IRIS

Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks

A Model for Addressing Structural Marginalization

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT IRIS

Informed by the systemic exclusion that people with intellectual disabilities and other marginalized groups face, IRIS's mission is to seed and support transformative social development. Guided by the principles of full inclusion and human rights, we carry out research to identify issues and policy options. We foster social innovation to re-imagine inclusion and design new ways to meet unmet needs. Through capacity building, we strengthen leadership and constituencies for transformative change. For more information, visit us as at https://irisinstitute.ca or email contact@irisinstitute.ca.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, regional and national coalitions, collectives, and advocacy and self-advocacy groups have been working to address the poverty and violence that people who have been systemically marginalized experience. However, advocates regularly note that, despite their efforts, there is a notable lack of improvement in peoples' lives; in fact, there is evidence that conditions are becoming worse.[1]

This report examines the concept and practice of Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks (LSISNs) as one alternative to what appear to be limited and ineffective strategies for addressing some of the most extreme manifestations of marginalization experienced by specific populations in Canada, such as gender-based violence, homelessness, and extreme poverty. Over the past decade, IRIS – Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society, has been evolving the LSISN approach, through working with local Indigenous, racialized, and disability partners across the country. We have learned the importance of focusing on grassroots community-based solutions, rather than trying to "fix" or reform local mainstream systems that were never built with these populations in mind. By creating a space for local grassroots leadership from marginalized groups to meet and collaborate with, a unique dialogue begins to emerge outside of local mainstream service parameters.

Based on learning from our work to-date, IRIS defines LSISNs as follows:

> Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks are collective actors rooted in a local, geographic community, made up of grassroots front-line service providers and community members of diverse marginalized populations, specifically Indigenous, Black African and other racialized groups, refugees and people with intellectual, psychosocial and cognitive disabilities. The aim is for these groups to work in solidarity, and using a gender-based lens to build a holistic web of support around these marginalized communities through community-led interventions designed to: 1) enhance economic security; 2) improve health status; and 3) prevent and more effectively respond to violence.

Within the broad category of marginalized groups, we have narrowed our focus to the *marginalized of the marginalized*, that is, those groups of people who are often excluded even in broader equality-seeking advocacy efforts, such as:

- People with intellectual, psychosocial, and cognitive disabilities, whose issues get less attention in the broader disability discourse

- Refugees, whose issues are often lost within the broader discussion of immigrant issues

- Indigenous and Black African people, whose issues can get lost within the broader label of "racialized" people, despite distinct historical differences.

Our community development work also focuses on women and gender non-binary people within these systemically marginalized communities. The reason for having this gender-based focus on groups of

people who are extremely marginalized is not only that they are usually not supported to be heard, they also experience some of the highest rates of violence, especially sexual violence; vulnerability to homelessness; susceptibility to trafficking; high levels of substance abuse and addictions; mental health issues arising from trauma; and overall poor health.

IRIS has also been focusing on convening grassroots, front-line service providers who support these marginalized populations in local communities, because people who work directly with marginalized people (many who have lived experience themselves), understand the specific nature of the exclusion and the barriers that face the groups they work with and support. In addition, front-line service providers understand the interlocking complexity of barriers experienced and thus know which people need to address those barriers, in a very practical, day to day manner. Also, grassroots front-line providers often use holistic approaches because they understand the interconnectedness of social problems. For example, they see directly that women from these marginalized groups are more likely to be poor because of a historical lack of access to opportunity, which means they have difficulties accessing education and employment, resulting in housing insecurity and precarity. All of this means they are unsafe. Most front-line workers therefore understand that siloed interventions will not work, i.e., providing only housing support without skills building and trauma counselling.

Finally, these local initiatives centre solidarity building amongst these particular groups. This is based on the rationale that these populations experience historically entrenched structural barriers to living a safe and secure life, which has resulted in comparable, even if distinct, experiences of marginalization. Solidarity building amongst these groups starts with having a space that intentionally excludes the dominant service structures, allowing for diverse groups to learn from one another, so that they can begin to address common barriers using their own knowledge systems.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The primary goal of this research was to examine the local to national community development strategy and LSISN approach that IRIS has been developing over the last decade.

In reviewing the literature on community-based initiatives in Canada and in selected international jurisdictions and drawing from a critical examination of IRIS' own pilots of this model, we explore ways in which the LSISN vehicle may be an effective approach for enabling marginalized communities to design strategies that get to the root causes of their exclusion. We also point to issues and questions this approach to local community mobilization raises for future design and research.

The specific questions guiding this research are:

1. What are the different types of issues facing marginalized people that community-based interventions aim to address?

2. Who leads, develops, designs, and participates in, community-based projects for marginalized people?

3. What are some examples of local community-based solidarity initiatives involving diverse marginalized people?

4. What are some of the key components of an effective community-based approach? For example: How should community members be involved? Who leads? What are important process considerations? How should community-based work be organized?

5. What are some of the challenges community-based interventions experience that could hinder successful outcomes?

The inquiry used both secondary and primary research methodologies including, a review of the literature, an online survey and one focus group.

Through secondary data collection, we examined published literature relevant to the above research questions, drawing primarily on Canadian, United States, United Kingdom, European and Australian sources.

A Google web search was conducted based on keywords related to community-based interventions for marginalized people including, women, people with disabilities, racialized, immigrant, African Black, Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ peoples. The word "solidarity" was also included in combination with these keywords. Academic studies were examined using the University of Toronto Library Portal for recent (10 years), academic publications on community-based interventions for marginalized people.

A short online survey was administered to 30 individuals who work in the area of community development, specifically with the marginalized populations we are focusing on. Many of those who received the survey have been involved with IRIS' local community work over the years. The aim of the survey was to

examine the key characteristics of LSISNs i.e., members, leadership roles, location, function, etc. A high response rate of 57% was achieved.

A focus group was also held with six individuals who have been involved in IRIS' Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Network projects work over the years. The goal of the focus group was to examine the benefits and challenges of working in solidarity and identify practical outreach strategies. Participants represented Western, Atlantic and Central Canada, with the majority of people identifying as a person with a disability, Indigenous and/or racialized.

Overview of the report

The report is divided into five main sections, as follows:

Section I – Introduction, which includes background information and the research design and methods used.

Section II – Literature Review Findings: Community-Based Interventions. This is comprised of multiple areas, including: the types of issues addressed, the project design and the key participants, examples of community-based solidarity initiatives, the key components of the community-cased approach and the challenges to community-based work.

Section III – Primary Research. This section includes the results from a survey and focus group discussion. A survey was administered to approximately 30 individuals who had some connection to LSISNs in one of the following six communities where IRIS has piloted this approach: Charlottetown, Saint John, Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Montréal.

Section IV – Summary of Findings, offers a synopsis of the key themes that emerged from the research.

This paper ends with **Section V** – Conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS: COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

TYPES OF ISSUES ADDRESSED

The literature review adhered to tight parameters focusing primarily on Canadian community-based initiatives that involved the target marginalized populations and those projects that used the terminology of "solidarity".

There are many "top-down" community development initiatives, i.e., those strategies developed by government departments or provincial, territorial, or national non-profit organizations which are delivered nationally or provincially. This review was limited to "bottom-up" strategies, i.e., those initiatives that aim to root and develop strategies at the local community level.

Most of the materials identified in this review were research reports that examined community-based interventions aimed at addressing a particular health or social issue generally, or in terms of how an issue impacts marginalized populations. Some reports, however, were more generic in nature examining and outlining how to assess the community-based model itself. For example, one study outlined the need to use process evaluation when examining the effectiveness of community-based projects because of the nature of "multidimensional interventions and interactions within unpredictable contexts."[2] We also reviewed studies that examined the experiences of systemically marginalized populations, usually at the community level.[3]

Within this context, the literature reviewed focuses on three main types of initiatives:

1. **Improving the lives of a specific marginalized population**—Examples, refugees, seniors, or people with mental health disabilities. This type of initiative represented 46% of the literature identified.

2. **Addressing health issues**—Examples, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, or health disparities. Many of these initiatives also addressed these health issues as experienced by specific groups of people, i.e., Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities, immigrants, mothers and children – 27% of documents reviewed.

3. **Addressing specific social issues**—These types of community-based initiatives focused on addressing specific social issues, such as Violence Against Women, homelessness, or housing disparity – 15% of initiatives examined.

