

# A Framework for Community Youth Development



*Holly Carr, hand painted silk*

*meaningful involvement of young people in building  
healthy communities*



## HeartWood

*Centre for Community Youth Development*

# HEARTWOOD CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Since 1989, HeartWood has provided learning experiences for youth to develop their personal leadership qualities through outdoor adventure, teamwork, environmental awareness, and service to others. However, after ten years of providing these programs, HeartWood recognized a need to go further with its work, supporting youth in becoming more integrated in their communities, post leadership training. Thus began a challenging and rewarding transformation of the organization and its program, to embrace youth as community change makers, building on their creativity, needs and passions.

Our core services and philosophy shifted to address an enhanced vision of youth engagement being vital to building healthy communities HeartWood's mission is to work with youth in Nova Scotia to develop their skills and confidence as community builders. The organization also works nationally, training, and supporting adults and young adults, and agencies, in the skills and tools they require to support youth engagement.

With a focus on linking youth and community development our work now encompass youth leadership training, adult leadership training and professional development, project management, research, consultations, and project development. We work directly with young people, adults serving youth, researchers, youth-serving organizations, community associations, government agencies, and policy makers.

HeartWood has discovered varying levels and types of support community groups and individuals may require with their youth engagement efforts, and responds accordingly. Often communities or agencies will approach HeartWood directly for support with including young people. At other times we hear of a youth team or an individual doing fabulous things in their community and we approach them. We are currently supporting thirty-five community and agency-based youth development initiatives, and are building the capacity to support many more. Our approach and programs focus on long term engagement of the youth and adults. Our programs and interventions are used as a complement to the activities of the group and are meant to support the unique character and intent of each community group.

HeartWood has developed a Community Youth Development Framework based on its research into variables that contribute to successful youth action teams. The Framework is intended for application when working with groups of young people, young adults, and adults within a given community or organization. The Framework blends youth development and community development, and is designed as a guide to encourage, plan for, and support active engagement of youth with their communities and agencies. 'Community' may be defined geographically, or by group, organization, or by a network of shared interest. The Framework must be made to fit the specific needs or desired outcomes that each community defines for itself.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

*"It's an adventure, it's fun and exciting, and we're changing society – changing the world!"*

Adult volunteer with a youth action team

Community Youth Development (CYD) is the process of young people being engaged in meaningful participation through planning, decision-making, and program delivery in our governments, organizations, institutions, and communities. While encouraging the gifts and talents of individual young people, CYD places equal focus on the investment of these assets in the community. Individual youth and adults, organizations, and communities all benefit when youth are engaged as full and active participants.

Heartwood's Framework for Community Youth Development supports the engagement of young people in community building by identifying core values, program tools, and community resources.



## THE RESEARCH

The foundation of the Framework is based on HeartWood's work with youth and communities in Nova Scotia, Canada. Redefined and strengthened through research, it now reflects the voices of both youth and adults working together in youth action teams in which partnerships are based on mutual learning, teaching, and action. Using the appreciative inquiry approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 54 participants from 12 youth action teams across Nova Scotia. An equal number of male and female youth, mainly from rural areas, were interviewed. Participants included 28 young people, 17 adult support people, and nine community agency representatives who have supported or received service from a team.



## FINDING THE CORE OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

*“I keep coming back to continue helping the community.”*  
Youth action team member, Chester, NS

Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity that has a focus outside the individual. When asked why they engaged as full and active participants, the young people interviewed articulated the following motivators, which have become the core values of the Framework:

- opportunities to follow their passions
- connections with both peers and adults
- a sense that their work contributed to making a difference
- the ability to take concrete actions
- having fun

When employed as the focus of a youth-engagement strategy these values will draw young people into a community or organization, guide their work and relationships, and sustain their commitment.

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

*“While they may be our future, youth are not merely adults in waiting but are members of our communities today. They have experience, information, views, ideas and solutions.”*

Canadian International Development Agency

The outer circle of the Framework diagram specifies four community resources identified as facilitating the engagement of young people in community building and organizational development. The following are all fundamental to the implementation of a sustainable youth-engagement strategy.

