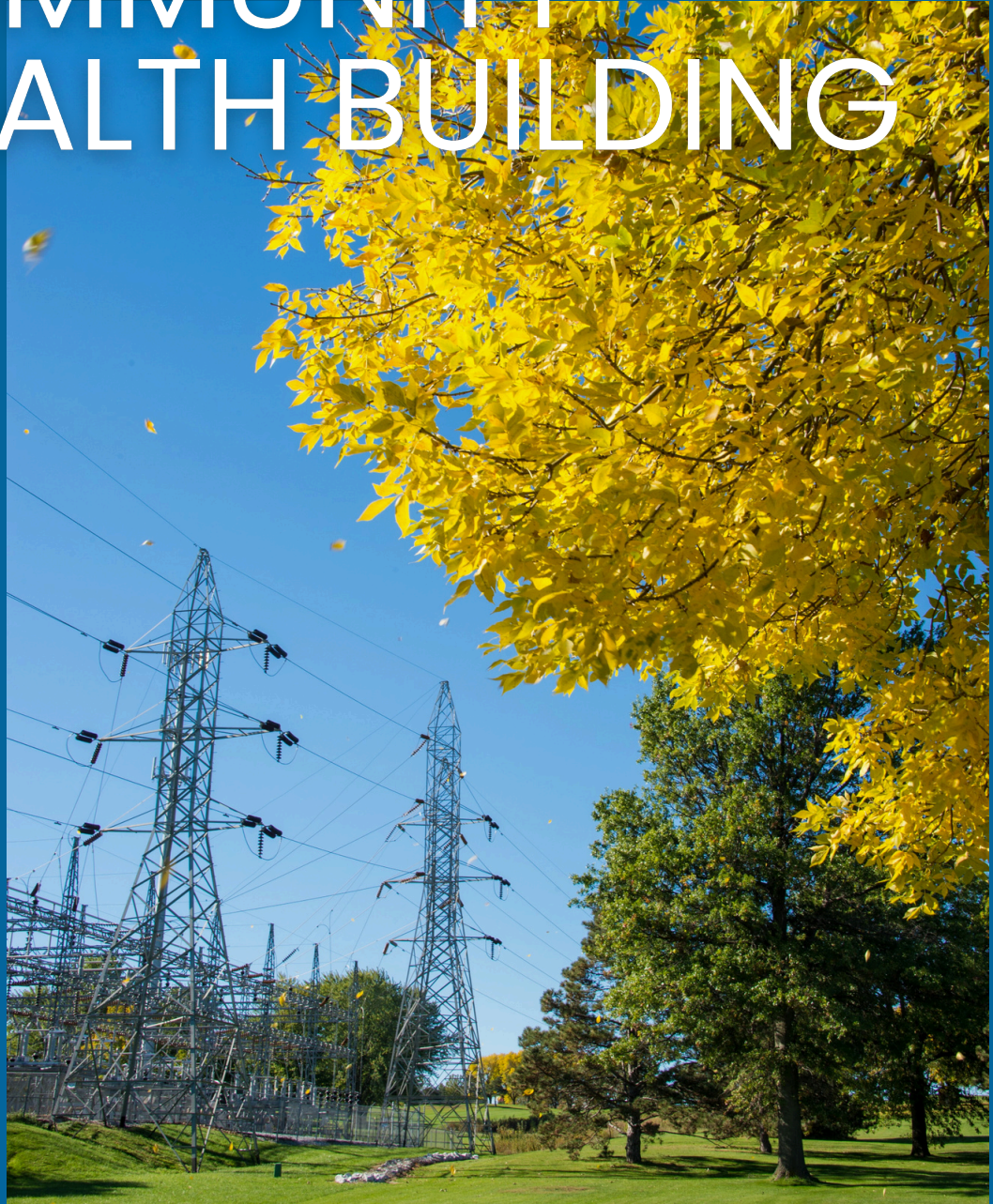


# ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING



**DEMOCRACY**  
COLLABORATIVE

This working paper summarizes and explores the *enabling conditions* which influence the start up, growth, and—ultimately—success of Community Wealth Building in place.



# WHAT ARE THESE CONDITIONS?



Enabling conditions are identified from observed patterns of **Community Wealth Building** (CWB) in practice, including from the work of practitioners in The Democracy Collaborative's CWB Community of Practice. They also reflect the learning from TDC's engagement with CWB practitioners and partner organizations across the USA and abroad.

Alongside our [Five Pillar model](#) for CWB activities, these enabling conditions offer a means by which we can deliver CWB more effectively.





# BACKGROUND



At **The Democracy Collaborative**, we believe that the multiple crises we face are driven by the extractive nature of our current economic system: characterized by concentrated ownership, community disinvestment, increasing precarity of labor, environmental degradation, and structural injustices.

We believe that Community Wealth Building has the potential to directly confront and address these trends and build an economic system where ownership is shared — broadly, democratically, and equitably.

