbourhood safety and collective life. Jan Gehl (1971; 2010) extended this into a design framework, demonstrating across decades of Copenhagen fieldwork that when cities reclaim space from cars and invest in pedestrian-scale environments, street-level social activity can triple. Ray Oldenburg (1989) named the "third places" - cafés, pubs, barber shops, libraries, parks - that sit between home and work and provide neutral ground for grassroots association, arguing that free assembly begins in these informal settings long before it is formalised into clubs or political organisations.

Robert Putnam (2000) documented the consequences of losing these spaces: as Americans drove more, joined less, and retreated into private life, social capital declined and with it civic engagement, trust and community problem-solving capacity. Putnam's prescription included redesigning communities to encourage interaction - a call that Eric Klinenberg (2018) answered directly, defining social infrastructure as the physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact and arguing, with evidence from Chicago heat waves to New York library systems, that strong social infrastructure reduces inequality, polarisation and the decline of civic life.

More recently, the Bernard van Leer Foundation's Urban95 initiative has reframed the question from a child and caregiver perspective: if a city works for a three-year-old at 95 centimetres tall, it works better for everyone. Urban95 programmes across dozens of cities globally have demonstrated that designing safe walking routes, quality play spaces, and co-located early-years services improves caregiver wellbeing, child development outcomes and neighbourhood social cohesion simultaneously (van Leer Foundation, 2018; Beck and Kaune, 2025).

The evidence converges on a central insight: participation is not primarily a motivation problem; it is an opportunity and capability problem which is then also shaped by design and infrastructure. People participate when spaces are safe, welcoming, reachable and flexible, and when they have the time, confidence and institutional platforms to act collectively. This final part of the literature review sets out the design mechanisms and infrastructure types that create those conditions, before examining how they play out differently across place types and what this means for strategic investment.

Eight Design Patterns

The eight patterns described on the next page (figure 14), represent the spatial and design-level factors that evidence suggests directly shape whether everyday environments generate connection or isolation. They draw on Jacobs' sidewalk dynamics, Gehl's human-scale design principles, Oldenburg's third-place theory, Klinenberg's social infrastructure thesis, and the Urban95 evidence on child- and caregiver-friendly environments amongst other evidence (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2010; Oldenburg, 1989; Klinenberg, 2018; van Leer Foundation, 2018).

Each pattern operates through a common behavioural logic: it reduces the friction, cost or risk of social contact and raises the likelihood of repeated, voluntary encounters between diverse people.

- Bumping spaces and walkable routes create opportunities for incidental contact (Matan & Newman, 2016) - with research from the University of Melbourne confirms that bumping spaces within 400–800 metres of homes are associated with higher reported neighbourly help and local group involvement (University of Melbourne, 2022);
- Third places and green spaces provide settings for potential lingering and relationship-building (Klinenberg, 2018);
- Safety and cultural security determine who feels able and safe enough to be present (AHURI, 2020);

Eight Design Patterns



‘Bumping spaces’

Bumping spaces are places located on everyday routes where people naturally slow down, linger and see each other often: small plazas at bus stops, seats near corner shops, playgrounds beside paths. When people regularly pass and pause in the same place, they build weak ties and familiarity; this makes invitations into groups, volunteering or collective problem-solving feel safer and more natural.



Third places as local anchors

Third places are settings beyond home and work where people choose to spend time: libraries, cafés, pubs, sports clubs, community gardens, neighbourhood houses and markets. These venues act as social infrastructure anchors, hosting informal contact and organised activity; over time, they grow dense networks and trust that become the “soft wiring” of local campaigns, mutual aid and governance.



Walkability + everyday routes

Where shops, parks, schools and services are within a 10–15-minute walk, residents spend more time locally and meet neighbours more often. Fine-grain connected streets, safe crossings and footpaths, and mixed uses all raise the likelihood that people will notice local opportunities, feel ownership of shared spaces and participate in place-based initiative



Transport + connection

Public and community transport, continuous cycling routes and safe pedestrian crossings are participation infrastructure as much as mobility systems. Affordable, reliable routes to education, health care, main streets, civic forums and cultural venues greatly increase take-up of activities and services; without them, even well-designed spaces and programs remain out of reach for many residents, especially in outer suburbs and regional towns.



Green + blue spaces

Parks, rivers, coasts and community gardens are flexible, free settings that support informal socialising, children’s play, cultural practices and protest. Quality green space close to home is associated with better mental health, resilience and social cohesion, all of which underpin the capacity to participate in local life and decision-making.



Children, families + the ‘pram test’

Children are powerful social catalysts: playgrounds, school gates and playgroups are where many adults first meet neighbours and future collaborators. Design that passes a “pram test” – continuous, shaded, wide footpaths; safe crossings; nearby toilets; clustered family services – turns daily care work into connection opportunities at a life-stage when motivation to participate is high but time and mobility are constrained.



Safety, comfort + cultural security

Perceptions of safety and welcome determine who uses public spaces, when and for how long. Lighting, visibility, active edges, toilets, shade and culturally recognisable cues all matter, especially for women, children, First Nations people and migrants; where spaces feel unsafe or exclusionary, people simply do not linger, and opportunities for connection and collective action evaporate.



Service co-location + multi-use hubs

When services such as schools, childcare, health clinics and neighbourhood houses are co-located with social spaces, they become participation gateways. Everyday visits for practical needs create touchpoints where people hear about groups, meet connectors and move gradually from being “clients” to co-creators, volunteers and local leaders; single-purpose, stand-alone service facilities rarely have this effect

Figure 14: The eight design patterns that evidence suggests directly shape whether everyday environments generate connection or isolation

- Service co-location and multi-use hubs potentially turn necessary trips into social opportunities; and
- Child-friendly design creates possibilities for the activation of the powerful connecting role that children and caregiving routines play in neighbourhood life (Van Leer Foundation, 2018).

Critically, these mechanisms do not operate in isolation.

A bumping space on an unwalkable, unsafe street will not function. A beautifully designed library without a bus route or digital connectivity will serve only those who can drive and park. This is why design must be understood within the broader infrastructure systems that determine reach, resourcing and governance.

