



Rural Capacity Building Research Overview - Presentations in Ireland and Scotland

March, 2026

Dr. Gary McNeely, Rural PLAR Researcher, RDI, PLAR Coordinator, Registrar's Office

Dr. Wayne Kelly, Director, RDI



Land Acknowledgement

Today as we talk about community well-being, I respectfully acknowledge that I live and work on Treaty 1 and Treaty 2 lands, the traditional homelands of the Dakota, Anishanabek, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dene, and Metis peoples. It is important to note that Indigenous peoples in Canada, First Nations, Inuit and Metis take a holistic view to community, and there, the concept of capacity, roles, and overall well-being is central to both community and development for Indigenous cultures.

Outline

1. Introductions and RDI Overview
2. RDI Living Lab
3. Pulse of Rural Manitoba Community Data
4. Education Pathways - Pulse example
5. Community Readiness Case Studies
6. Discussion & Invitation



Introductions and RDI Overview

Manitoba:

- 1.5 million people
 - The capital city, Winnipeg has approx. 850,000 (57%)
 - Brandon, the 2nd largest city, has approx. 53,000 (3.5%)
 - 260,000 approx. are rural (17%), 90,000 approx. are northern (7%)
 - Most rural and northern communities are small (<2,500)
-
- 650,00 km²
 - 1225 km north to south, 793 east to west
 - Brandon – Winnipeg is 200 km
 - Most rural and northern communities are more than 50km from urban centres

Manitoba (Canada) is 2.7 times larger than United Kingdom.



The Team

- ★ 2 Faculty & 2 Staff
- ★ 8 Graduate Students
- ★ 1 Post-Graduate Researcher
- ★ 4 Undergraduate Students

Partnerships



2025 provided so many opportunities to foster partnerships with a variety of researchers, practitioners and community leaders!

- ★ 11 on-campus partnerships
- ★ 13 off-campus organizational partnerships
- ★ 4 international partnerships

RDI has conducted research and project work with **5 communities** throughout 2025



Knowledge Mobilization

2 Podcasts Produced



Small Towns, Big Stories



ConnectedMB



- ★ 1 Book Chapter
- ★ 2 Journal Articles
- ★ 3 Reports
- ★ 14 Public Presentations at 7+ Events



Events

- ★ **SEPTEMBER 2025: Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation Conference: Foundations for the Future of Rural**
- ★ **DECEMBER 2025: Exploration into Community-Based Data Collection and Knowledge Mobilization for Sustainable Rural Development**