This is very hard work. The problems are easy to see; they are all around us and we are dealing with their consequences every day. But the way forward is not as clear. Systems of power and wealth benefit from the existing order and either choose to ignore the problems or actively mount barriers in the way of solving them.

**As such, system change is essential.**

CWB's theory of change is based on a steady, inexorable process of designing, building, and scaling solutions, leveraging both the tools at our disposal while simultaneously innovating new ones to tackle our economic system at the root.



# STATE VS CIVIL SOCIETY

Drawing on our experience working alongside Community Wealth Builders in the United States and Scotland, we are witnessing three sociocultural conditions which influence the success in driving broad-scale economic transformation within and beyond the state. In this we can see how some core overarching dynamics greatly influence the governance, and thereby expansion, of CWB:



- AN ENDURING SENSE OF INJUSTICE
- TRUST IN THE EFFICACY OF THE STATE
- PRESENCE OF A ROBUST CIVIL SOCIETY, THAT CAN ASSIST, AGITATE, AND MORPH INTO MORE ACTIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

What is clear across all three conditions is that the patterns of change and scale of CWB are influenced by the power of the state and its relationship to its citizens.

THE RELATIVE ABSENCE OR MISTRUST OF THE STATE CAN FUEL A GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM THAT CAN HELP DRIVE CWB

A STATE THAT IS AWARE OF AND RESPONSIVE TO THE PEOPLE'S WILL MUST EMBRACE THE GRASSROOTS ENERGY OF CWB, SO THAT A POWERFUL PACE AND DEPTH OF CHANGE IS FACILITATED



# ENABLING CONDITIONS

What is evident is that there is no one-size-fits-all model of Community Wealth Building. Each approach will be different, based on local context, resources, and politics.

But there are patterns across practice.



For example, some places take up CWB more readily while others do not. CWB action moves faster and goes deeper in some areas than in others. CWB will sometimes start slow and build toward greater momentum, while other times it starts with a bang and then peters out.

These variations illustrate the different enabling conditions that impact the viability, uptake, growth, and sustainability of a CWB strategy locally.

It is therefore important to be aware of these conditions, take advantage of their presence, and work on developing them when they are absent - and/or seek to nurture and scale them when they are present.

Below we outline our initial observations of these enabling conditions, separated into three broad groupings.



# ENABLING CONDITIONS – GROUPINGS

PEOPLE



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PLACE



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INSTITUTIONS & ORGANIZATIONS



These conditions have differing levels of importance at different stages of Community Wealth Building evolution. Some are more important when getting started, while others are instrumental to sustaining the approach over time.

Ultimately, however, the presence of one or more of these enabling conditions is necessary to support CWB in a local landscape.

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In all movements the people involved are the heart and soul.

As the agents of change they can spread knowledge and drive action. Considering how certain individuals can leverage their positional power and influence, and understanding how to access that power both at the grassroots and at institutional levels, is critical to advancing Community Wealth Building.

**CONTINUED**

# PEOPLE

**ELECTED POLITICIANS**

Democratically elected politicians wield political influence, which can make them powerful champions for CWB — from mobilizing people and directing much needed resources, to policy making and legislation — all aid the advancement of structural change

**ACTIVISTS/ORGANIZERS**

Activists rally communities against lived injustice and their organizing energy helps to position, mobilize and maintain CWB action — including having local insight into depth and voracity of CWB progress

**CWB ADVOCATES (NON-GOVERNMENT)**

Non-political actors working in anchor organizations (e.g. universities) who are passionate about change serve as key drivers of CWB practices within institutional machinery

**ENGAGED COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

Residents who have the time, energy, and resources to agitate for change and CWB action are important in organizing and in holding to account implementation

**COMMITTED CIVIL SERVANTS**

Government employees from a wide variety of departments who can influence policy and practice shifts within the apparatus of government are powerful change agents





# PEOPLE



## RESEARCHERS & STORYTELLERS

Being able to paint the picture of CWB solutions in a way that is accessible, while resonating with community, is significant. The use of data and media tools which reach people where they are, and building out participatory research, is essential for moving CWB from an idea and a framework to reality

## GENERATIVE PROFESSIONALS

Having the lawyers, accountants, business people, architects and planners that don't just parachute in to a locality and leave, but can lend their skill and expertise to communities in a way that develops local talent and ability, is important to advance CWB beyond piloting, and to imbed efforts directly into mainstream practice







## CWB is rooted in the context of a particular place.

Understanding the cultural and historical landscape is essential in cultivating the soil that supports and fosters vibrant Community Wealth Building efforts.