Design and infrastructure are two sides of the same system: ***design shapes the qualities of spaces, while infrastructures determine who can reach, use and govern those spaces over time.***
Design and infrastructure can either lock communities into managed disadvantage or support civic life, connection and self-determination.

Seven Infrastructure Types

*"Infrastructure, at its most fundamental level, is not about roads and bridges, cable and concrete. It's about who we are, what we value and what kind of society we want to create." (*Eric Klinenberg, 2018)

Seven infrastructure types – physical, social, service, economic, community (civic), digital and cultural – represent the ecosystem within which design patterns



Figure 15: Seven infrastructure types within which design patterns either thrive or fail

either thrive or fail. The concept of social infrastructure as defined by Klinenberg (2018) and elaborated by the Bennett Institute (Kelsey & Kenny, 2021) and the British Academy (2022) focuses primarily on spaces of interaction. This framework expands that lens to recognise that participation also depends on movement systems (physical), livelihoods (economic), governance (community/civic), connectivity (digital), services (service) and identity and belonging (cultural). These further 'infrastructures' are drawn out of both deeper, longer-term work undertaken by The Good Shift, but also are evident in the Community Researcher outputs within the ACCP project.

These infrastructures are complements, not substitutes. Social and civic infrastructure generate social capital and voice, but need economic infrastructure to turn relationships into livelihoods and shared assets. Service infrastructure can stabilise crisis, but without economic and civic infrastructure it becomes an emergency net rather than a springboard. Digital infrastructure amplifies organising, but only where people also have trusted local hubs, affordable devices and the skills and time to use them. When any one type is absent or disproportionately dominant, participation becomes fragile and selective; when they are present in balanced, community-led ways, participation becomes part of ordinary life (Klinenberg, 2018; Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022; British Academy, 2022).

How design and infrastructure play out in place

The same design patterns and infrastructure types produce very different participation outcomes depending on the place in which they are configured. Three common Australian place types illustrate this.

Greenfield outer suburbs

New master-planned estates on the urban fringe represent a particular form of infrastructure imbalance: strong in hard physical assets but thin in almost everything else (AHURI, 2020; Victorian Department of Planning, 2023). Roads, utilities and housing arrive quickly, but they are typically designed around cars, with disconnected street networks, wide arterials and limited public transport for many years after residents move in. AHURI research confirms that each item of social infrastructure in greenfield areas is accessible to fewer people than in established parts of the same city, and that fragmented transport provision inhibits connections between precincts and to higher-order services (AHURI, 2020).

- Social and community infrastructure lags badly: parks are often delivered as bare grass without shade, seating or play equipment; libraries, community centres and sport facilities can take a decade to arrive; and the volunteer-run groups that typically animate these spaces struggle to form in populations that are time-poor, commuting long distances and still finding their feet in a new place (Victorian Department of Planning, 2023).
- Service infrastructure focuses on basic schooling and childcare, while health, youth and specialist services remain distant.
- Economic infrastructure is particularly weak: local employment is limited to retail, construction and logistics, and main streets, if they exist at all, are often big-box retail strips rather than diverse, walkable high streets (Urban Development Institute of Australia, 2022).

For children and families, this combination is especially isolating. Parents of young children, at a life stage when motivation to connect is high, face severe barriers: long car trips to reach playgroups, maternal health services or simply a café with a play corner; few safe walking routes or bumping spaces; and limited community governance forums through which to shape the emerging place (van Leer Foundation, 2018).

Design interventions can partially mitigate this, for example by delivering early multi-use family hubs and quality bumping spaces, but without faster, more deliberate investment in social, economic, civic, cultural and digital infrastructure, participation remains fragile and heavily dependent on the unpaid labour of already-stretched residents.

Localities experiencing entrenched disadvantage

In suburbs and towns marked by long-term socio-economic disadvantage, the infrastructure profile is different but equally imbalanced. Here the dominant pattern is over-concentration of service infrastructure and under-resourcing of everything else (AHURI, 2014; AHURI, 2021). Decades of policy oriented to managing risk have produced a dense landscape of crisis and compliance services, including income support offices, child protection teams, justice services, short-term funded programs and rotating NGOs, while investment in community-controlled social spaces, local enterprise, cultural infrastructure and resident governance has been far thinner (Social Ventures Australia, 2025).

Research on neighbourhood effects confirms that concentrated poverty reduces access to civic organisations, social networks and the information flows that mobilise participation, while physical features of disadvantaged areas, such as dilapidated buildings, poor lighting and heavy traffic, further weaken social ties and trust (Wodtke et al., 2024; UK Neighbourhoods Commission, 2025).

- Social infrastructure often exists in these places – older halls, churches, sports grounds, parks – but can feel unsafe, securitised or stigmatised; informal third places such as takeaway shops or laundromats may carry high social loads but receive no recognition or support as participation infrastructure (Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022).
- Economic infrastructure is thin or extractive: few quality local jobs, fragile small-business ecosystems, limited access to capital, and spending that leaks to retail centres elsewhere (AHURI, 2014).
- Civic and community infrastructure is under-powered: residents are frequently consulted yet rarely hold real control over land use, investment or service design; advisory structures are fragmented and often tokenistic; and consultation fatigue is widespread (AHURI, 2021).
- Cultural infrastructure can be rich informally, particularly in First Nations and culturally diverse communities, but is under-recognised and under-resourced by formal systems.

For children and families, the result is a paradox: many programs exist, but the conditions for genuine, sustained participation, such as safety, economic stability, trusted local institutions and community power, remain inadequate (Social Ventures Australia, 2025).

In these places, adding another program or building another facility without shifting the infrastructure balance risks deepening dependence. What is needed is a deliberate rebalancing: pairing service investment with community-controlled space and governance, tying economic development to local civic and social infrastructure, and treating transport and digital inclusion as foundational enabling layers.

Relatively affluent localities

Affluent inner- and middle-ring suburbs, or established regional towns, tend to enjoy a relatively balanced and high-quality infrastructure mix (Infrastructure Australia, 2019).