RDI Research Pillars & Projects

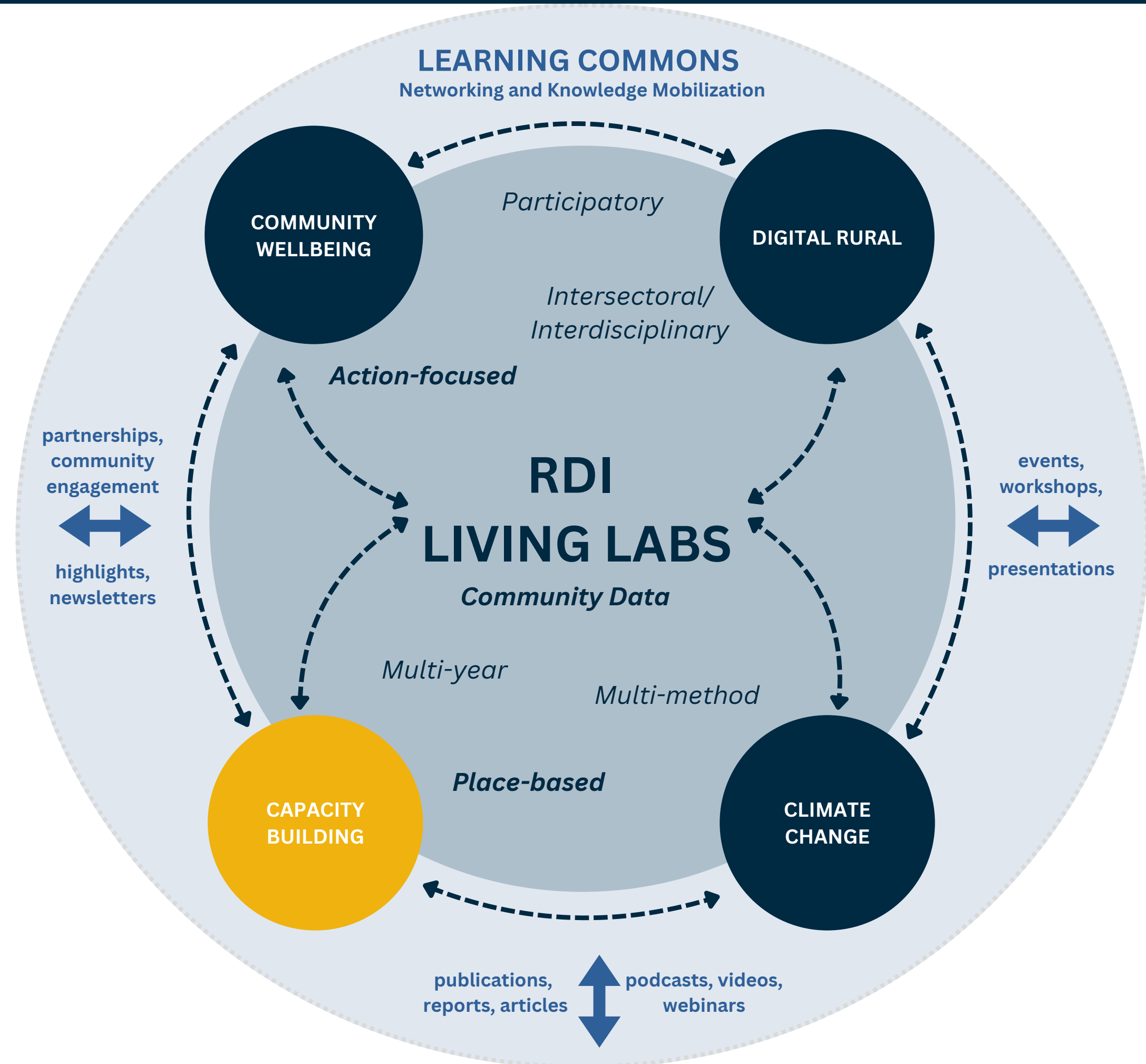


Throughout 2025, RDI conducted 6 Projects in line with the RDI Pillars:

- ★ Co-Creating a Community Wellbeing Framework
- ★ Community Capacity Development: Summer Practicum
- ★ Changing Nature of Rural
- ★ **Does AI Have a Place in Rural Governance?**
- ★ Digital Horizons: Shaping Manitoba's Integrated Policy Future
- ★ **Pulse of Rural MB**

RDI Living Lab

Rural Innovation
Capacity Building
Partnerships & Collaborations
Knowledge Mobilization



Capacity Challenges in Rural Communities

- Government downloading of responsibilities and costs to local communities
- Public Policy and Programs misaligned with rural place-based realities
- Reliance on volunteer organizations for community leadership and planning
- Limited financial and uncertain human capital (skill sets) to engage in community development projects
- Lack of access to and capacity to use local data for community development



Rural Community Capacity Building

Why are we interested in Rural Capacity Building?

- Enable rural communities to pursue development projects to enhance *Community Well-being*

What's RDI's current story around Rural Capacity Building?

- 3 Readiness Domains coordinate (a) community assets, needs, practitioners, (b) education and training pathways, and (c) researching community economic development practices and policies, centred around *Iterative CED Case Studies*

What have we achieved recently?

- Paired a *Rural Readiness Framework* with a *RPL/PLAR process*

Why are we gaining attention locally, regionally, provincially, nationally, and internationally?