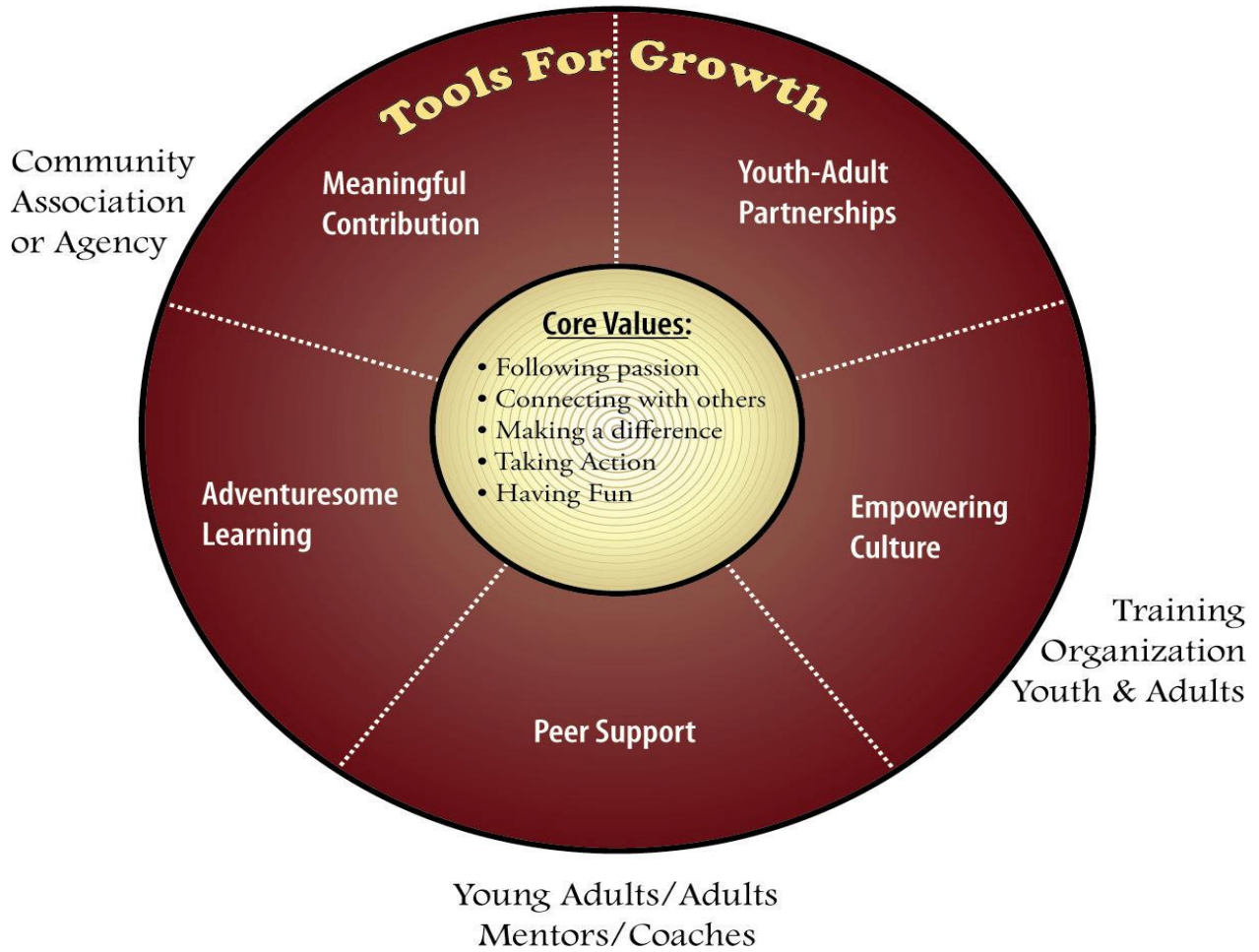
- youth
- supportive adults and young adults
- community links and associations
- a youth training organization

These community resources create the context within which an organization or community can successfully implement the tools for growth suggested by the Framework and encompassed within its secondary ring.