- Physical infrastructure is well maintained and offers multiple movement options: train, bus, cycling and walking networks connect residents to jobs, education, culture and each other within short travel times.
- Social infrastructure is abundant and attractive: vibrant main streets, galleries, well-programmed parks and playgrounds, quality sport facilities and well-resourced libraries provide plentiful, varied bumping spaces and third places (Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022).
- Service infrastructure in these places tends to lean towards prevention and enrichment rather than crisis management: schools are well-resourced, health services include allied and specialist providers, and private and community offerings are diverse enough that residents can choose what suits them (Infrastructure Australia, 2019).
- Economic infrastructure is strong: dense local employment in professional, health, education and creative sectors, thriving retail and hospitality high streets, co-working spaces and active business associations generate local wealth and keep spending circulating within the community.
- Civic and community infrastructure is robust: residents have multiple, overlapping avenues for influence, from active precinct and school boards to resident associations, business improvement districts and responsive elected representatives; voter turnout is higher and advocacy networks are well-connected to decision-makers (British Academy, 2022).
- Cultural infrastructure is visible and valued: galleries, theatres, heritage sites, festivals and creative programs attract funding and reinforce a strong sense of local identity and belonging.
- Digital infrastructure is high-quality and widely used for community organising, local commerce and civic engagement.

In these contexts, design excellence is amplified by a supportive infrastructure ecosystem: a new park, street upgrade or community hub lands in a place where people can already reach it, afford to use it, shape its programming and connect it to wider networks. Participation is not a special effort; it is woven into daily routines. This is the benchmark against which inequities in other places should be made visible, and the standard to which investment should aspire for all communities.

Regional, rural and remote communities

In regional, rural and remote Australia, the infrastructure dynamics seen in greenfield and disadvantaged urban settings are amplified by distance, thin markets and small populations. Infrastructure Australia's 2019 Audit found that people in very remote areas have access to roughly half as many GPs per capita as those in major cities, death rates are 2.5 times higher, and Medicare-subsidised mental health services are accessed at one-third the rate (Infrastructure Australia, 2019).

Transport is overwhelmingly car-dependent, with minimal or no public transport; digital connectivity remains patchy and unaffordable in many communities; and economic infrastructure is often concentrated in a single industry, leaving local economies fragile and dependent on external investment (Parliament of Australia, 2023; AHURI, 2003).

A defining feature of smaller towns is that individual facilities carry enormous social loads across multiple infrastructure types. A school doubles as the community meeting place, the sports oval hosts social events and civic gatherings, the pub or general store functions as the primary third place, and the local church may be the only indoor venue available for groups to meet (Choices Magazine, 2023; Southern Ag Today, 2023).

Research on rural third places has found that unconventional venues such as hardware stores, seed and feed shops and petrol station cafés frequently serve as critical social infrastructure, generating both bonding and bridging social capital; quantitative analysis shows this relationship between third places and civic engagement is "slightly more pronounced in nonmetro areas," suggesting these spaces play a particularly important role where alternatives are scarce (Choices Magazine, 2023). This multi-functionality is a strength but also a vulnerability: when a single facility closes, degrades or becomes contested, social, civic, cultural and economic functions collapse simultaneously (Infrastructure Australia, 2019).

Like their urban disadvantaged counterparts, rural and remote communities can experience a pattern of service concentration without community control or economic foundation. Government and NGO service infrastructure is often delivered by external providers on short funding cycles, with limited local governance, workforce development or asset ownership (Parliament of Australia, 2023; Central Land Council, 2021). The Parliamentary inquiry into Northern Australia found that younger people and families may choose not to live in remote areas because of perceived or actual lack of social infrastructure, leading to an ageing and shrinking population with limited services because of a lack of staff, creating a downward spiral of withdrawal.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote Australia, this pattern is particularly acute. Housing and basic physical infrastructure are frequently overcrowded and poorly maintained, while service infrastructure is layered in by external agencies with limited community control (AHURI, 2006; Infrastructure Australia, 2019). Infrastructure Victoria's work on self-determination in infrastructure found that true self-determination requires a "formal transfer of power and resources, empowering Aboriginal communities to control matters that impact their lives," and that infrastructure projects embedding self-determination produce better outcomes for social cohesion, inclusivity and community wellbeing (Infrastructure Victoria, 2024). Design frameworks for remote Indigenous housing similarly emphasise the need for flexible, community-governed approaches to infrastructure procurement and management rather than standardised, externally determined models (AHURI, 2006; Health Habitat, 2008).

AHURI research on rural housing and regional development confirms that privatisation and market-driven reform have led to service closure and infrastructure withdrawal in many rural areas, and that the most significant obstacle to effective place-based outcomes is the absence of regional, integrated approaches to infrastructure investment. Place-based community development programs, such as those documented by the Central Land Council, demonstrate that where communities have increased engagement, ownership and control over infrastructure and decision-making, outcomes improve, but this requires sustained investment in governance and local capacity, not just asset delivery (Central Land Council, 2021; AHURI, 2003).

Regional and remote communities therefore make the case for a balanced infrastructure portfolio even more starkly than urban settings. Where distance, thin markets and small populations constrain what can be physically provided, every piece of infrastructure must work harder across multiple functions.

- Facilities need to be designed as integrated multi-use hubs from the outset, combining social, service, civic and cultural functions rather than single-purpose assets.
- Transport and digital connectivity are non-negotiable enabling layers: without minimum thresholds, other infrastructure investments cannot deliver their intended participation and wellbeing outcomes.
- Community governance, through Aboriginal-controlled organisations, community-owned hubs and local boards, provides the continuity and accountability that short-cycle external funding cannot.
- And economic infrastructure, including enterprise platforms, local employment pathways and mechanisms to retain wealth locally, must sit alongside services rather than being treated as someone else's problem.

Implications for funders and system stewards

The evidence makes it clear that investing in programs without regard to the design of everyday spaces and the balance of infrastructures in a place will deliver only partial, fragile gains, and this holds whether the place is a new suburban edge, a long-disadvantaged suburb, an affluent inner ring or a remote town (UK Neighbourhoods Commission, 2025; Infrastructure Australia, 2019). For funders and system stewards, four implications follow.