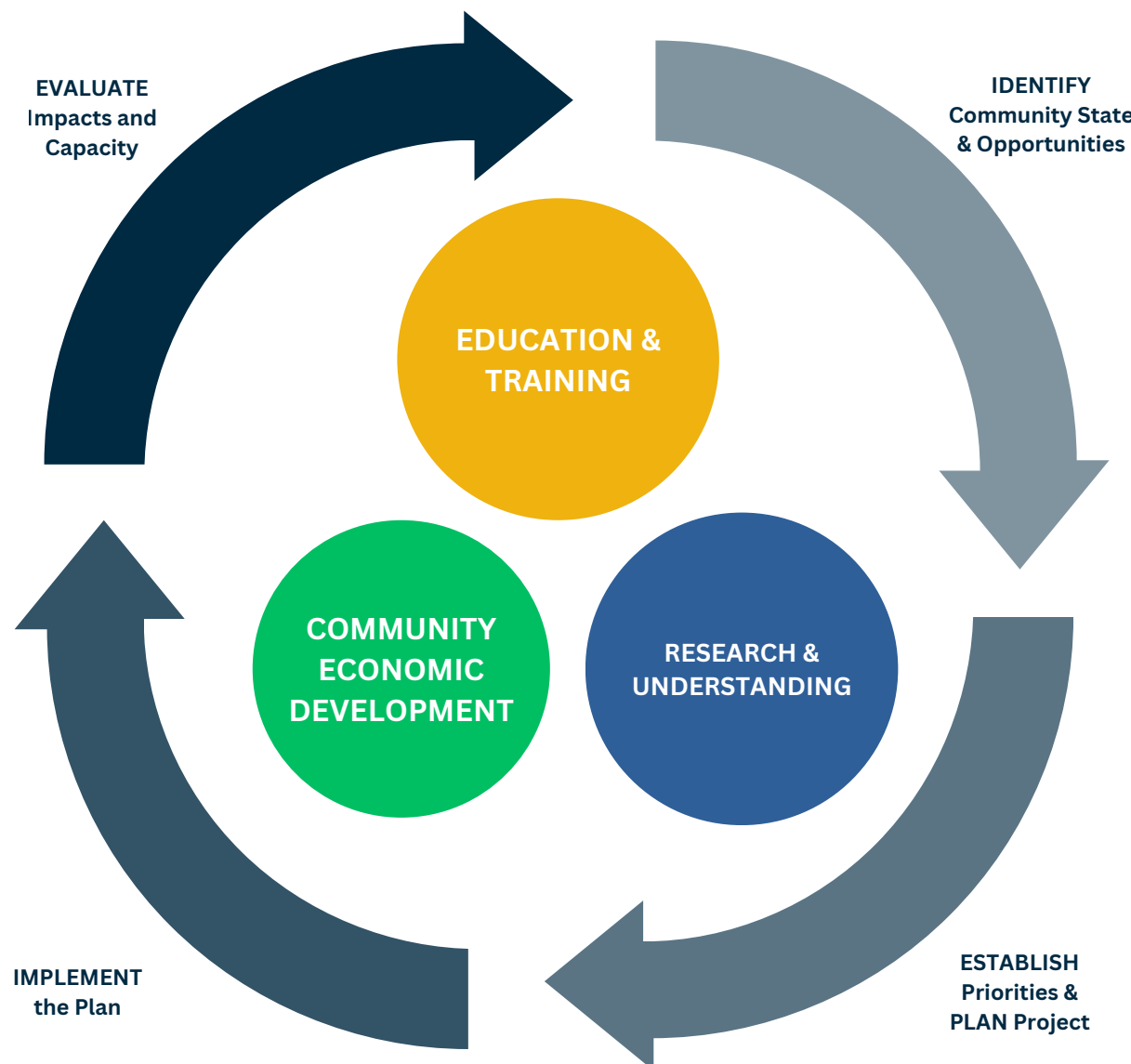
- Developed a *Action Research* approach tailored to *Place-based community needs and priorities*

PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

Pulse of Rural Manitoba - municipal indicator project with RMED

The purpose of this project is to create accessible, localized, and reliable data to support decision making and effective planning across these rural municipalities enhancing the region.

- Statistics Canada Census profiles and RMED dashboard currently allow deep dives into each municipality - but several key challenges remain:
 - Lack of easy access to universally available non-demographic or economic indicators
 - Lack of tools for comparing or contextualizing municipal data
 - **Many small rural municipalities do not have the capacity to use current data sets**



PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

Pulse of Rural Manitoba - municipal indicator project with RMED

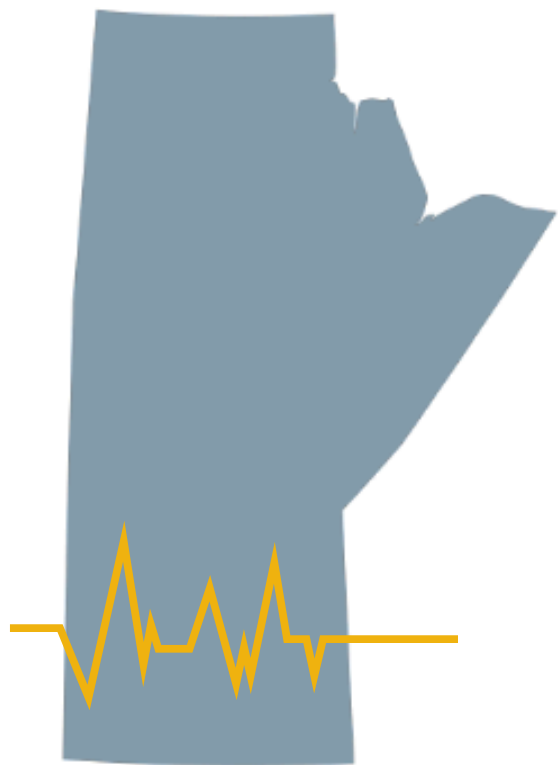
Project Purpose: Create accessible, localized, and reliable data to support decision making and effective planning across 125 rural municipalities in southern Manitoba.