Improving the lives of a specific marginalized population

Canadian highlights of this type of community-based project are:

- A community-based participatory action research project conducted in Western Canada, involving a seniors' housing society that financed an affordable housing development.[4]

- A project to address homelessness and mental health issues for specific populations, (i.e., people living with addictions who are also homeless, Indigenous, "newcomers", Francophones and those living in a semi-rural community) in five project sites across Canada.[5]

- A study examining integration approaches to government-sponsored refugee resettlement in Montreal.[6]

- An arts-based, community participatory action research project in Toronto, exploring how women, (focusing on trans and Indigenous women) experience homelessness and build support networks in order to survive.[7]

- A paper that presents a model for understanding the concept of "social inclusion" as a negotiation process which is political and influenced by power. A collective of four social planning networks in Toronto within and across South Asian, Chinese, Hispanic, and African communities.[8]

Addressing health issues

Many of the community-based initiatives relate to health issues. These studies set out to:

- Understand the impact of a community-based health intervention—i.e., HIV/AIDS programs in rural and remote regions in Canada or diabetes prevention in Indigenous communities.[9]

- Examine promising practices in community-based health initiatives—such as the importance of culturally based approaches in addressing Indigenous health issues.[10]

- Examine health promotion and recruitment of a specific population—i.e., Black immigrant mothers to participate in a project on child nutritional health.[11]

- Examine the importance of capacity building – These reports examined the importance of building the capacity of local actors to strengthen community-based health initiatives.[12]

Addressing specific social issues

Not many of the reports examined community-based projects that were designed to address a societal problem. The majority of these reports focused on projects or studies aimed at addressing homelessness or housing insecurity, with most initiatives taking place in Toronto. For example, an arts-based project that was implemented in eight communities in Toronto with marginalized people facing housing precarity

and homelessness was designed to hear about their experiences, commonalities and ideas on solutions.[13] Similarly, there was another community art-based project exploring homelessness as experienced by Indigenous and trans women in Toronto.[14] One project report, outlined an inventory of models, inclusive service practices and women's own strategies to address the issues faced by women and families facing homelessness in Canada.[15]

Projects that focus on addressing gender-based and domestic violence include a study which examines community-based actions outside of mainstream systems in several cities across the USA,[16] and a report examining promising practices on the issue of housing for refugee women fleeing violence in the home.[17]

PROJECT DESIGN AND KEY PARTICIPANTS

The community-based projects examined in this literature review were largely developed and supervised by academics who were specialized in areas such as, public health, applied sociology, geriatrics or immigrant and refugee issues. Often universities worked in partnership with mainstream community organizations such as community and resource centres, social planning agencies, hospitals and in some cases, issue-specific research centres, i.e., Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children in London, Ontario.[18]

In most cases the people most affected by a social problem were consulted on their experiences and then project leads would synthesize, analyze, and share back findings. Most of the reports set out to describe and analyze community-based approaches, i.e., a study of community-based HIV/AIDS prevention interventions,[19] evaluating a community-based diabetes prevention project,[20] or a review of community-based models to prevent violence and promote safety from a trauma informed lens.[21]

A few of the initiatives went further by convening and supporting spaces for those most impacted by a social problem to share their experiences and ideas around solutions using methods that gave them more control in the research process. For example, the *Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support*'s project design ensured that Indigenous and trans women could serve on an Advisory Board, participate in interviews, and take part in "art-making sessions" to capture and share their experiences of homelessness.[22] In these more participatory approaches, the project would still be led by either local mainstream agencies and/or universities, rather than grassroots agencies led by, and for, those most affected by a social problem.

One exception to this is a national meeting convened by the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children and the federal government that heard from grassroots agencies serving refugee women, i.e., Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee in Toronto and the Muslim Family Safety project on the issue of the safety and housing needs of refugee women fleeing violence.[23]

For all of the initiatives referenced in the literature reviewed, financial and human resources came from universities and mainstream agencies, which means there was an inherent power imbalance with the people most impacted by social and/or health issues. That is, those with the resources designed the project's

methodology and for the most part people with lived experience were brought in to participate in the already defined approach.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-BASED SOLIDARITY INITIATIVES

Our search yielded various studies and initiatives that touched on the concept and practice of solidarity building and, more specifically for our purposes, the coming together of diverse marginalized populations to work together to effect change. As referenced earlier, the community-based art project that examined the issue of homelessness for Indigenous and trans women in Toronto wanted to interrogate the "efforts made by those who experience homelessness themselves to organize collectively" to address their own needs.[24] While the report does not explicitly explore the notion of solidarity, they do identify important themes that support our developing definition of Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks. These include:

- The importance of social support networks amongst "women and trans women" with experiences of homelessness.

- Individual experiences of homelessness being "affected by the historical and current systems of marginalization at the group/structural level."

- The "need for services that build on the strengths of women and trans women who are homeless and which recognize and address the challenges they face."[25]

Where this approach differs from the LSISN model is in the homogenizing of, or grouping together under one identity, a group that in fact has important differences amongst the members. For example, focusing on "women" disappears distinct barriers, commonalities or intersectional experiences that trans women, Indigenous women, gender non-binary persons and others who may not identify with or are marginalized from dominant approaches characterizing "women". In addition, the authors acknowledge the historical and current-day systems of marginalization without delineating the differential histories of oppression impacting these groups, i.e., colonialism, residential schools for Indigenous women and the historical criminalization and psychiatrization of women with mental health disabilities and queer identities, etc.

Four social planning networks in Toronto examined how social inclusion is conceptualized in four communities: South Asian, Chinese, Hispanic and African.[26] Relevant to the LSISN model is this study's identification of common experiences that contribute to these specific communities' social exclusion, i.e., low income, racial profiling and racism, barriers to employment and securing affordable housing.[27] Also important in this report is the authors' acknowledgment of the structural nature of exclusion for marginalized peoples and the need to develop "processes of political inclusion" which asks questions such as: "Inclusion for whom, for what ends, and how?"[28]

David Dobbie and Katie Richards-Schuster in their study, *Building Solidarity Through Difference: A Practice Model for Critical Multicultural Organizing*, critique traditional models of "neighborhood-based organizing"

associated with solidarity building, which focus on the commonalities of experiences rather than differences. They contend that by focusing on commonalities these more traditional models of community organizing struggle with adapting "to an increasingly multicultural context."[29] Further, this article supports the observation made earlier that more "theoretical work" is "relatively detached from action on the ground, with few efforts to translate to community organizing practice."[30]

An Indian study by Dixon et al., entitled: *Contact, Political Solidarity and Collective Action: An Indian Case Study of Relations between Historically Disadvantaged Communities,*[31] explores the "role of contact between communities who share a history of disadvantage," as a means of "fostering the conditions under which the disadvantaged act collectively to challenge inequality."[32] This report draws on studies in South Africa (i.e., contact between Indian and Black South Africans) and a U.S. example, (i.e., African Americans and Latinos).

One of the key components of the LSISN approach is to emphasize collective action amongst marginalized populations rather than focus on transforming dominant culture attitudes and/or reforming mainstream systems. Dixon's study examines what happens when you switch the focus from reform to collective action, as they state: "from prejudice reduction to collective action," by nurturing political solidarity through "positive contact" between marginalized groups.[33]

The results of this study highlight the strength of solidarity building amongst marginalized communities in two areas:

> First, we found this relationship was partially mediated by a collective sense of grievance about the unjust treatment of disadvantaged groups in India. Contact seemed to encourage participants to recognise more fully common forms of injustice. Second, we found that this relationship was partially mediated by a sense of collective efficacy, the belief that the status quo might be transformed via collective resistance. Contact seemed to empower participants to believe that they could challenge the status quo.[34]

Lastly, Dixon's study also supports the need to exclude the dominant culture from participating in this type of solidarity work, because: "contact with the historically advantaged may sometimes carry ideological consequences, diminishing both their willingness to recognise inequality and their motivation to do something about it."[35]

Findings from a 2011 US study[36] were used to highlight this point:

> Cueing a sense of common identity amongst members of Black and Latino communities in the US resulted in a heightened sense of political solidarity. However, this effect was moderated by contact with members of the historically advantaged white community: the more intergroup contact Latinos had with whites, the less solidarity with Black Americans they reported.[37]

KEY COMPONENTS OF COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

The studies and reports reviewed identify key characteristics that most help local, community-based strategies achieve their goals. The following section outlines these findings, related in particular to how the community should be involved, the local infrastructure required, partnerships and relationships to nurture, and resources needed.

Work is rooted at the community level

While this is an obvious characteristic given the nature of this literature review, the literature points to why working at the community level is essential. The research finds that by rooting work locally, there is more direct access to and engagement of people who are experiencing a given social issue as it occurs in real time. Sakamoto et al.'s study of diverse experiences in homelessness recognizes that the community setting provides the means to directly involve diverse people in the "decisions that affect their everyday lives."[38] This is important because community-based projects, as in this study's case, "recognize homeless people as the 'experts' of their own experiences, whose insights can inform real-world solutions to the lived experiences of homelessness."[39] Work that is rooted at the community level recognizes lived experience expertise as key to developing policies and practices, rather than relying on traditional top-down approaches.

Local community work also brings project actors face to face with the unique local context where a social problem is occurring, in terms of the socio-demographics, culture, physical environment, and economics. Understanding the local setting is essential for arriving at effective, context-specific solutions, rather than generalizing experiences or solutions across provinces, territories and nationally.[40] As Worthington et al. found in their study of community-based HIV/AIDS prevention interventions in rural and remote regions of Canada, top-down planning and evaluation models have a likelihood of failing to capture the essence of what a program achieves in rural/remote areas.[41]

Involvement of Community Members

The research points to varying levels of community involvement and lived experience expertise in local, social change initiatives. Some research stresses the importance of community involvement right from the onset of an initiative, with shared decision-making processes,[42] while other projects drew a distinction between "the development of partnerships at the local level" and "action to address systemic issues"[43]

Key factors in community involvement include the importance of building trust with the community, getting the "right" people involved,[44] and the need to provide incentives for participating.[45]

Finally, it is recognized in the literature that community-based work focuses on groups who experience marginalization. A 2019 exploratory project which set out to identify how to further promote social inclusion in Toronto through an LSISN approach, supported the importance of a focus on the most

marginalized: "An overarching theme was the importance of prioritizing the needs and interests of Toronto's most politically, economically, and socially marginalized populations."[46]

Projects Guided by Grassroots Knowledge and Led by those Most Impacted

While most articles reviewed point to the importance of involving people at the community level, the idea that the people most impacted by a social problem should lead and direct community- based work, was less common. By "lead" it is meant going beyond community consultations with marginalized sectors, where the initiative is nonetheless designed by mainstream groups, i.e., academics or mainstream resource centres. Further, even though the importance of grassroots, gendered or "cultural" approaches are noted in the literature,[47] this is viewed only as an important element of projects, not foundational to effective community work.