Assess infrastructure balance before designing interventions

Rather than starting with a project wish-list, investment strategies should begin with a place-level infrastructure assessment: which of the seven types are over-supplied (often crisis-oriented service infrastructure in disadvantaged and remote areas), which are under-supplied (typically economic, civic, social and cultural infrastructure), and how do transport and digital gaps compound these patterns? In regional and remote communities, where single facilities carry multiple infrastructure functions, this diagnosis must account for the fragility created when one closure or funding cut cascades across social, civic, cultural and economic domains simultaneously (Infrastructure Australia, 2019; Parliament of Australia, 2023). Tools emerging from social infrastructure reviews, neighbourhood-focused commissions and early-years investment mapping provide useful starting points for this kind of portfolio analysis (UK Neighbourhoods Commission, 2025; Social Ventures Australia, 2025).

Tie design excellence to rebalancing and integration

The most promising investments are those that simultaneously improve the design quality of key spaces and shift the infrastructure mix toward community-controlled, relational and opportunity-creating assets (British Academy, 2022). In greenfield settings, this means delivering integrated multi-use hubs early rather than waiting a decade for social and civic infrastructure to catch up with housing (Victorian Department of Planning, 2023). In disadvantaged urban localities, it means pairing main-street revitalisation with local enterprise support and resident governance, not just attracting chain retail or adding another service office (AHURI, 2014) . In regional and remote communities, it means designing every new or refurbished facility for multi-function from the outset, co-locating social, service, civic and cultural uses in a single, community-governed hub, and coupling this with transport and digital connectivity upgrades (Central Land Council, 2021; AHURI, 2003). In each case, success depends on linking physical and digital access with governance and economic levers, not simply building a better facility.

Invest in community power and connective tissue

The literature on social infrastructure, neighbourhood effects and self-determination consistently shows that the most resilient, participatory communities are those where residents have meaningful control over assets and decisions, and where connectors, such as community builders, organisers and cultural leaders, weave people and institutions together (Klinenberg, 2018; Wodtke et al., 2024). For philanthropic actors, this points toward long-term support for community-led organisations, including Aboriginal-controlled bodies in remote and regional settings, along with resident assemblies, participatory budgeting, and connector roles embedded in trusted local places such as libraries, schools and neighbourhood houses. Infrastructure Victoria's finding that self-determination in infrastructure produces better outcomes for social cohesion, inclusivity and community wellbeing applies well beyond remote Aboriginal communities; it is equally relevant to greenfield estates where residents have had no hand in shaping their place, and to disadvantaged suburbs where consultation fatigue has eroded trust in top-down processes (Infrastructure Victoria, 2024).

Treat transport and digital connectivity as non-negotiable enabling layers

Across all four place types, transport and digital infrastructure function as preconditions for every other infrastructure to deliver participation outcomes (Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022; AHURI, 2020). In outer suburbs, infrequent buses and unsafe walking routes lock families out of emerging social and civic opportunities. In disadvantaged localities, the cost and complexity of reaching jobs, education and civic forums by public transport compounds every other deficit. In regional and remote communities, the absence of public transport and reliable broadband can render even well-designed facilities inaccessible and leave communities dependent on a single physical venue for all online access (Infrastructure Australia, 2019; National Rural Health Alliance, 2026). Funders should consider transport and digital inclusion as foundational requirements in any place-based investment strategy, not optional additions: without minimum thresholds on these enabling layers, spending on programs, spaces and services will consistently under-deliver.

Conclusion

Participation emerges across this review as a living system rather than a discrete activity - the evidence shows that participation, connectedness, equity and resilience are four branches of the same root system, generating either virtuous cycles of flourishing or reinforcing loops of fragmentation and harm. When participation is well-supported, social ties deepen, health and wellbeing improve, trust grows, democratic engagement strengthens, and communities become better able to adapt to shocks; when it erodes, loneliness, poor health, economic insecurity, distrust and polarisation feed each other in a downward spiral.

What the review has covered

This literature review has synthesised fragmented literatures into a four-quadrant sensemaking framework, surfaced strategic questions for funders about power, process and scale, and highlighted bold approaches that explicitly link participation with asset ownership, decision-making authority and long-term institutional change.

- Participation clarifies power-sharing in decision-making (invited versus claimed spaces, depth versus breadth), critically assesses ladders, spectrums and cubes, and emphasises resourcing the 'invisible labour' of quality participation rather than treating it as a cost-free means to other ends.

- Connectedness distinguishes social cohesion from broader drivers like inequality, highlights evidence on what works - structured intergroup contact, co-designed initiatives, third-sector infrastructure, leadership for inclusive norms- and warns against one-off, symbolic interventions.

- Equity shows how inequality depresses participation and how poorly designed engagement can reproduce harm, pointing to asset-based approaches, community wealth building and participatory grantmaking as ways to shift who holds assets, voice and agenda-setting power.

- Resilience distinguishes planned from emergent resilience, demonstrates that social capital and civic participation are as important as physical infrastructure, and argues for long-term, place-based investment in relationships and civic infrastructure that help communities "bounce forward", not just survive crises.

The systems maps developed alongside this review make visible how these segments are profoundly interconnected: shifts in any domain reverberate across the whole system, from individual wellbeing and family life to neighbourhood safety, economic opportunity and democratic legitimacy (see figures 16 and 17).

The positive feedback loops show how increased participation expands social ties, reduces loneliness, improves mental and physical health, builds collective efficacy and trust across difference, and strengthens democratic engagement - each reinforcing the others.

The negative loops reveal the mirror image: when participation erodes, communities enter a web of mutually reinforcing harms that create fertile ground for polarisation, extremism and institutional breakdown.

Key Takeaways

Minderoo Foundation's greatest leverage lies not in funding more participation 'activities', but in resourcing the conditions under which participation genuinely shifts power and enables the positive loops revealed in the systems maps: time and economic stability for those most affected, skills and confidence-building, trusted intermediaries and 'weavers', third spaces and civic infrastructure, and institutional readiness (including within Minderoo Foundation itself) to share authority, respond visibly to community leadership, and change practice.