Methods:

- Examined 10 themes highlighting pressures, structural changes, and policy demands in rural municipalities
- Developed 9 themes with 37 Indicators
- Scanned existing datasets: Statistics Canada; Rural Manitoba Economic Development (RMED) database; and municipal websites
- Assembled and analyzed qualitative data across and within regions, municipalities, themes, and indicators to identify trends, patterns, emerging narratives, and gaps.

Research Limitations:

- Data often scattered across multiple platforms.
- Format, details, and accessibility varied across municipalities often influencing the analysis.



PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

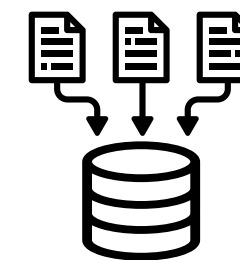
Pulse of Rural Manitoba - municipal indicator project with RMED

Project Purpose: Create accessible, localized, and reliable data to support decision making and effective planning across these rural municipalities enhancing the region.



37 Indicators across 10 themes

The indicators were developed based on available data across all municipalities and informed by Indexes like Canada's Wellbeing Index, OECD Better Life Index and other wellbeing data sets across Canada



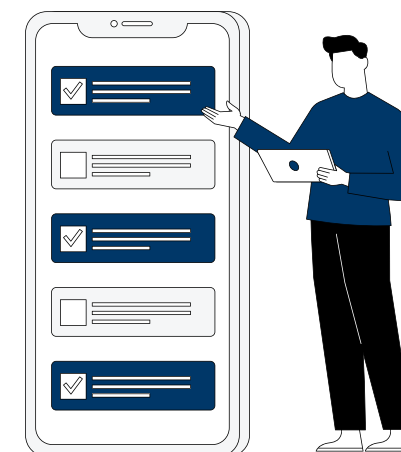
Data Sources

- Stats Canada - (Focus on Geography Series & Census Profile)
- RMED database
- Municipal Websites



Data Analysis

- Calculated averages, medians, minimum and maximum values for all data.
- Compared data within themes to identify patterns and stories