A few of the articles acknowledged the importance of grassroots knowledge, based on lived experience whether as a front-line worker or as an individual experiencing social and economic barriers. By definition, grassroots services deal with the day to day problems of their community, and are continuously troubleshooting and adapting as they contend with the details and nuances of situations impacting marginalized populations. Céline de Richouffz makes this point in her paper examining community-based approaches for the integration of refugees in Montreal, "[…] grassroots organizations are adapting to Montreal's new intercultural reality and are bringing their services as close to refugees as possible."[48]

This close proximity that grassroots organizations have with the people they support provides front-line workers with practical knowledge about how a social problem is experienced and should be addressed. They tend to rely less on more abstract and theoretical understandings from those who are outside of a particular local context, examining it from a distance. Further, in order to appropriately address any social issues, i.e., homelessness, gender-based violence, etc., there needs to be a recognition that causes are complex and thus require the integration of diverse knowledge and flexibility.[49]

The Community Identifies Priority Issues

Only a few articles highlighted the importance of the grassroots community members identifying the issues that were most relevant to them. Not one of the initiatives examined started with the community identifying the issues. That is, a research or community development project developed by a public health authority, hospital or university went into communities to examine how to address, for example, homelessness, diabetes prevention or the relationship between violence against women and homelessness. These projects did talk about the need for intervention to be relevant to the community, safe and accessible[50], yet did not create an environment where the community could define the issues needing focus and design the intervention.

Key Characteristics of Project Infrastructure

The literature points to three main features of the design of project infrastructure that appear to support effect grassroots initiatives:

1. *The importance of engaging a local coordinator* – Rather than the work being managed and organized offsite, the role a coordinator from the local community was seen as important in driving the work,[51] because of their shared investment in the needs of the community, knowledge of local issues and rapport with community members.

2. *Establishment of local networks of people with lived experience* – The importance of local networks comprised of the people most impacted by a social problem was identified in a few of the studies examined. For example, the homelessness project with trans and Indigenous women in Toronto states: "In order to participate and benefit equally, organizing efforts need to be better grounded in homeless women's networks and resourcefulness."[52] Also a case study that examined a grassroots initiative for marginalized women in India, emphasized the importance of a community-based solidarity network.[53]

   These local networks are places where people who have been systemically marginalized can feel safe and begin to collectively feel like they can be agents of change. A focus on building strong relationships within these networks is critical. As Guzhavina explains in their article examining social capital in urban communities, "[…] the basis for strong social relations is trust, which contributes to the creation of common values and standards as their embodiment."[54]

   Building on the importance of prioritizing grassroots knowledge over mainstream practices and strategies, it follows that community leadership from these marginalized communities would be key players in these local networks. With the LSISN model we see the importance of front-line workers' leadership, who often are members of the impacted communities. Community leaders bring credibility and instill trust in the process.[55]

3. *Importance of a national framework* – The importance of having a national body that works collaboratively with local sites, was identified in the literature,[56] to provide capacity support and synthesize local learnings.

SHARED PRINCIPLES AND UNDERSTANDINGS

There was some mention in the literature about the importance of developing shared principles to drive community-based initiatives. Nelson et al. in their examination of the planning process for a local to national project addressing the issue of homelessness for people living with psychosocial disabilities, stated the importance of a shared vision and values which also leads to community ownership of an intervention:

"Developing a shared vision, values, and principles is the foundation for planning. In planning, it is important for stakeholders to have a superordinate goal towards which they are working. Ownership and 'buy in' are also enhanced when partners have a shared vision and values."[57]

Also important was that people who experience a social problem share their understanding of the injustices that they experience, along with what they feel are the root causes of their marginalization. The case study of marginalized women in India demonstrated how this mixed group of castes and religions came to a shared understanding of their experience of oppression, leading to increased trust and social ties.[58] Dixon et al.'s cross-sectional survey conducted in New Delhi of diverse communities who share a history of disadvantage found that solidarity was advanced by a collective sense of grievance about the unjust treatment of disadvantaged groups in India.[59]

Sakamoto's report on an initiative that examined the experiences of Indigenous and trans women and homelessness in Toronto, highlighted that effective interventions are rooted in understandings of the structural root causes of marginalization:

> "A second theme from the research highlighted that individual experiences of homelessness are often affected deeply by the historical and current systems of marginalization at the group/structural level, which, in our study, was particularly pertinent in how Aboriginal women and trans women experienced homelessness."[60]

Related to this, is an increased understanding of the importance of trauma-informed interventions that go beyond a focus on individuals,[61] in recognition of the broader structures and systems that have produced trauma in certain communities.

SUSTAINED AND LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO THE WORK

Many documents highlighted that there is a need for a sustained and long-term commitment to community-based initiatives in order for them to have an impact. Community-based initiatives are usually resourced through short term project funding and thus, local structures that have been established to support activities are threatened once a project ends. This highlights the need to build in sustainability processes to ensure systemic impact. As Montemurro et al. explains:

> Once project planning and implementation were underway, sustainability became a focus. A primary goal from early stages was to ensure projects could be integrated into community structures once coordinators left. […] During later project stages, sustainability involved embedding projects within community agencies, and identifying community leaders to take over projects.[62]

The continuation of funding, partnerships, and a sense of community ownership were all noted as key to long-term sustainability and success of community-based projects.[63]

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROCESS

The process that community-based teams engage in is critical to the success of an intervention. Many of the above components such as—how and who from the community should be involved and lead,

prioritizing grassroots knowledge, the community identifies and frames priority issues, establishing appropriate local infrastructure, the need to understand structural marginalization to inform strategies and ensure sustainability of the work—are all relevant to activating a productive process. Outcomes will be less successful if for example we do not pay attention to sustainability as change takes time or we do not recognize the importance of grassroots knowledge because people with lived experience know the most about what they need.

Often in the literature, process was discussed in the context of partnerships and collaboration in recognition of the importance in hearing diverse voices that bring diverse strategies. Nelson et al. emphasize the importance of relationships and how the work is being done: "Collaboration draws attention to the relational nature of planning and how tasks are accomplished."[64]

The importance of dialogue was also outlined in a few documents examined, as essential for dealing with diversity amongst partners. For example, a key recommendation in a paper on a community-based approach towards the integration of refugees in Montréal was that community organizations need to "Identify each organization's areas of intersection and establish pathways to partnerships by enhancing inclusive dialogues."[65]

Establishing community relevant and sensitive processes, recognize that the most impactful outcomes will come from those who are experiencing, and/or, are directly supporting marginalized peoples. This detailed attention to establishing a grassroots process is novel, given that most community-based work is top-down because they have been designed by mainstream and/or academic organizations.

CHALLENGES TO COMMUNITY-BASED WORK

The vast majority of the materials that were examined did not discuss challenges in implementing community-based projects, rather they shared key learnings on promising practices, i.e., the conditions, processes, and considerations that advanced project goals.

A few exceptions to this finding was a study that outlined challenges in recruiting Black immigrant mothers for a community-based study on nutritional health, that found there was a mistrust of white researchers and research institutions and that strategies using mass media were largely ineffective.[66] The lack of trust in a community process was also noted by Guzhavina in an examination of social capital in urban settings, where they outline the relationship between the level of trust and the degree of marginalization people experience in their lives: "The main barrier is distrust caused by socio-economic instability and, consequently, a high level of social risks."[67]

Given that most of the community-based studies and initiatives in this review were developed by those outside of the populations and sometimes even the geographic communities of focus, we can infer that, recommendations developed were based on the challenges outsiders experienced while trying to implement projects. Worthington et al.'s evaluation of community-based HIV/AIDS prevention interventions in rural and remote communities, noted the ineffectiveness of outsider led projects, where

the community needs long-term resources to support their leadership in planning and implementation processes.

> "Top-down planning and evaluation models may fail to capture program achievements in rural/remote contexts. The long-term engagement practices that render rural/remote programs promising do not always conform to planning and implementation requirements of limited funding."[68]

When you examine the key components of what were deemed successful interventions, for example, the nature of community involvement and elevating grassroots knowledge, we can see that challenges occur when community leadership and self-determination is not foundational to the design of an intervention.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

As part of this research, we wanted to hear from people who have been involved with this local work serving as the lead organization, a local coordinator and/or as a LSISN member with lived experience. Participants were from LSISNs in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montréal, Saint John, and Charlottetown. These LSISNs are all at various stages of development, with some communities like Saint John, Toronto and Vancouver having been involved for over five years, with the others more recently engaged.

Based on their practical experience, participants shared their thoughts through an online survey and one virtual focus group. Participants in both the focus group and the survey were from Western, Atlantic and Central Canada, with the majority being Indigenous, racialized and/or a person with a disability. An attempt has been made to use direct quotes wherever possible in order to minimize inaccurate interpretations, expand on sentiments and to highlight details that may be missed in paraphrasing.