Strategic opportunity sits in backing bold, field-building moves - participatory philanthropy, community wealth building, community-led resilience and social cohesion initiatives, and support for "claimed spaces" where communities set their own agendas - that treat participation as core infrastructure rather than a discretionary engagement process attached to programs.

Participation infrastructures - the places, norms, relationships, platforms, skills and institutional practices that make it easy and meaningful for people to shape their shared world - play the same foundational role for social, democratic and ecological outcomes as roads do for economic activity or hospitals do for health.

Leaving this review, Minderoo Foundation should carry forward a clear mandate: treat participation, connectedness, equity and resilience as intertwined pillars of a single living system; invest for the long haul in emergent resilience and civic infrastructure that strengthen the positive feedback loops; and use its own power, practices and partnerships to help rewire systems so that communities most affected by decisions can set agendas, own assets, and shape fairer futures on their own terms.

The evidence speaks loudly - communities with high participation don't just have higher wellbeing, they face fewer intractable problems, generate more trust and opportunity, and are more resilient when crises hit. Participation isn't an ideological preference - it's how humans flourish together, and the question for Minderoo Foundation is whether it will build the conditions that make it possible for everyone.

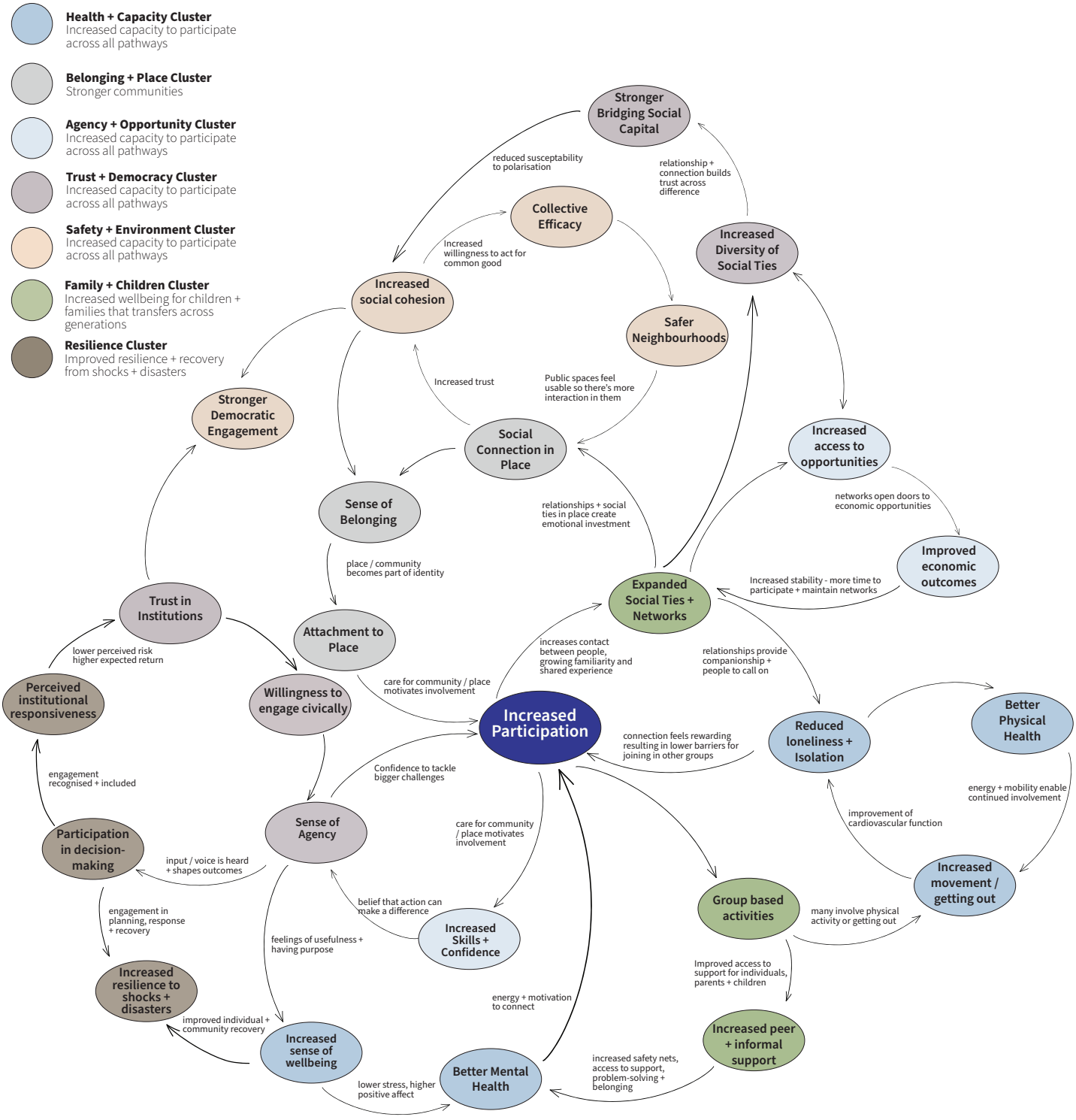


Figure 16: A Systems Map showing what the evidence covered in this literature review demonstrates about the positive connections that are generated through increased civic and community participation