# Community Resources

Youth



# TOOLS FOR GROWTH: *translating values to practice*

## **YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS** - *“I’m supported.”*

Youth-adult partnerships engage both youth and adults in mutual growth and learning. As role models, adults provide youth with support and inspiration by sharing interests and experiences in an environment of equality and mutual respect. As mentors and coaches, supportive adults are a resource for young people in connecting them with individuals or organizations. Reciprocally, adults who work with youth in healthy partnerships often find themselves inspired, energized, and increasingly committed to the organizations and communities they serve.

## **PEER SUPPORT** - *“I’m accepted.”*

When supported by peers, individuals feel connected, encouraged, and appreciated. Peer support in the context of the Framework involves a balance of play and action, helping young people to feel like part of a team or community while taking concrete action. Relationships rooted in mutual support and acceptance help group members nurture each other’s strengths and growth. This collective voice and strength inspires them to take on challenges and face risks that they might avoid if acting alone.

## **ADVENTURESOME LEARNING** - *“Learning can be fun.”*

Adventure is about exploration, excitement, challenge, mystery, and seeking the unknown. Young people are action-oriented, testing new behaviours and exploring their world, and are drawn to experiences that offer challenge, adventure, and new learning. Adventuresome learning acknowledges this need for action by engaging participants in real-life experiences that challenge them to step outside their comfort zones to learn and grow.

## **EMPOWERING CULTURE** - *“My voice counts.”*

As young people grow and develop they want and seek opportunities for leadership and the freedom to exercise real control and power in a culture that incorporates trust, honesty, and open communication. An empowering culture provides youth with this sense of responsibility and control over what happens, inspiring them to follow their passions and inviting them to become co-authors of the vision of the organization or community.

## **MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION** - *“I’m needed.”*

Meaningful contribution is taking action to meet a genuine need. Youth often have fresh, creative approaches to dealing with challenging social and environmental issues. When encouraged to think critically about the root causes of issues they hope to address, young people are challenged to use their gifts to expand acts of service beyond charity to action for social change. Young people thrive when they feel needed; and define their self-worth in relation to their skills and capacity to make a difference. The quality of their engagement is more important to growth than the frequency or quantity of participation (Checkoway, 1998). The sense that one’s work is part of something greater than the individual can be the fuel for inspired and passionate work by young people (Tolman et al, 2001).

*“I think that’s key, that we do it together. It’s not us and them. It’s not just us. It’s all of us participating together, to have us all be our best.”*

Adult youth action team member, Lunenburg, NS

*“I think when it comes down to it we’re always going to be there for each other. We’re connected and we’re really, really close.”*

Youth action team member, Middle Musquodoboit

*“It pushed my personal boundaries, so that was a thrill. It’s given me the courage to take on things that I wouldn’t have dared before.”*