SURVEY RESULTS

A survey was administered to approximately 30 individuals who had some connection to LSISNs in one of the six communities where IRIS has piloted this approach. There was a 56% response rate. It was explained to survey respondents that IRIS has been exploring a community-based model aimed at addressing acute marginalization experienced by specific communities, including Indigenous, Black African, and other racialized groups, refugees and/or people with an intellectual, cognitive, and psychosocial disability. Further, that we believed that these local solidarity networks would be effective in identifying community solutions to tackle issues such as gender-based violence, housing precarity and access to justice when they adhere to eleven key characteristics.

Respondents were asked to rate whether or not they felt a specific characteristic was *extremely* to *not at all* important. All eleven characteristics were deemed either *extremely*, *very*, or *somewhat* important, therefore we were interested in understanding the significance of this nuanced variation. With many of the characteristics, respondents were almost equally divided between *extremely* and *very* important, thus we could infer that the particular characteristic of the LSISN model is well supported. Respondents were also offered the opportunity to explain their answers. The following section outlines the results of the survey.

1   The networks are based in a local geographic community

All of the respondents agreed that networks needed to be rooted in a specific community with 88% of respondents deeming this *extremely* or *very* important and 12% feeling this was *somewhat* important. The main reason provided was that it is at the local level that people live and receive support. Other reasons offered include: proximity to marginalized people enables access to them and the local approach recognizes the individual needs of a given community.

Respondents shared the following comments:

"Local networks are best able to share up-to-date resources in a timely manner."

"Systemically marginalized populations tend to be socially isolated and their transportation options are limited. If interventions are to be successful, services and supports must be accessible."

"Communities are like people, each with their own personalities and their own issues. To get the right information and solidarity the members need to be in the same area."

2   Priority is given to working with local grassroots service providers over local mainstream service providers

The below chart indicates the varied responses to this question. The results indicated that the majority of respondents felt strongly that community work needed to prioritize working with grassroots service providers over mainstream workers, with an approximate 65% indicating that this was *extremely* important. An interesting contrast however was that 17.65% of respondents felt that this was only *somewhat* important, which indicates that there is a desire for some level of involvement of local mainstream workers in addressing the issues facing marginalized peoples.

Q2 Priority is given to working with local grassroots service providers over local mainstream service providers
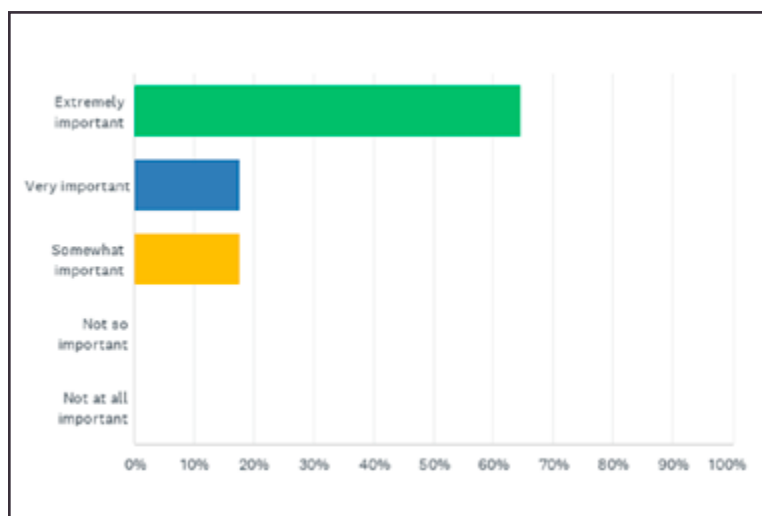
Reasons given for the importance of a grassroots organizations' involvement with LSISNs over mainstream, were: grassroots organizations are where marginalized people go when they need support, therefore they have more access to the community; grassroots agencies have trusted relationships with marginalized communities and a strong commitment to their needs; grassroots workers have the understanding, sensitivity, and expertise and conversely mainstream organizations do not have this knowledge base.

Comments regarding grassroots service providers:

"It's important to have access to a local network that gather the most important grassroots organizations offering local services. Individuals especially those more marginalized need to have equal and easy access to the information and the services."

"Grassroots service providers often have shared insight, experience, and often are seen, by those who are reaching out to the service as someone who 'has skin in the game' and want to help versus being paid to help as more local mainstream providers."

"The grassroots workers and organizations have the expertise in how to best serve their communities. In terms of the challenges and needs of individuals that they are serving."

"'By the people, for the people'" needs to be a governing value.

"Many marginalized individuals are likely to seek help from community first, as the safe access point."

"The perspectives of the two groups can be very different. With the grassroots service providers you are more likely to hear the voices, concerns, appreciations of those closest to the issues."

"Mainstream looks after their vested interest of promoting white-dominant continuity in enjoying the wealth of the country."

> Unless local grassroots service providers suggest otherwise (e.g., referring specific needs to local mainstream service providers), they know the needs and achievements of people with disabilities, so they can share accurate (or appropriate) information or resources accordingly. Furthermore, they may connect with people in a way that mainstream service providers often may not.

As mentioned, a minority of respondents felt there needed to be some level of involvement of local mainstream organizations in the work of LSISN, because they felt that some mainstream organizations are made up of, and close to marginalized people in their community:

> I think that local grassroots play a key role in keeping mainstream organizations accountable and spaces safer, but also recognize the resource limits than can inhibit grassroots organizations from being able to support individuals in the ways they might want to, so I think a collaborative approach is key. In smaller communities, the distinction between local grassroots service providers and mainstream providers is blurred. Quite often mainstream providers are the only providers!

> I find that this question conflates systems a bit too much. With police, etc. I would absolutely agree that they should not have a leadership role. It becomes a bit tricker for me with the other examples above, (i.e., community health, shelters, etc.) as many of the people who are hired and would be involved in the network are community members with lived experience. This is especially true for

community health centres which were built, and are staffed, by members of particular newcomer communities, specifically to ensure cultural competence access to care.

"It may be that these groups should not 'lead' the group. That said, front-line workers in shelters and community health centres have an awareness that is close to grassroots."

3 The network is made up of grassroots community members and service providers of the most marginalized populations with a gender-based intersectional focus

Respondents felt that LSISNs need to be made up of people, primarily women and gender minorities, who have been marginalized and the grassroots workers who support them, with 71% indicating that this was *extremely* important and 29% believing this was a *very* important characteristic.

Q3 The network is made up of grassroots community members and service providers of the most marginalized populations with a gender-based intersectional focus
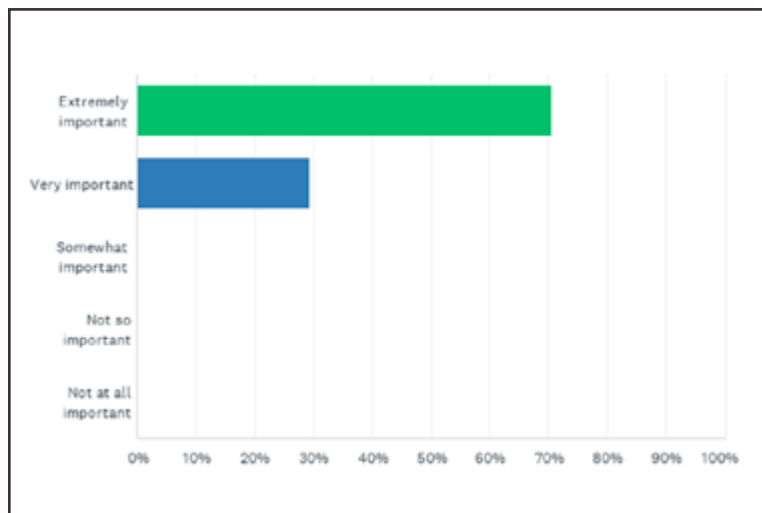
Reasons given for LSISNs to be comprised of marginalized people and the front-line workers who support them, include: marginalized people trust that they have the expertise and understanding of their issues, therefore they use their services and they can relate to many of these workers because they are of the same community.

"They will have the expertise concerning the challenges that this group of people are facing. important to have them at the table as the expert."

"People connect to those who are like them, walking the same path. As we are 'walking each other home,' we have to do that as a network that is made up of community members who have lived experience…'credibility'"

"If the intent is to reach 'the most marginalized of the marginalized', then this is the only way to organize the network. A gender-based intersectional focus will contribute to our understanding of issues and assist in designing appropriate interventions."

4   Diverse marginalized groups work together in solidarity

The vast majority of respondents felt strongly that diverse marginalized peoples should work in solidarity to address the social issues they experience, with 76% indicating that this was *extremely* important and 18%, *very* important.

Q4 Diverse marginalized groups work together in solidarity
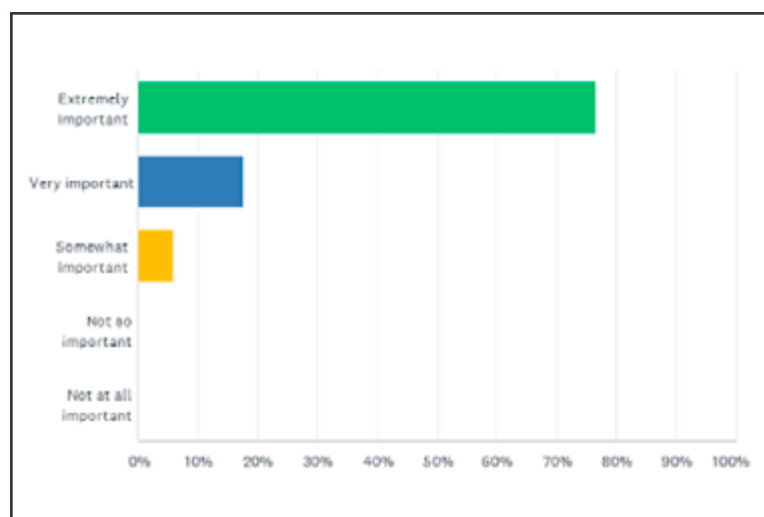
Reasons why working in solidarity was deemed important include: to share resources and strategies; there is strength in numbers; serves to elevate marginalized peoples' voices; to counter working in silos; helps to guard against mainstream services defining the issues; and recognizes the commonalities in the experience of structural oppression.

