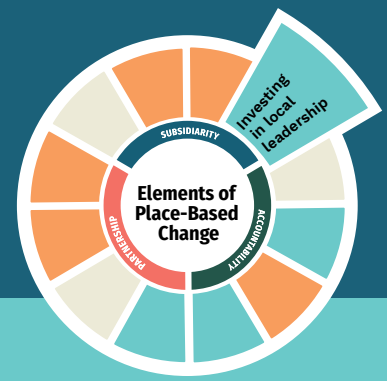


**Subsidiarity:** Decisions should be made at the most local level possible – where people have the greatest knowledge of context and the strongest stake in the outcomes. In place-based work, this means shifting authority closer to community – giving local leaders, organisations and residents the power to shape the services and systems that affect them.



## 1.4 Investing in local leadership

**Invest in the capacity and legitimacy of local organisations and leaders to act as stewards of change.**

### What is investing in local leadership in the context of place-based change?

Investing in local leadership and local organisations is central to place-based change because community acceptance and ownership are often key success factors for an initiative.

For many community leaders and organisations, leadership does not come from title or hierarchy. Leadership arises from need, cultural and spiritual authority, trust, and the capability to mobilise the local community, government agencies, service providers, and funders around a common vision.

Leadership is already happening in families, youth councils, community boards and grassroots networks. What they need now is for systems to back that leadership with real authority.

Becoming a community leader rarely follows a normative pathway. There's no formal qualification and it looks different in every context. It's important to recognise and understand the diversity of leadership models and norms, and

the need to invest in and enable the development of community leaders in ways that reflect their community and cultural contexts.

Community roles shift and change over time in the work of place-based change, from providing advice or leading specific activities to participating in shared governance and accountability. This transition requires different skills and confidence levels for both community leaders and partner organisations. Investing in building these capabilities – particularly in relational and cultural competencies – should be planned and resourced.

Leadership development should be planned and budgeted as a core activity, not as an optional extra. A mix of approaches can strengthen leadership, including formal training, peer learning networks, self-directed learning and cultural mentorship. The best methods are linked into the local context and draw on existing resources and networks.

Enabling community leadership also means removing barriers. Common challenges include limited resources, short funding

cycles and staff balancing multiple roles. Evidence from Collective Impact work highlights the value of investing in coordinating positions and organisations that bring all partners together around the different activities, programs and projects to achieve change. Similar investments are also needed for community organisations, who are often the most consistent actors across interventions and the trusted stewards of local knowledge.

Supporting these organisations through seed funding, incorporating leadership roles into program design, or creating permanent positions strengthens their ability to lead and sustain change long after external programs conclude. Strategic and sustained investment in both coordinating roles and community organisations can support current leaders and nurture emerging leaders for the next generation.

Investment should look beyond visible or well-connected individuals to include emerging and less recognised leaders. Deep listening helps identify where influence lies, who holds



community trust, and where opportunities exist to build new leadership capacity. It is important to support leaders and develop an inclusive leadership group that represents the diversity of the local community and avoids reliance on one or two people.

### Why investing in local leadership is important in place-based change

Strong local institutions and leadership are fundamental to subsidiarity – keeping decision-making power close to the people most affected. This supports the self-determination of all communities and increases the agency of individuals. Locally-led institutions provide continuity, buffer against short-term funding or political cycles, and create trusted spaces where communities

and partners can collaborate with confidence.

Investing in local leadership matters because it strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of place-based work. When local leaders and organisations are resourced to lead, decision-making becomes more relevant, timely and grounded in community realities. Local leadership ensures that priorities reflect lived experience and that solutions build on community strengths rather than external assumptions.

Leadership already exists at many levels within communities. Investment helps it evolve and endure by supporting both current and emerging leaders. It also requires recognising that leadership does not always follow formal or hierarchical pathways – it can be collective, cultural or issue-

specific. Sustained investment builds capability, confidence and local authority to share in governance and accountability for outcomes.

Balancing investment between individuals and institutions is equally important. Individuals bring insight, trust and energy, while strong local organisations provide the structure to sustain collective leadership over time. Supporting both creates an ecosystem that is capable of leading and maintaining change.

Ultimately, investing in local leadership reflects a shift in mindset – from seeing communities as recipients of services to recognising them as the stewards of systems change. It builds resilience, strengthens trust, and ensures that power and responsibility for progress rest where they have the greatest impact – with communities themselves.

## Key takeaways

- **Recognise and resource existing leadership**

Leadership already exists in every community. Listen and identify who the community values as leaders by looking at cultural and community authority as well as titles and hierarchy.

- **Invest in people and institutions**

Balanced support for both individuals and organisations strengthens whole-of-community leadership. Training, mentoring and employment pathways build personal capability, while long-term funding for community-led and locally embedded organisations ensures enduring capacity and cohesion.

- **Build capability through subsidiarity**

Keep power and decision-making as close as possible to the people affected. Co-design

capacity-building plans with communities that strengthen cultural and relational competencies, governance skills, and confidence to engage in shared accountability and leadership.

- **Remove structural barriers**

Address role overload, short-term funding cycles, and fragmented responsibilities that undermine local leadership. Flexible, sustained investment enables leaders and organisations to focus on outcomes, continuity and building trust over time.

- **Broaden the base of leadership**

Avoid concentrating investment in a few visible or well-connected individuals. Use deep listening to identify where influence and trust sit within the community, supporting diverse and emerging voices to lead and participate.