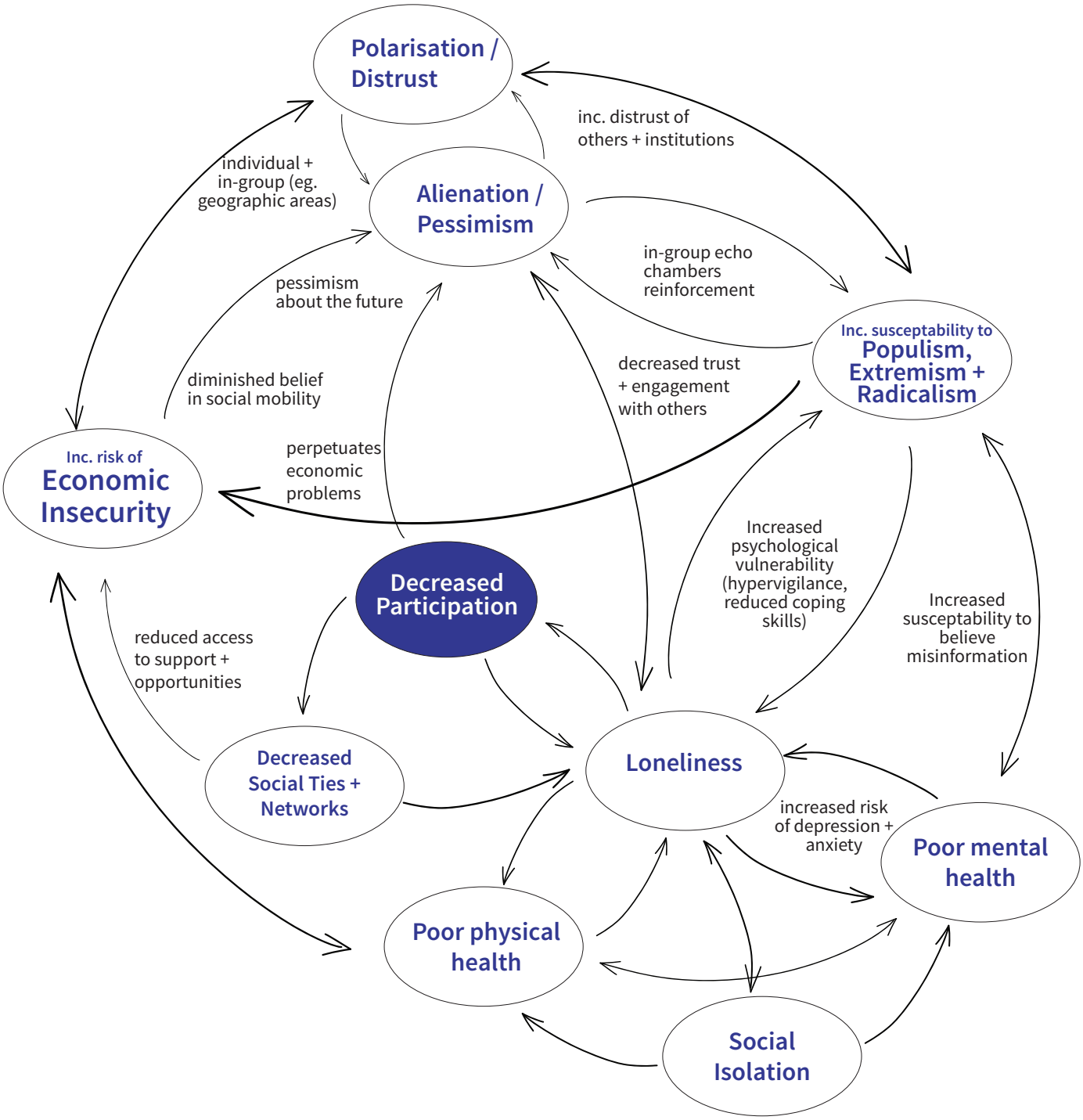


Figure 17: A Systems Map showing what the evidence covered in this literature review demonstrates about the negative connections that are associated with decreased civic and community participation

Appendices

Appendix One: Models of Participation

Contextualising Three Models: Ladders, Spectrums and Cubes

This appendix examines three influential models that have shaped thinking and practice around civic and community participation: Arnstein's ladder, the IAP2 Spectrum, and Fung's democracy cube. Together, they trace a shift from viewing participation simply as 'taking part' to understanding it as structured, contested arrangements for sharing power, setting agendas, and influencing decisions in both state and market contexts. Situating these models within contemporary debates about invited versus claimed spaces, institutional capacity to 'host' participation, and the risks of tokenism provides a critical foundation for assessing their usefulness in Minderoo Foundation's efforts to activate deeper, more equitable forms of civic and community participation.

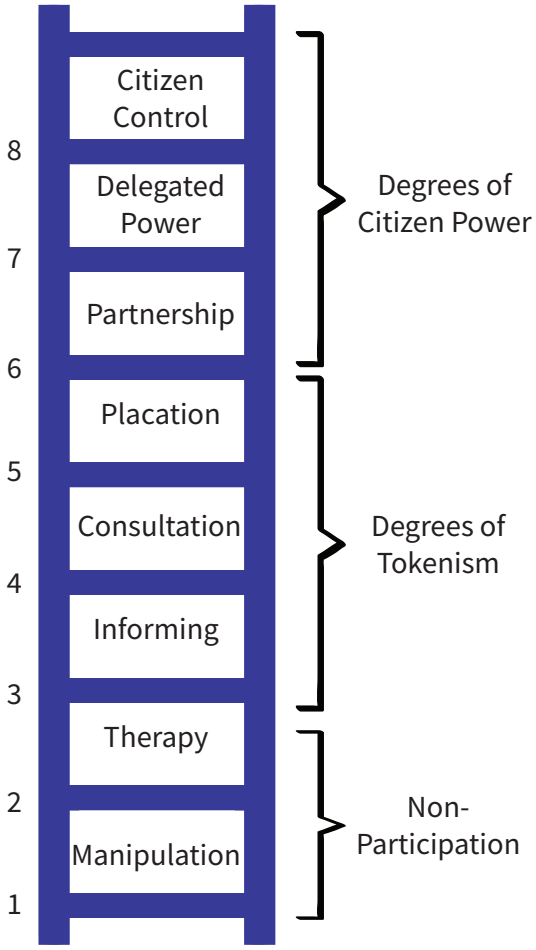


Figure 18: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969)

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) represents the foundational critique of tokenistic engagement, depicting participation as an eight-rung ladder ranging from manipulation and therapy (non-participation) through consultation and placation (tokenism) to partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (citizen power). Though it has been heavily critiqued as being oversimplistic and ignoring structural issues, the ladder's central insight was its explicit focus on power redistribution as the defining feature of authentic participation (see figure 18).