"Relationships would have been built and trust is formed. Release of information, resources and/or other should be shared between them to support each other to grow."

"We often fight our fight within our silos of vulnerable persons, and we often do not connect to other populations—although we should as there is always strength in numbers and shared voices for change."

"Important to create this solidarity so that we can remove the silos in marginalization and there is no hierarchy of oppressions."

"This is the only way to amplify the voice of the systemically marginalized!"

"Cannot stress enough how important this is; good initiatives too often get co-opted by those not affected by the solutions/problems and feeds into a saviour mentality."

"As we have seen with some of the work through IRIS, the diverse voices make everyone stronger."

"Understand the issues that are common to all marginalized communities."

"That way, diverse groups can learn more on what isn't known or openly discussed before. From there, they can share their resources with each other."

5 The non-leadership role of mainstream service providers such a local police services, shelters, community health centres, etc.

The responses to this question were the most surprising in this survey, because they appear to be at odds with the results related to prioritizing of grassroots workers over mainstream workers and the belief that LSISNs should be made up of marginalized peoples and their workers.

A significant number of respondents felt that the non-leadership role of mainstream workers was only *somewhat* important at 47%. Twenty-four percent felt it was *very* and 29% *extremely* important that mainstream service providers did not play leadership roles in LSISNs. The results to this question indicate once again, that local mainstream service providers should be involved in some way with LSISNs. We can also infer that a significant percentage were not too concerned about mainstream providers serving in leadership roles.

Q5 The non-leadership role of mainstream service providers such as local police services, shelters, community health centres, ect.
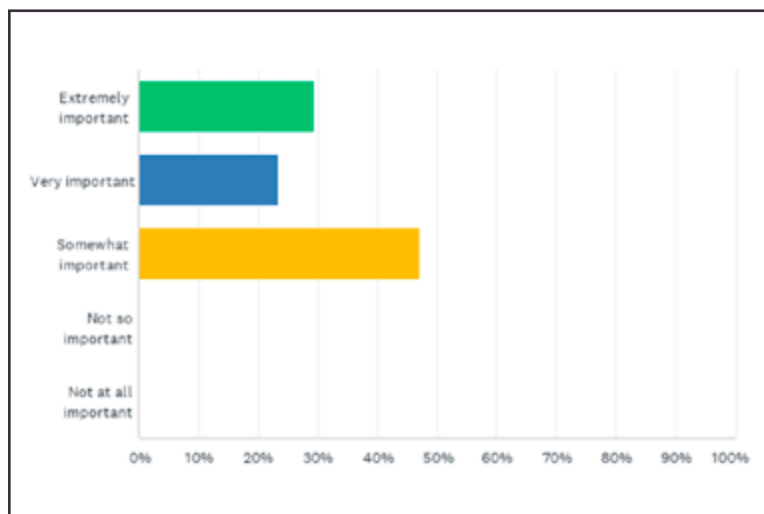
6   A local agency provides institutional support to network activities
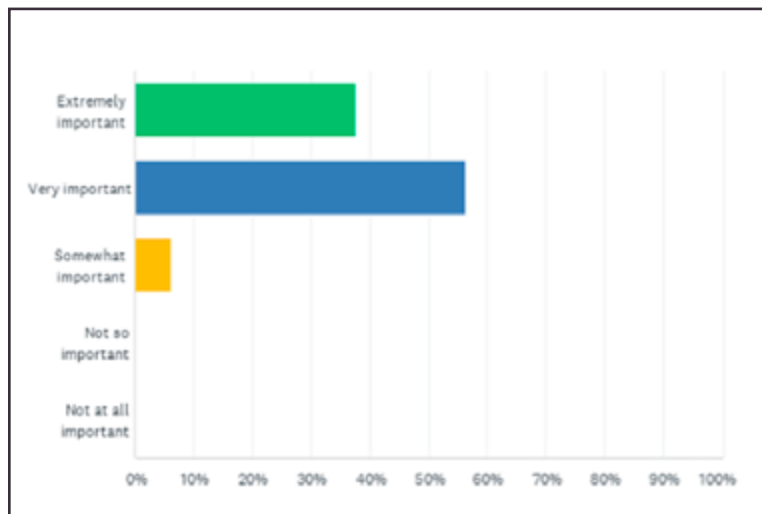
Respondents did feel that it was important to have a local agency support local activities, but they did not feel this intensely, i.e., only 37% identifying this as *extremely* important.

Q6 A local agency provides institutional support network activities

Reasons provided for the need for a local organization to provide institutional support include, to fulfil administrative needs associated with implementing network activities; to bring diverse partners together; and it is important to have a trusted organization:

> There are administrative frameworks that are needed to make sure that a network is working efficiently and is accountable to its purpose, and it can be easy to lose all or some of the parts if there is not a specific dedicated person(s) keeping track. I find that agreed-upon standards, and a process for conflict resolution can also be key when you bring together diverse groups with different priorities, goals and needs.

"The institutional support will reduce the stress of maintaining the network."

"A grassroots organization that is supporting, advocating is essential for making connections with other diverse marginalized groups that we want within a network."

"It's trite but true—change happens at the speed of trust. A trusted local agency can convene the necessary partners and help create a common agenda."

A few respondents stated that we need to be cautious not to replicate oppressive institutional structures:

"As long as they are not institutions that advance white supremacy."

"While it is important to have a local agency provide the institutional support there needs to be some safeguards in place to address […] so we do not replicate oppressive systems."

7   A local organizer with a strong diverse community network is identified to coordinate the work of the network

Respondents generally felt this was an important characteristic of LSISNs with 59% stating this was *extremely* important, 35% *very* and 6% *somewhat*. Reasons given for this importance include: the need for dedicated resources; a local facilitator is viewed as key to building relationships and trust; and they can serve as a liaison person with mainstream sectors.

Here's what some respondents shared:

"A project of this nature (and scope) cannot be done off the sides of agencies' desks. The capacity of service providers is already strained. A local organizer with a strong network would 'jump start' the project."

"This is vital for building trust and relationships in the community."

I would also add that this person should be able to navigate between both grassroots and mainstream services, so that opportunities to reduce risks and seek/see opportunities to improve are not lost. There are many times where individuals will still need to interact with mainstream services and so it is important to also make efforts to build capacity to improve that area as well.

One respondent noted that it was not necessary for the local coordinator to be a member of a marginalized group, as long as they were closely aligned with the issues facing marginalized peoples; *"As long as the person is politically well versed with the pain of the marginalized people"*

8   The convening space and interactions have the necessary supports in place for diverse marginalized people to participate in an equitable manner

Respondents felt strongly that diverse marginalized people need supports in order to be able to fully participate in the work of LSISN, with 88% stating that this was *extremely* important and 12% noting that this was *very* important. People felt that when supports are provided this will advance relationships, build trust, and enable access and participation:

"Everyone's voices need to be heard and opportunities to participate equally must be established from the very first reach out. It is the only way that the network can form together, support each other. It must come from a place where diversity is celebrated, supported and the opportunity to express, contribute is equitable."

"This is a necessary foundation for creating and sustaining trust."

"Without this some voices will not be heard."

9   Awareness of the issues facing marginalized populations is communicated to the broader community

While respondents did feel that it was very important that the community at large understood the issues facing systemically marginalized peoples, the intensity with which this was felt was divided with 53% feeling that this was *extremely* important and 41% indicating this was *very* important. Some of the sentiments were that some populations are marginalized because their issues were not known to the broader community, while others felt that issues must first *'be recognized within the network […] in the beginning, members may not be aware of shared issues.'*

Q9   Awareness of the issues facing marginalized populations is communicated to the broader community
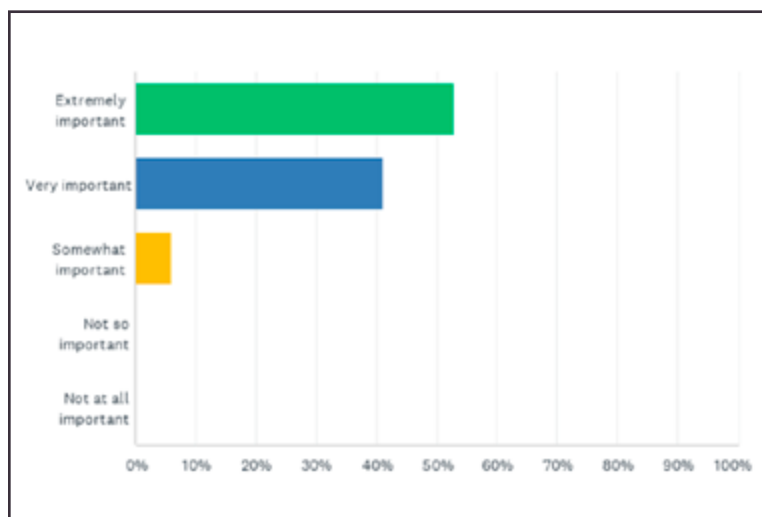
10 Network activities place equal importance on the process of working together as it does on action

Again, the responses to this question were divided in intensity with 53% indicating this was *extremely* important, 34% *very* and 12% *somewhat*. Reasons provided include: this focus on process is needed to establish trusting relationships that can endure challenges, to enhance collaboration and to acquire a commitment to the work.