# PLACE

### **PREEXISTING POLICY & ACTION**

Most places are already aware of and/or advancing elements within the Five Pillars of CWB. Naming and connecting preexisting policies and practices across the Pillars accelerates the take up and growth of CWB

### **MOTIVATIONAL LOCAL ISSUE**

An ongoing issue that is widely experienced and is inadequately or not being solved or addressed by current economic development strategies creates a boiling discontentment which can motivate organizing for and action toward change

### **TRIGGER EVENT, CRISIS OR INJUSTICE**

Adverse or calamitous events — such as a flood, wildfires, or police brutality — expose structural injustices and trigger wider calls for economic justice and community control, positioning CWB as a productive antidote

### **RADICAL POLITICAL PROVENANCE**

A history of a place where there has been significant and overt politicization and mobilization of people (e.g. fighting against racial and/or class injustice in Chicago, IL) creates a collective cultural identity, community memory and lineage to which CWB can tap into, connect and give power

**CONTINUED**





# PLACE

**LEGAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

Having supportive legal and jurisdictional configurations allows for the advancement of actions and elements across the Pillars

**EQUAL VALUES FINANCIAL RESOURCES**

The existence of mission-aligned public and private investment flows make it possible to both catalyze and sustain CWB action

**ECONOMIC SECTOR**

Certain economic sectors may have a tradition of broad-based ownership models (e.g. agriculture), while other, emerging sectors are primed for democratic ownership models (e.g. energy). Other sectors have a syndical tradition, or there is a prevailing labor union or worker struggle for representation. All offer the opportunity to demonstrate and scale CWB activity

**CULTURE OF COMMUNITY BUILDING AND SELF-DETERMINATION**

Some communities have a deep culture of cohesion and bonding — often as the result of historical disinvestment and exclusion — meeting and sustaining economic needs through informal cooperative practices that can be built on to legitimize and sustain CWB activity locally





# INSTITUTIONS & ORGANIZATIONS



A robust landscape of active and engaged organizations can serve as the infrastructure to deliver CWB.

These institutions can also lend credibility and heft to Community Wealth Building, offering the mechanisms to scale and institutionalize power.

## **ANCHORS**

Large public and nonprofit organizations are rooted in place and have a mission to serve. With awareness of their role as partial shapers of local/regional economy, they can help create the conditions that enable CWB actions to thrive

## **TRADE UNIONS**

Trade unions not only represent and protect worker interest, but also serve as political influencers and actors in place. They can play an important role in advocating for local economic reforms central to CWB — such as support for employee ownership and worker buy-outs

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The support and commitment of local governments to creating policies, provide resources, and convene key players is ultimately critical for the longterm success of CWB (i.e. producing CWB action plans as core part of their economic strategy)

## **PHILANTHROPY**

Philanthropic, non-governmental funding acts as seed or catalytic capital necessary to start CWB by modeling proofs of concept, or building the technical assistance capacity that may be missing to deliver on CWB ideas

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# INSTITUTIONS & ORGANIZATIONS

## **NONPROFIT OR “BACKBONE” ORGANIZATIONS**

Community-based organizations are often the key drivers of CWB action. From building and iterating the various elements of CWB (e.g. land trusts, cooperatives) to building coalitions among community stakeholders, “backbone” organizations amplify action across the Five Pillars. Importantly, some of these organizations are positioned to act as intermediary bodies, providing the infrastructure to hold complex relationships (often with politicians and political administrations) and the resources to help build capacity and advance development

## **INCLUSIVE & DEMOCRATIC ENTERPRISES**

The presence of various business set-ups — from social or municipal enterprises to cooperatives — can create a point of reference (or proof of concept) for democratized ownership and act as a rallying coalition for CWB

## **SUPPORTIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS**

High touch and specialized assistance to support and professionalize local CWB institutions and elements is necessary to rebuild capacity that has been drained from communities through disinvestment and atomization



# MOVING FORWARD

Not every place will have all of these enabling conditions — nor do they need to in order to get started.

Some of these conditions are catalytic, while others are about staying power and the enduring quality of a longterm Community Wealth Building strategy. However, many of these conditions can be cultivated through broader movement networking, partnership and collaboration.

Some of these conditions are more important than others, depending on the place and its context. Various combinations of these factors can be at play in any given place at any given time; some will be stronger or more dominant than others at different times, so it is important to be able to use such openings as opportunities and go where a community's strengths and energy are.

Determining the presence and sophistication of these various conditions in a given place is helpful in assessing a community's readiness for CWB strategy.

Ultimately, a successful CWB approach must nestle within the personal, political, cultural and institutional context of a place, leveraging and augmenting — and ultimately transforming — what already exists.

Doing so will not only empower more immediate action, but help sustain Community Wealth Building as central to economic change.







## DEMOCRACY COLLABORATIVE

**The Democracy Collaborative** is a research and development organization for the democratic economy. Founded in 2000, our mission is to demonstrate in theory and in practice the principles of a democratic economy, offering a vision of what that economy can be, designing models that demonstrate how it operates, and building in coalition with others the pathways to a new reality. By making the democratic economy conceivable, visible, and practical, we open minds, ignite hope, and inspire action.

**THINK. DO. CHANGE.**

Learn more at [democracycollaborative.org](https://democracycollaborative.org).



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