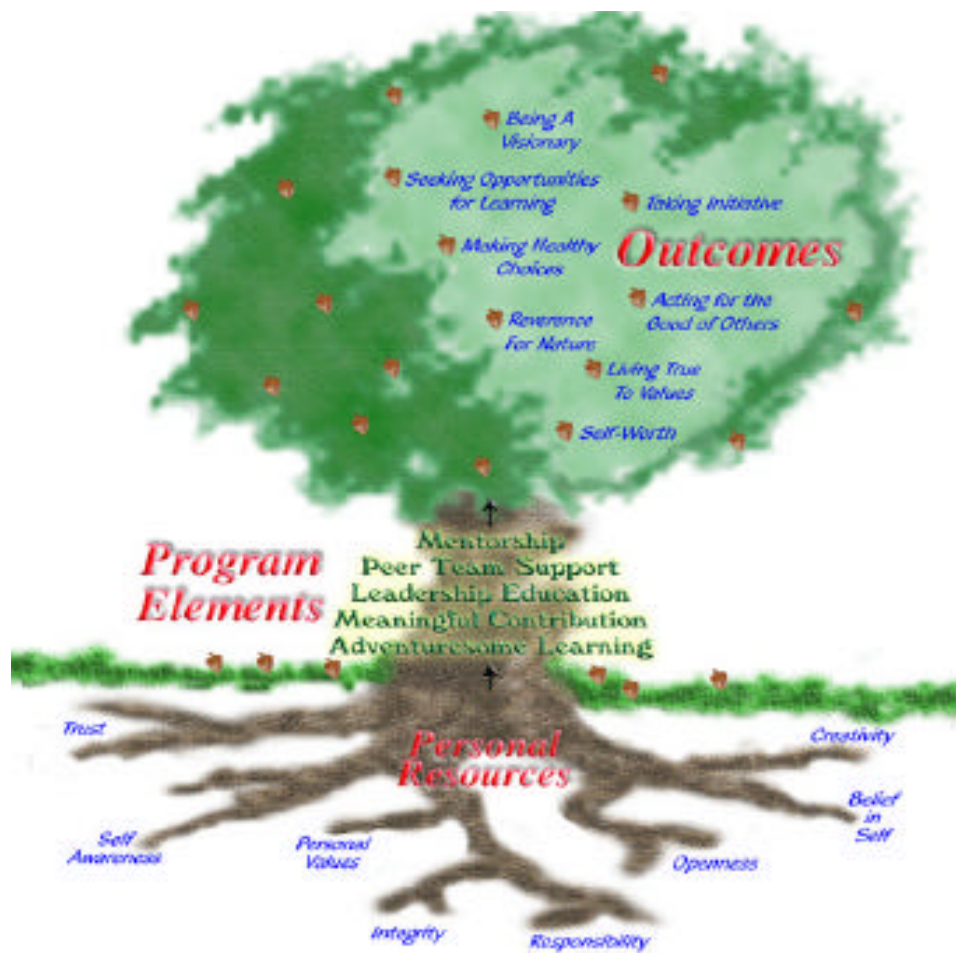
Youth action team member

*“If we were serious about youth empowerment then we had to make sure that we used meeting processes that said, right from the beginning, that this meeting was theirs.”*

Staff member, Amnesty International, Canada

*“It’s always fun and I always feel like I’m making a difference and that’s very important to me.”*

Youth action team member, Mahone Bay, NS



# OUTCOMES OF COMMUNITY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

*“We used to be shy. We didn’t believe in ourselves. We didn’t care about anything.  
Now we are trying to make our neighborhood and our lives better.”*

Jesus, 17, on the impact of Cefocine, a youth-driven organization working to stop gang violence in Ecuador

We apply a metaphor of a tree and forest that we use to describe the potential outcome of this approach. The metaphor likens each individual to a tree and each community to a forest. The term community is used to connote a geographical community or a community of interest.

To describe the *individual youth development outcomes* we utilize the metaphor of a tree. The tree describes each young person as having gifts and Personal Resources, many of which may be untapped. The person may not have had the opportunity to explore these resources, and/or may not be aware of them. With the help of a set of educational tools, the young people come together and find opportunities to develop, enhance and share their personal resources. The Outcomes are the fruits of the tree: young people demonstrating and living their personal bests and in so doing contributing to the lives of others and their community. The specific resources and the particular outcomes will inevitably vary among individuals, programs, and experiences.

## **For individuals\*:**

- living true to values
- developing self-worth
- being a visionary
- seeking opportunities for learning
- taking initiative
- making healthy choices
- acting for the good of others

\* observed outcomes

We depict the *community development outcomes* of the Framework through the metaphor of a forest in which the diversity of trees represents the diversity of individuals in the community. We consider youth as one of the most important and often untapped community resources. By engaging and developing a strong set of community resources and root structures, including supportive adults and young adults, community links with an associations or agency, and a youth and adult training organization(s), young people can be drawn into community life as a powerful resource for the benefit of all. The Outcomes proposed in Framework are simply examples that HeartWood has observed in its work with youth in communities (e.g., youth supporting youth, enriched community resources, etc.). It is essential that each community define and measure the community outcomes for itself.