> "Building connections with the network is essential for strong relationships, 'buy in' to what we are trying to build and a framework to hold ourselves to."

> This type of work and partnership is a long-term endeavour. It takes support within the network to ensure that people are able to sustain through disappointments, and to support each other. There can be huge mental health tolls in trying to advocate for self/others. It is also difficult to make

any progress if people are not working together, as egos, needs and priorities start to interfere and undermine. It can also become difficult to identify actions to act upon when collaborative processes are not working.

Respondents also cautioned that while there is a need to focus on process, we shouldn't do this in ways that compromise the equally important need for action.

"It's a balancing act. They are mutually supportive. Long/medium term success (and sustainability) need authentic processes. Action will keep people engaged. Local circumstances (and leadership) will influence the balance."

"Yes, this is important and (at the same time) the members need to see that action will be taken. Too many have sat at a table and talked (and talked) and saw no action."

11 There is a national structure, like IRIS, that provides support

Eighty-eight percent of all respondents felt that having a national framework was *extremely* important to the work of LSISNs, with 12% indicating it was *very* important.

Q11 There is a national structure, like IRIS, that provides support
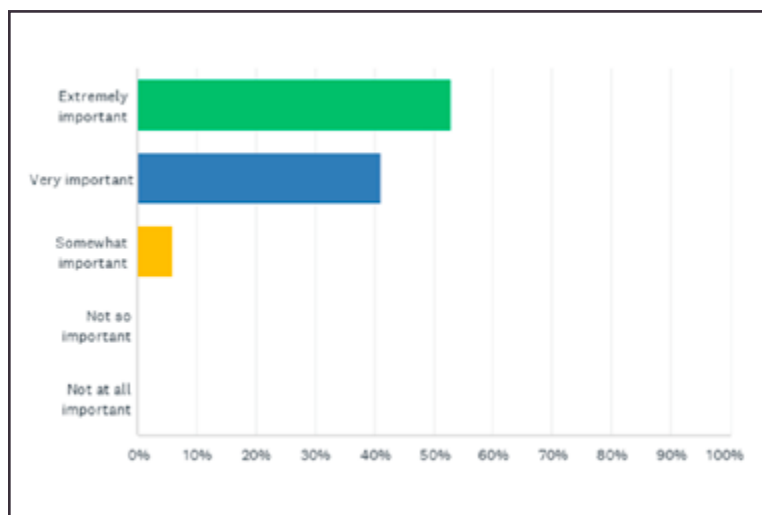
A national body was considered important in providing support and expertise, influencing policy reform, and people felt most importantly to bring local teams together for knowledge sharing and learning.

"While it is important for the grassroots locally, it is essential to be connected with a national structure that supports with the guidance, policies, and practices that we know we want to have locally and regionally."

I think there is a lot of value in being able to share across locations…solutions that have worked, lessons learned, as well as remaining challenges. Also, some challenges are local in nature, but some are more universal. Without connecting at provincial and/or national levels it can be very difficult to see these patterns, and approach situations effectively and with the best scope of effort and resources.

"A national project needs a group, like IRIS, to connect the parties. And to share their knowledge and experience. It's important that communities learn that there are common threads (and promising practices) to 'local' issues."

"It is important for an entity like IRIS to provide the support as they can bring a broader lens to the local work and can help link the projects/work together for greater impact."

Challenges

Respondents identified some challenges a local network of marginalized people may experience when they attempt to work in solidarity.

"As it is important to work together, it's been a lifetime of diverse marginalized groups working in silos for their needs/concerns/support, with a lens of solidarity need to be sure to be able to reassure (people) that no one is going to get lost or seen as less than any other group."

Intersectionality interacts in unique ways and can layer in ways that can facilitate or inhibit access in ways that are often unseen by program planners, even at the grassroots level. This can be especially problematic for people when the part(s) of their identities that cause marginalization are hidden in certain contexts leading to assumptions that can cause harm.

These comments highlight the need to recognize that marginalized populations have been pitted against one another, particularly when competing for resources and thus we need to create an environment within the networks that every group matters. The last sentiment may be asking us to recognize internalized discrimination and the harm we may unwittingly cause one another.

FOCUS GROUPS

The following section shares the results of a focus group discussion that occurred with lead participants in LSISNs from Charlottetown, Saint John, Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Montréal. Based on their practical experience in working on IRIS' LSISN initiatives, participants shared their thoughts in four areas: 1) The importance of a marginalized women and gender diverse peoples' solidarity; 2) How and who to reach and engage in this work; 3) Challenges that can occur while working together; 4) Promising practices and process ideas.

The Importance of Working Together in Solidarity

Based on their involvement with the LSISN approach, focus group participants were asked, why they believe it is important, or not, for marginalized groups to work together in solidarity. There were a variety of reasons discussed.

Working with mainstream systems is ineffective

People spoke about the lack of progress when they work with local mainstream sectors to address their needs. Some of the reasons offered were that mainstream work tends to encourage the "hierarchy of oppression" which only results in marginalized groups being pitted against each other. There was a general sense of distrust of mainstream organizations and governments, who it was felt do not allow marginalized groups to be self-determining.

> That's what happened at the consultation table where we've come up with a project, but of course, board members and those from the federal government have to watch us closely because some how they're afraid of what we are going to do. We're going to set fires or something stupid like that! Because they're so scared that we, heaven forbid, are making our own plans.

> It is a divisive tool that keeps us scrambling around in circles and not, you know, making effective pushes. So, when we can't fall for that trap; not compete in whoever has the most adversity but join together in strength and determination and focus on our stated, recognized, and chosen goals…that we can push with more energy with more force with more power towards our own goals.

Work outside of silos and learn about one another

Related to the "divide and conquer" belief, people stated that marginalized groups are encouraged to work in silos which can be less effective. People said that when marginalized groups work outside of their silos they can learn about, and from one another.

> "Like from experience as a front-line worker, I guess I played it safe. I would just stick with Indigenous, you know, networks because I thought, OK, they understand but I kind of thought, there has to be more so I started branching out to non-Indigenous organizations. I found this helped to open up my mind […] and help the women."

> I really appreciated when we went to Ottawa (reference is to a solidarity conference IRIS held in 2017) and I heard the stories of the many, many other people…They have experienced some really traumatic things in their lives and you know, to be able to hear them and for them to hear us. I appreciated hearing the stories and I know that they like to hear what we have to say as well, as Indigenous people.

"Especially as a front-line worker, you just get tunnel vision, supporting your community, your own group. That sometimes it's hard to get out of that and think broader about how maybe if we expand and connect with other groups, it can actually make my life easier."

A participant who supports people with intellectual disabilities talked about how focusing exclusively on people with intellectual disabilities, does not allow us to learn from other marginalized groups and also hinders understanding of intersectionality within the intellectual disability population.

> In the field of intellectual disabilities, there's a lack of solidarity, you know. There are some grassroots groups that come together on the basis of a diagnosis of their family member [...] but how do we become relevant to them (i.e., other marginalized communities) in a way that we haven't before as an organization? How can our work resonate with the people we haven't reached out to before?

> There are families out there who are not just concerned about disability…they are racialized or stigmatized in some other way…how does disability and that come together? [...] because if we were to invite someone based on the fact that they have a family member who has an intellectual disability, we're just going to get this same group of people that we always have. So how do we then go to these other communities of people that are out there?

Strength in numbers

Related to the above point, participants talked about how collectively they have more power and that they have intentionally been kept apart to weaken that power. This growth in numbers, it was stated, can help motivate governments to act:

> "Solidarity is to focus on the strength of the most marginalized communities and come together to create change. Focusing on our strengths, all the things that we have to offer as a group and finding unity within that strength and within that story."

Related to the idea of strength in numbers is that when marginalized communities come together, it helps them to be "seen", raise the profile of their needs and gives value to their communities:

> You know at the root to hold the government accountable to looking after all of its citizens and not just you know, a chosen few or those that you know who have their ear [...] those in privilege. Solidarity is extremely important for all communities that have been pushed to the margins so that we can be recognized and effectively utilize the power that we have.

Acknowledge similarities in experiences of oppression and support one another

Participants identified that it was useful to learn about the similarities they shared in experiences of exclusion and marginalization because it forged a sense of unity and caring for one another.

"I think we all face similar things out there. You know with racism and all of that. It's working together and getting support from each other and working to support one another and working with the community, our communities and understanding that we do have some differences, but many similarities."

"Build community with each other and have each other's back in a way that we know the systems aren't going to support us."

Community Involvement

Focus group participants were asked who should be involved in a marginalized peoples' solidarity network? People overwhelmingly said people from the target marginalized groups and who have experienced a social problem, i.e., gender-based violence, housing precarity, etc.—"You need to hear from the individuals that we are working with. On a daily basis because that's what's real. That's what the real story comes down to, right?" They also highlighted the importance of including the front-line workers who serve these populations, who often have lived experience themselves.