The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation emerged as a practitioner-oriented framework widely adopted by Australian governments. It defines five levels - inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower - each with explicit promises to the public and corresponding participation goals. Unlike Arnstein's critical stance, IAP2 presents these as legitimate levels rather than steps, acknowledging that different contexts warrant different levels of public influence (see figure 19).

Fung's Democracy Cube (2006) takes a three-dimensional approach, analysing participation mechanisms across three continuums: who participates (from exclusive expert administrators to open self-selection), how they communicate and decide (from listening as spectators to deliberation and negotiation), and the authority and power granted (from personal benefits to direct authority). This multidimensional framework allows for more nuanced mapping of participatory designs than linear models (Visser et al, 2019). We have also added a fourth continuum in line with (references), focused on 'meaning' of participation from the participants perspectives (drawing on Visser et al, 2019, and influenced by White, 1996) (see figure 20).

Strengths and Applications

Arnstein's ladder remains powerful for exposing the rhetoric-reality gap in participation. Its provocation continues to challenge institutions to move beyond consultation toward genuine power-sharing, and empirical research confirms that citizens themselves favor arrangements equivalent to higher rungs, rating them as more legitimate and effective.The IAP2 Spectrum offers practical utility for planning and communicating about engagement processes. Its widespread adoption in Australian government contexts

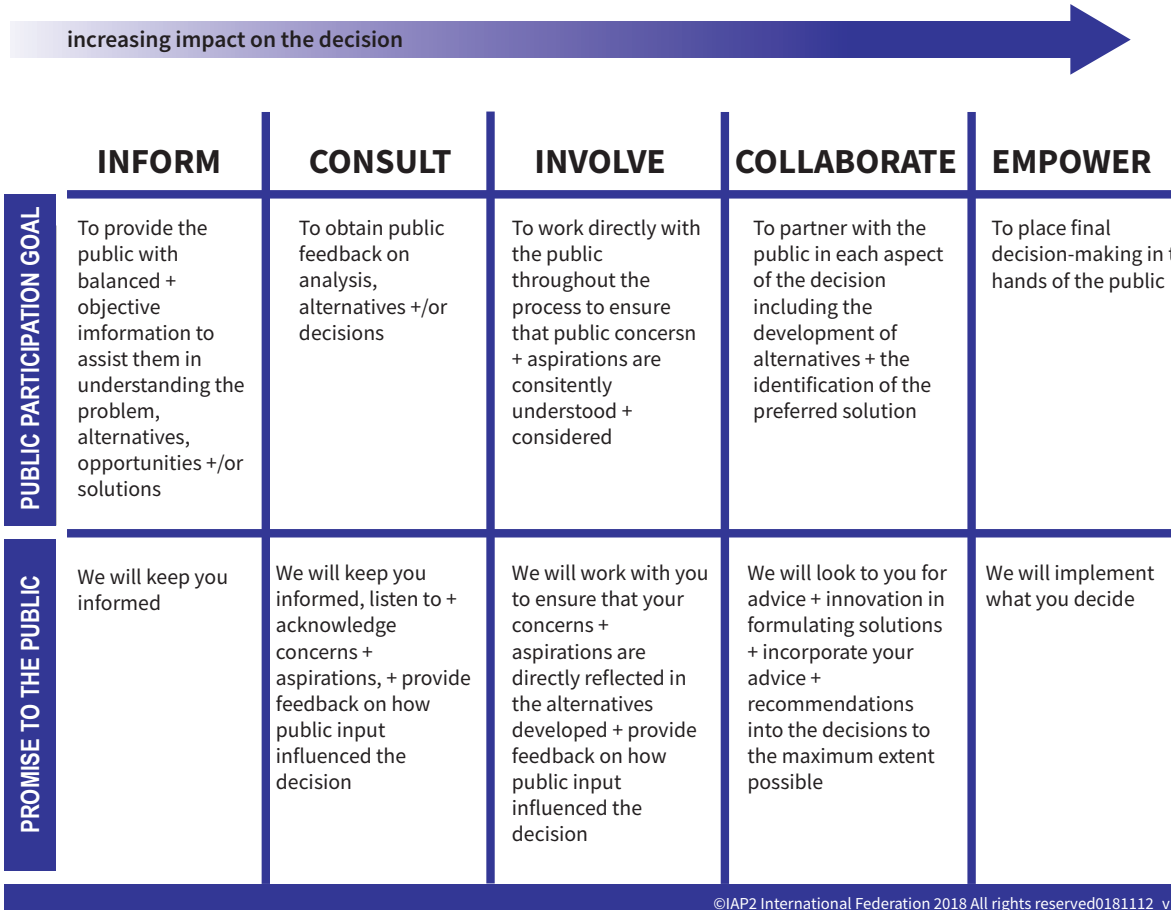


Figure 19: IAP2 Spectrum of Participation

provides a common language for practitioners, and its explicit "promises to the public" create accountability mechanisms. The framework acknowledges that not every decision requires co-governance - some contexts appropriately call for information provision or consultation.

Fung's democracy cube provides analytical sophistication that linear models lack. By disaggregating participation into three independent dimensions (and even further with our forth dimension), it reveals that a process can be open in selection yet limited in authority, or deliberative in mode yet restricted to expert participants. This helps designers identify specific features to strengthen rather than assuming participation quality is unidimensional.

Limitations and Critiques

Arnstein's binary power logic oversimplifies contemporary participatory landscapes. The ladder assumes a zero-sum game between state and citizens that doesn't account for collaborative governance where power is generated rather than redistributed, nor does it address horizontal power dynamics within communities - particularly elite capture that can occur even at "citizen control" rungs. The model also predates digital participation mechanisms that blur previously distinct thresholds.

The IAP2 Spectrum risks legitimising lower rungs as acceptable endpoints rather than starting points. By framing all five levels as equally valid "depending on context," it can inadvertently provide cover for institutions to remain at inform or consult levels for high-stakes decisions that warrant collaboration or empowerment. The framework also emphasises institution-initiated processes, giving less attention to community-claimed spaces where citizens set their own agendas.