## **For communities and organizations\*\*:**

- youth supporting youth
- enriched community resources
- shared community vision
- youth making healthy choices
- youth-initiated activity
- genuine youth inclusion
- healthy youth-adult relationships

\*\* observed and anticipated outcomes



# CALL TO ACTION

*“This is our community. We want to change it. We’re not going to depend on someone else to change it. We’re going to do it.”*

Youth action team member, Middle Musquodoboit, NS

By adapting the HeartWood Framework for CYD to address local community assets, needs and circumstances, youth can be engaged in community building activity in sustainable and successful ways. Organizations and individuals, from academics to youth workers and managers to policy makers, can all play a role in contributing to the understanding, practice, support, and implementation of CYD work by engaging young people as full and active participants.

## RESEARCH

### The challenge:

While the positive impact of youth engagement on individuals has been well established, more research is needed to understand and document the benefits of meaningful youth inclusion for communities and organizations.

- How can research inform the ongoing dialogue on youth engagement?
- How can research informed by the framework empower youth as researchers?

### Taking action:

Research can play a direct and active role in youth empowerment through the use of youth-led and participatory-action methodologies in research and evaluation. The innovative and fresh perspectives of young people lead to unique and relevant research, giving youth a powerful voice in the decisions affecting and shaping their lives.

## PRACTICE

### The challenge:

For practitioners working with young people and communities the Framework offers a tool for reflection on the day-to-day work of engaging young people. It provides a lens for examining practices to see if they reflect the core values and are linked to community resources.

- Is my practice informed by the values that engage young people?
- How can I best draw on community resources to enhance my youth-engagement work?

### Taking action:

The tools for growth suggest practical means for developing strategies and approaches to working with young people as partners in program planning, development and implementation.

## POLICY

### The challenge:

Meaningful, significant youth engagement requires a strong commitment from governing bodies both internal and external to government structures. This includes providing the financial, human, and policy support to communities and organizations pursuing the work of youth engagement.

- How does our current policy framework support CYD?
- How can HeartWood’s framework tools help to implement meaningful structural changes to engage young people in our society?

### Taking action:

The Framework provides governing bodies with an assessment tool for youth-engagement initiatives. The tools for growth can guide policy makers in implementing structural changes that draw young people into meaningful roles in our society.



## ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### The challenge:

Community organizations and associations, and their leadership, are the key to CYD. However, even those with a clearly defined youth-serving aspect often feel they lack the direction and tools to successfully accomplish meaningful youth engagement. We need to move beyond the usual defense of youth inclusion as the 'right' thing to do, recognizing its value for both youth and organizations.



- Does my organization have meaningful input from young people into the programs and services meant to serve them?
- What group of young people in my community could be invited to participate in a dialogue on community issues?
- How can young people help to bring about change and stimulate renewal within my organization?

### Taking action:

**Youth-serving organizations** must look beyond traditional program boundaries and play a more powerful role in ensuring the inclusion of youth in community and organizational processes. CYD requires guidance and ambassadors. There are many opportunities for YSOs to provide training, facilitation, and mediation to youth and their communities.

**Community associations and their leaders** are searching for fresh support and creativity, elements youth are well equipped to provide. By applying the tools for growth and practicing an assets-based (i.e., talents, skills, resources) development approach community organizations are on the right path toward bringing young people into the heart of community-building activity.

**Directors and managers** need to recognize that their organizations have much to gain by meaningfully engaging young people. Youth inspire and energize adult workers and act as catalysts for organizational renewal. The tools for growth can guide organizations in this challenging, but rewarding, work.

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