The importance of having the broader community support was also shared. However, this was not in reference to the broader local geographic community, but rather the specific target populations. For example, an Indigenous facilitator of a LSISN spoke about how important it was that the broader Indigenous community supported their proposed action:

> We really need the support of the community and I know that they are supportive (of the LSISN action) because we had a focus group to discuss and there were several people who wanted this and were supportive of it and it's just a matter of getting them to continue. […] I guess it's really a matter of getting the support and on really emphasizing the need for it.

Others felt strongly that LSISNs really need to engage younger people in solidarity work.

Challenges

Focus group participants outline many challenges in building local level solidarity amongst marginalized communities. These challenges are rooted in the lack of trust, safety concerns and systemic barriers that marginalized people experience.

Challenges in outreach and convening

The following challenges were identified in attempting to reach and engage marginalized populations to participate in the activities of LSISNs.

Cynicism from past involvement in community research or projects

Focus group participants strongly felt that people were over consulted and that their lived experience was

not really informing any change. They felt the community at large is disillusioned with the lack of action and/or seeing anything come out of their involvement.

> "I think one of the biggest challenges that we've had in Winnipeg is that people are a bit skeptical, because they see it as, like, 'Oh, I'm getting invited to another meeting' and people are very sick of meetings…um, we're sick of talking about things we want action!"

> "I think also too that the idea of being consulted over and over […] on one hand, someone with expertise from lived experience is identified as being really valuable, but on the other hand, if nothing happens, then they are not valuable. There's no demonstration of using that value."

> "Some people are really tired of feeling like they're being mined. You know wanting to see that action. The fatigue over the constant consultations and the way that things just end up being framed the same, like a lot of times we talk about doing things differently and inadvertently fall right back into those same patterns."

Poverty and its relationship to time and resources

It was evident in this discussion that one of the main challenges in convening people who experience acute marginalization is that they do not have the time nor money to participate in a community action. As one person put it very succinctly, *"People are so marginalized and fighting the fight every day that they don't even have the space to come and have these dialogue."*

The challenges individuals face to participating brought on by poverty and lack of time and resources, also applies to the front-line workers who support them as they are often low income and face the same barriers to inclusion in society, i.e., racism, ableism, and discrimination based on gender.

> Some of the challenge of bringing people together […] in terms of workers is just like the limited capacity that the workers have. Like without honorariums we can't do this work. They don't have time as they focus more on their clients in face-to-face interactions, that doesn't leave a lot of time and space within their caseload or workload to be able to connect […] It usually is after work times and that makes it a long day. It is long hours to try and squeeze that in and it kind of messes up the work schedule. We don't have the capacity. We don't have the money to do it.

In the context of a discussion regarding how to get the most marginalized people who live with psychosocial disabilities to participate in the work of LSISNs, one participant discussed the class barrier that racialized people who live with mental health disabilities experience, as being a significant barrier to getting involved.

> It's very, very hard to reach that part of the population that is deeply marginalized by race and mental health and addictions, who end up getting dumped into the justice system and having a rough ride. I mean, early intervention for a middle-class family—they get the early intervention

program at CAMH (Centre for Mental Health & Addictions) and they get the case manager, etc. But racialized people end up in boarding homes…

Difficulty in reaching marginalized people

Based on their experiences in attempting to establish LSISNs, participants discussed how the most marginalized people are difficult to identify because they are not accessing services, so they remain quite isolated.

> "Some people need a lot of assistance and we aren't reaching the people who need it the most, so it is very hard to reach into that population […] especially finding intersections."

Challenges in working together

Focus group participants shared many challenges that can and have occurred once LSISNs are convened.

Lack of trust and understanding of others

Participants talked about how marginalized people have faced so much adversity it is easy to understand how difficult it is to trust others.

> "Lack of trust could be such a challenge if people don't feel safe, they're worried whatever comment that they make is not going to be understood or someone else in the group is going to take exception to that."

> "You don't necessarily understand what somebody else has gone through and sometimes that lack of understanding can cause conflicts or divisions […]"

> "Individuals may have a fear of being judged […] Not wanting to be judged, it takes time to build some trust amongst one another."

Hierarchy of oppression

This refers to situations where marginalized groups believe that they experience more oppression and hardships than other marginalized groups. In an exclusively marginalized peoples' solidarity this was identified as a potential problem

> "Lack of understanding of different intersections […] you know it kind of goes back to the 'Oppression Olympics' at times."

Differences in cultural and social presentation

People from different backgrounds may demonstrate different ways of interacting based on their histories and culture. Since this work focuses on bringing marginalized people together coming from diverse backgrounds, conflict may occur initially when they begin working together.

I think the challenges are the history and the type of structural and social oppression that each group has gone through and it isn't even that everybody understands their own (oppression). But you also don't necessarily understand what somebody else has gone through and sometimes that lack of understanding can cause conflicts or divisions.

I think especially when you're bringing different marginalized groups together, like yes, there's similarities and there's common experiences of oppression, but there's also different ways of seeing the world and being in the world right? Which may for some people seem offensive, even though we are all marginalized, it's like that's not the way we communicate, for example.

These findings suggest that it is important to consider the "cultural" context in a broader way than the usual definition of ethno-cultural differences. Participants referenced, "different ways of seeing the world" which come from distinct experiences of oppression and marginalization. Those who have similar experiences in this way do seem to have a shared sense of identity, which differs from other groups' whose experiences of marginalization were different. For example, some people with disabilities share histories and experience of exclusion and segregation, i.e., institutionalization and segregation in schools, which other groups do not experience in quite the same way. These differences were found to be important to participants. At the same time, they wanted to explore how these distinct histories and experiences could be understood as linked and connected, as a basis for growing a shared identity and solidarity across the differences.

The wrong people get involved

Participants talked about the damage to the process when people who are in situations of privilege and power get involved in the work of LSISNs.

We had been connected with some business folks […] I called them to come out, they wanted to invest in housing for women. So, we had arranged a meeting with them as well as an architect and the architect essentially mansplained his understanding of the project the entire time and took up a lot of space and then was called out on that […] who should be involved? [...] If you have a beautiful building (women's housing) but you don't have the right people involved in doing the work, then it doesn't really matter!

"I think people mean to do good but they just don't understand […] We can't create this unless the right people are there doing the creating."

Key Practices & Process Considerations

Focus group participants identified a number of important considerations when attempting to establish and activate LSISNs.

Outreach considerations

Ensure that LSISN work is relevant to community needs

It was felt that in order to engage the target communities, the need for coming together and using the LSISN should be communicated in ways that are relevant to marginalized groups of people. As we saw earlier, the need for community relevancy was also identified in the literature review.

> "I think emphasizing the need in general and the benefits is really important and like having more space and more conversations about what this really could look like in the long term for Black queer Indigenous disabled folks so that it can kind of like inspire and motivate people to continue on with this solidarity network."

LSISN work is action oriented

It was also stated that in order to engage the target communities, people need to see that there will be action, not just talk.

> "And I think it is really important that people understand that there is an end goal; this isn't just about coming together and talking…there really is a framework for something to happen […] and […] to hear what's happening across the country, or to hear you know someone like us who has lots to offer."

Ensure participation of younger people

The importance of younger people from marginalized communities playing a key role was highlighted and identified as something that has been missing in LSISN work to-date. Social media was seen as a powerful means to engage youth and young adults—*"Younger folks need to be a part of the movement and social media is a really great place to build solidarity."*

Use social media

Social media was highlighted as an important engagement tool to grow solidarity amongst marginalized populations generally, not just for youth.

> Thinking about how we can modernize our conversations and bring people in through social media. Have campaigns about the work that we're doing about the different projects. Highlighting the issues. But also, the solutions that people are doing […] so that they can jump on board and like share that widely across Canada. I think it's just such an easy way to mobilize quickly and gain a lot more traction. I think that social media is a space that we haven't really tapped into enough of, but we could very much utilize […] But make sure there's like 'calls to action'!

Ensure you are reaching out to the "right" people

Focus group participants spoke about the importance of trying to engage people who understand their personal privilege and are willing to give space to the leadership of marginalized people. While this was usually said in the context of people, mostly men, from the white, dominant, non-disabled, non-queer

identified culture, this also holds true for women who are white, queer, racialized and disabled who have a class bias and who may not be connected to the grassroots community.

Considerations when working together

Ensure that the voices of marginalized people dominate and understand our privilege

Related to the above point, if people with privilege are involved in a LSISN they need to ensure that they give space, are well aware of their privilege and practice active listening. It was also pointed out that individuals may have the right intentions, but it is counter productive to the network's end goals. The following quotes share this sentiment in relationship to LSISN meetings.

> "It was very interesting because, there was this architect who came in with a whole plan…like he had the whole thing designed before the community even met! So that's not really his fault because he had this idea and he was working with the person who had the money […] but we never got to the first step."

> "What we're trying to do is the community builds it! It's the community that will be the end users that build the building!"

> "Because this is not about consultation, it's about ownership and drive. These groups are driving it."

Recognize how we contribute to oppressing others

Self-awareness in doing this solidarity work was emphasized as critical when marginalized people work together. This was stated because it was felt that one's own experience of exclusion might make us unaware of how we are also complicit to harming others. Further, marginalized groups are not immune to holding prejudice and discriminatory attitudes.