Fung's democracy cube, while analytically rich, presents implementation challenges. Its three-dimensional complexity can make it difficult for practitioners to operationalise, and the model focuses primarily on formal governance mechanisms rather than informal or movement-based participation. It also doesn't explicitly address the temporal dimension - how participation evolves over time or how people move between different modes.

Cross-Cutting Considerations

All three models grapple inadequately with power asymmetries within participating publics. They focus on state-citizen or institution-community dynamics but give limited attention to how class, race, gender, disability, and migration status shape who can participate and whose knowledge counts.

The models also privilege invited spaces over claimed spaces. Arnstein and IAP2 both assume institutions design the processes, while even Fung's framework centers on formal mechanisms. Yet research shows that community-initiated participation -where people organise on their own terms - generates different forms of agency and ownership.

Finally, these models emerged in contexts emphasising episodic participation (single consultations, time-bound processes) rather than the ongoing, relational participation that builds trust and enables people to move from low-risk to high-influence roles over time.

Choosing Models for Purpose

Rather than selecting a single model, Minderoo Foundation's approach to activating civic and community participation might benefit from strategic eclecticism - drawing on different frameworks for different purposes. For example, Minderoo Foundation may choose to:

- Use Arnstein's ladder diagnostically to maintain critical vigilance about power and prevent settling for tokenism, particularly when assessing whether proposed participation matches the stakes involved.
- Deploy the IAP2 Spectrum operationally when planning specific engagement processes and communicating with institutional partners already using this language, but pair it with explicit alignment between decision impact and participation level.
- Apply Fung's cube analytically when designing or evaluating complex participatory mechanisms, particularly to identify which specific dimensions need strengthening and to map how different initiatives complement each other across the three continuums.

Most importantly, however, it it is important to recognise that no model substitutes for the foundational work of resourcing the invisible labourr of participation processes, supporting both community capacity and institutional readiness to host participation well, and funding community-claimed spaces alongside invited ones. The models illuminate design choices, but activation requires sustained investment in the enabling conditions - time, skills, trusted relationships, and genuine commitment to sharing agenda-setting power - that make any participatory mechanism meaningful rather than merely symbolic.

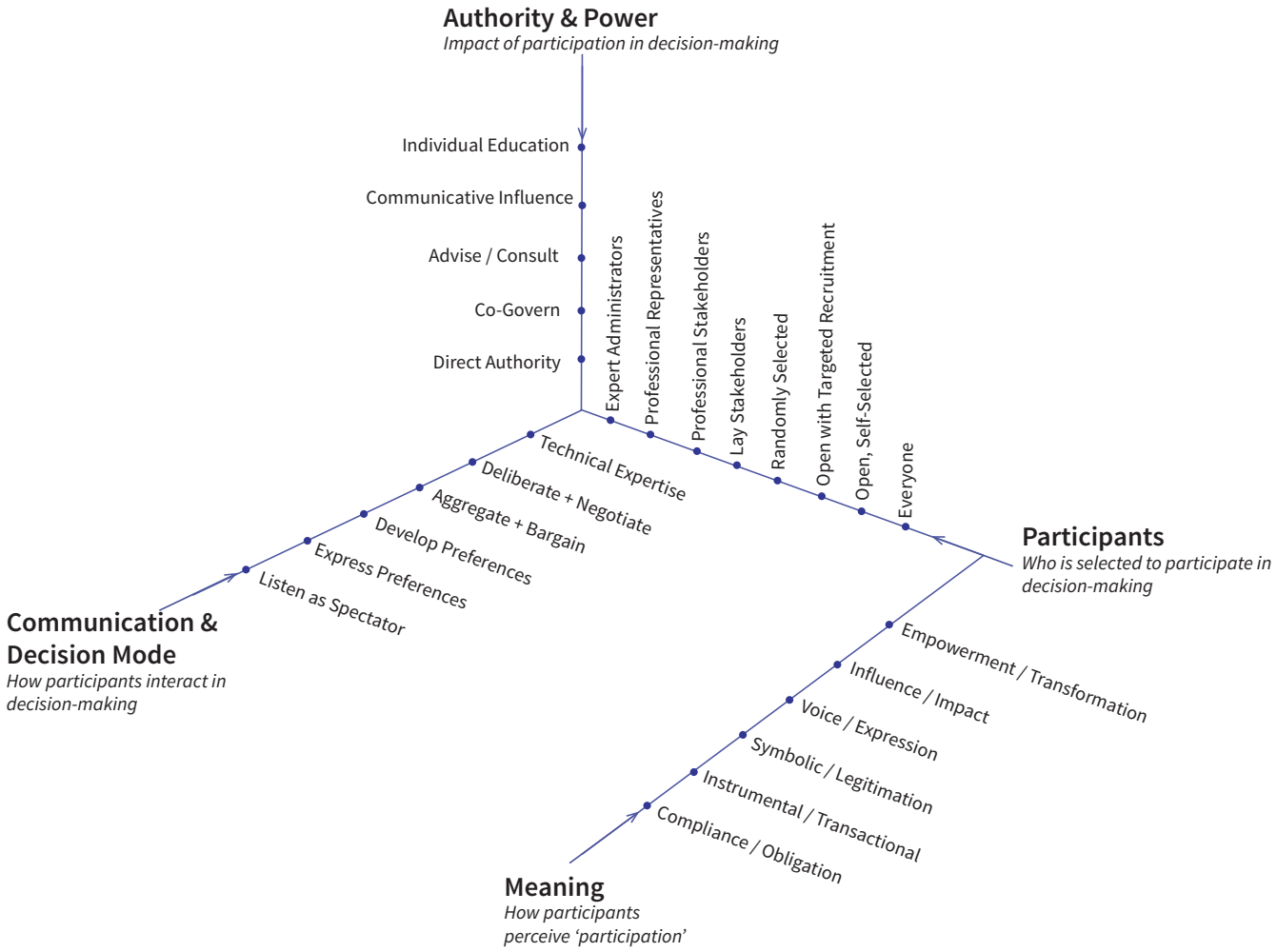


Figure 20: Fung's Democracy Cube (with additions from Visser, 2019 and influences from White, 1996)

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