> We like to think of the 'oppressor' as only belonging to others, but we have integrated a lot of that ourselves and we have unconscious ways that we also reinforce the very systems that we are trying to down take, and so it really requires a lot of reflection, a lot of self-awareness and a lot of willingness. [...] it's a constant willingness to be reflective of ourselves, because (we may)not realize that we have also incorporated some of that, and we also bring that at times…

Understand different ways of being

Related to the challenge outlined earlier on differences in cultural and social presentation, focus group participants talked about the need for openness, non-judgmental attitudes and a willingness to learn from one another.

> "We have to understand our differences […] like the differences in words and differences in being. We can recognize that there isn't necessarily a wrong and a right way. We can incorporate everybody's needs without excluding others."

Finally, participants stated that these kinds of process considerations ultimately would lead to the creation of a safe environment, where members of LSISNs would trust one another.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The goal of this research was to examine LSISNs as an effective model for getting to the root causes of systemic social issues that have resulted in the extreme poverty, violence and poor health impacting specific groups of marginalized populations, in order to better address them. In this report we have focused on women and gender minority people who are Indigenous, Black, African and members of other racialized groups, refugees and people with intellectual, cognitive, and psychosocial disabilities.

For the literature review we adhered to a tightly defined scope which targeted local community-based solidarity initiatives that were also specific to the target marginalized populations. The notion of solidarity was rarely identified in the community-based initiatives examined. The majority of the community-based work reviewed was academically led, some in partnership with mainstream health or social organizations, i.e., hospitals and social planning councils. Even in the more progressive projects that aimed to convene and support more involvement of marginalized groups, the community's participation was largely consultative in nature, that is, processes did not support target community members to lead the work.

Many of these community-based initiatives focused on addressing a health or social issue, with the vast majority concerned with housing and homelessness. Most of the recommendations that were offered in research reports were theoretical or came to broad conclusions, i.e., "there is a lack of material resources required for living", rather than offering practical information of what resources are lacking, i.e., English as a Second Language (ESL) courses to help refugee women get work or Indigenous women's healing programs to help women dealing with trauma so they can begin work on finding employment. The literature revealed that there has been minimal attention paid to building solidarity at the grassroots level with marginalized communities—particularly women and gender minority people from those marginalized groups.

The survey and focus group research probed into the themes emerging from the literature review and identified key characteristics of the LSISN approach.

Firstly, the research confirmed that it is essential that *work occur at the local level*. The literature also described the importance of establishing local networks when conducting community-based work.

It was clear from survey and focus group results that *local networks should be comprised of members from marginalized populations and front-line workers* who provide supports to these communities. The importance of reaching and including those who are acutely marginalized with a focus on women, gender minorities, people with intellectual, cognitive, and mental health disabilities, and those who live with multiple intersecting identities, was affirmed. The rationale is that if marginalized people are in leadership positions, grassroots knowledge rises to the forefront to guide the work. While this was a strong finding, a few respondents also indicated that some level of involvement of local mainstream organizations in the work of LSISNs was warranted, because it was believed that in some communities, mainstream agencies are made up of, and close to marginalized people in their community.

Solidarity amongst marginalized people was also strongly supported in the survey and focus group. Reasons offered were: mainstream systems have been ineffective in addressing the issues marginalized people face; solidarity allows groups to work outside of their silos and learn from one another; there is strength in numbers, where a collective voice can be amplified; and an understanding of the commonalities people experience can lead to unified strategies.

Effective methods for outreach and convening—Participants stated that LSISN work must be relevant and action oriented; that supports people need to participate must be in place; that outreach to younger people is needed; that social media should be used to reach and engage people; and that those who become involved should share similar values and understandings, or be willing to explore the potential for commonalities.

Many *process considerations* were offered for enabling marginalized people to work together in solidarity. These include: ensure that the voice of marginalized peoples dominates and other members understand their privilege; recognize how we all contribute to oppressing others; understand different ways of being; ensure that marginalized people are identifying priority issues to focus on; and be guided by shared principles and values. It was also noted that, the work should be contextualized with understandings of the history of structural oppression experienced by each group and its present-day manifestations. While participants pointed to the importance of focusing on process, such as building trust, respecting differences, avoiding competing against one another, etc., they also made clear that process needs to be balanced by a plan for concrete action.

Participants in the survey and focus groups supported specific *characteristics of the structure of local to national work* that goes into supporting LSISNs, including: a local agency to provide institutional support; a local coordinator with strong community networks; and the importance of a national framework to synthesize and share learnings from across the country. Research participants also highlighted the importance of *building awareness in the broader community* about the issues facing marginalized people and felt strongly that plans need to be put in place that will *ensure the sustainability and continuation of LSISN work.*

Many challenges were described when marginalized groups work together. These include: cynicism from past involvement in community projects; poverty and its relationship to time and resources; difficulty in reaching marginalized people; lack of trust and understanding of others; hierarchy of oppression; differences in cultural and social presentation; and the risk of involving people who might not necessarily share the same values and understandings of how marginalization is established and perpetuated.

CONCLUSION: THE LOCAL SAFETY & INCLUSION SOLIDARITY NETWORK MODEL

The goal of this research was to examine a local to national community development approach that aims to address the root causes of extreme marginalization experienced by specific populations in Canada. The core mechanism of this local to national strategy, is the Local Safety & Inclusion Solidarity Networks that bring grassroots front-line service providers and community members of diverse marginalized populations together to develop community actions to better understand and respond to, the interconnectedness of poverty, health, and violence.

The results of both the secondary and primary research processes have affirmed key components and characteristics of the Local Safety Inclusion Solidarity Networks' model for marginalized groups to effectively work together in solidarity. These are:

- ✓ Networks are based in a local geographic community

- ✓ Networks are made up of grassroots community members and service providers of the most marginalized populations with a gendered intersectional focus

- ✓ Priority is given to working with local grassroots service providers who work with marginalized communities, over local mainstream service providers. However, some involvement of mainstream services should be included in the work of the network.

- ✓ Related to this, mainstream service providers should play a non-leadership role, i.e., as observers and listeners.

- ✓ A local agency provides institutional support to network activities through all its phases, including outreach and convening; designing the action; developing an implementation plan with timeline; and activating the plan

- ✓ A local coordinator is engaged who can strategically and intentionally grow an intersectional community network.

- ✓ The convening space and interactions have the necessary supports in place for diverse marginalized people to participate in an equitable manner.

- ✓ There is a national structure that provides "technical" support, i.e., convening diverse partners; bridging communication gaps; offering processes for working together; developing, and sharing resources; supporting grassroots capacity building where needed; consolidating local and national learnings for broader-scale social development; and facilitating project design and evaluation.

✓ Awareness of the issues facing marginalized populations is communicated to the broader community.

✓ Networks pay equal attention to process and action, due to the importance of trust, voice, and constituency building and to nurture a sense of community ownership.

The research demonstrates that there are many avoidable challenges when marginalized people are not supported to lead in efforts to address their own problems. For example, not trusting outsiders because they do not see any progress from past involvement or a sense that there is a lack of understanding of their day-to-day experiences. It is however understandable that this disconnect exists, because as Isabel Wilkerson asserts, you can't fix what you can't see.[69] That is, people who are not on the ground living a social problem or providing direct support, cannot really "see" the problem in its specificity and complexity.

For example, an Indigenous front-line worker supporting an Indigenous woman with an intellectual disability who is a survivor of violence, knows that she needs to offer traditional teachings, get a diagnosis, put in place culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, disability supports for employment training, deal with addictions issues, etc., if she is to effectively address her client's housing needs. However, an outsider would initially have to spend time learning to "see", (i.e., research), the housing problem impacting Indigenous women in that community. The external strategist often misses the complex relationships and nuances associated with the issue, which is "felt" knowledge to the Indigenous front-line worker. Or as Dian Million states, "A felt analysis is one that creates a context for a more complex 'telling,' one that illuminates the deeper meaning"[70] and understandings of a social experience.

LSISNs provide the infrastructure, supports and resources for those with felt, lived and front-line knowledge to lead in the defining and implementation of strategies that get at those complex interlocking barriers that have impeded progress to-date. Further, the exclusive focus on building solidarity and a "working together" among those who are most marginalized allows us to move beyond the confines of broad categories such as "women" or "migrant people" or "people with disabilities" and to recognize that power operates even within marginalized groups.

The Local Safety Inclusion Solidarity Network model is an approach that significantly shifts our understandings of how to address structurally embedded social problems impacting the most marginalized populations in Canadian society. The very design of these networks recognize that economic, political, and social systems were built to support the protection and advancement of the dominant settler society. We can thus understand why mainstream organizations to-date, whether national, provincial, territorial, or local, have felt the responsibility to lead in addressing the marginality experienced within their own systems. However, a marginalized peoples' solidarity network recognizes that people who do not live the consequences of systemic exclusion cannot lead in the identification and implementation of solutions for groups that they do not belong to.

Currently it is recognized that people with lived experience should be involved in articulating their needs and sharing ideas of what would help their situation. However, as this report has shown, the LSISN model

attempts to go beyond consultation, ensuring that marginalized people are well supported and resourced to design and implement their own social change strategies.

That said, those in positions of privilege have a role to play in convening, supporting, listening, and learning. Nonetheless, a marginalized peoples' solidarity movement must lead in the identification of actions to respond to their own needs.

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