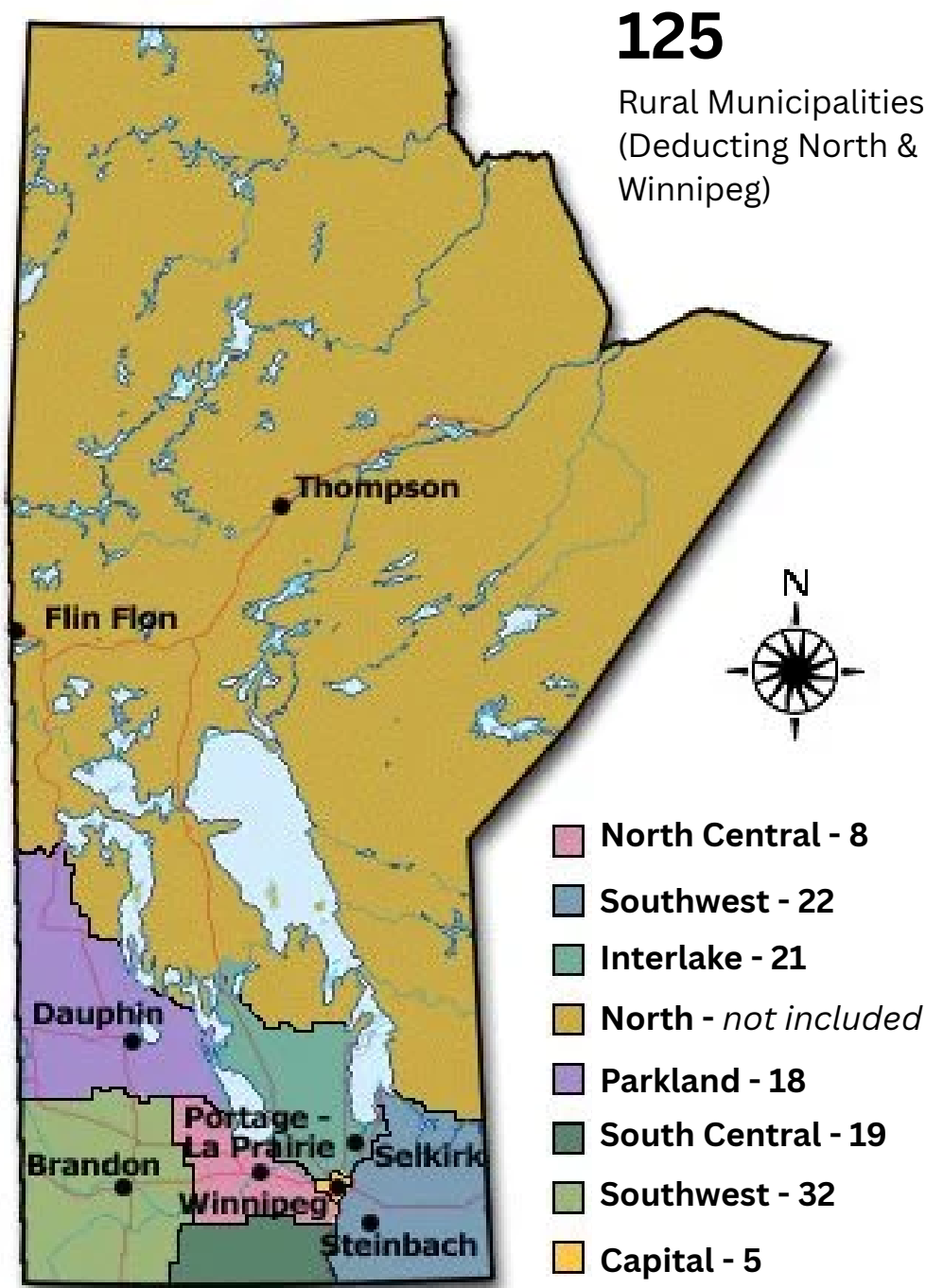
Reporting

Designed preliminary report and presentation
Final report- Design of final Pulse of Rural MB 1.0

PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

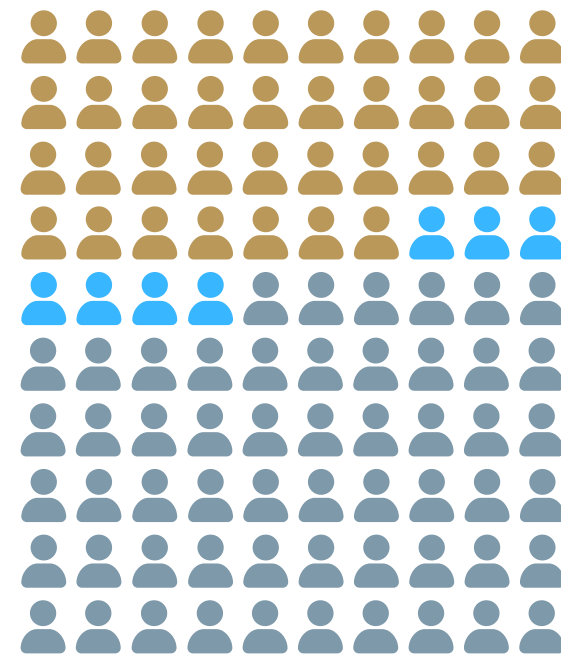
- Themes**
- ✓ **DEMOGRAPHICS:** Population size, population growth and decline, age distribution, migration patterns, and indigenous population.
 - ✓ **HOUSING:** Total houses, total occupied, total apartments, and the average housing and rental cost across Manitoba municipalities.
 - ✓ **ECONOMY:** Focused on median household income, business establishments, industry diversification and occupational structure across rural Manitoba.
 - ✓ **MIGRATION:** Distribution and concentration of immigrant population residing in Manitoba municipalities.
 - ✓ **TRANSPORTATION:** Availability and connectivity of public transit within and across municipalities and regions, and commuting patterns and key infrastructures.
 - ✓ **CAPACITY:** Completion of education at the high school, college, and university levels as well as numbers of municipal staff.
 - ✓ **CLIMATE CHANGE:** Data related to the availability of climate action plans, climate risk data, preparedness and water security and management at each municipality were collected.
 - ✗ **TOURISM:** Some tourism data was collected but insufficient to include in this version of the report.
 - ✗ **CONNECTIVITY:** Accessible, consistent municipal-level data is currently unavailable.
 - ✗ **WELLBEING:** Some data from other themes overlap with wellbeing indicators, but insufficient data were available to conduct a full thematic analysis.

PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY



POPULATION

1,342,153



- 37% of Manitobans live in rural
494,459
- 7% of Manitobans live in the north
98,087
- 56% of Manitobans live in Winnipeg
749,607

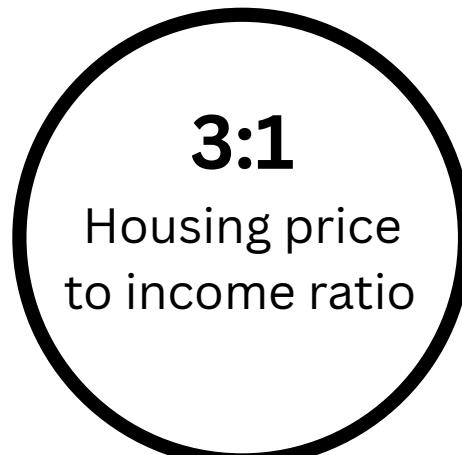
IMMIGRANTS

43,600 Immigrants: (9%)
30,954 Economic immigrant (71%)

ECONOMY & AFFORDABILITY

Median household income
\$ 85,210

Housing Affordability
Average housing price
\$ 292,728



CAPACITY

667 Admin & CED staff
32 Dedicated EDOs

EDUCATION

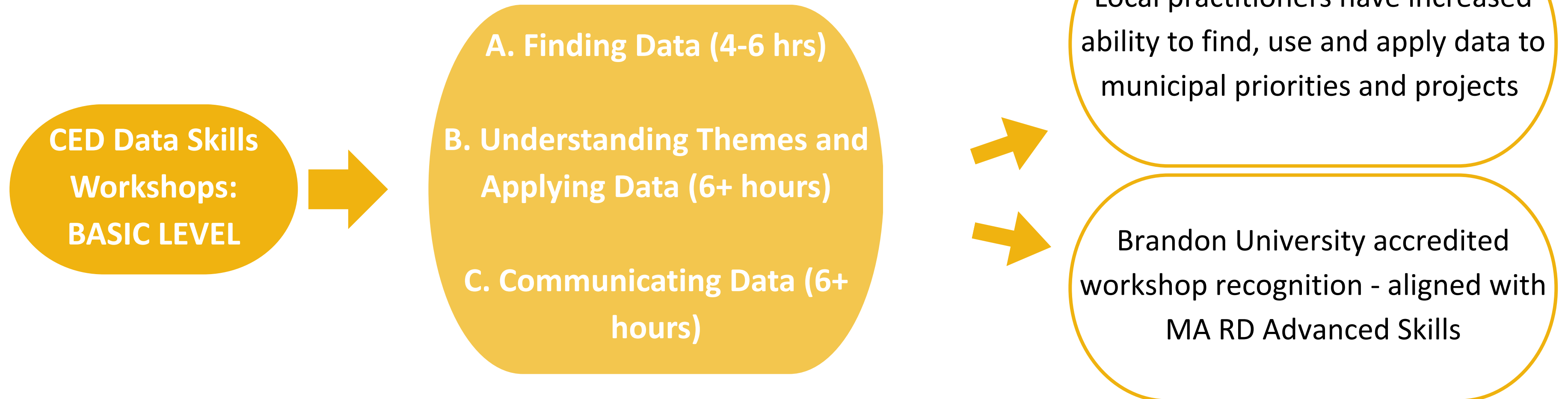


PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

Pulse of Rural Manitoba - accredited training plan for data use

BASIC Level Data skills for community economic development

- Workshops centred on finding data for community/municipal profiles
- Understanding the municipal profile data and its themes
- Communicating the data



PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

WORKSHOP DESIGN

- **Criteria of recognition** (Completion, Participation, Competency)
- **Eligible for PLAR/RPL assessment** - demonstration of workshop competency skills (assessment methods) leads to recognition, which qualifies for workshop exemption
- **Registration in the sets of workshops is sequential**, except for PLAR/RPL recognition
- **Cohort-based** with practical / collaborative exercises with differing participant groups for broader experiential learning
- **Delivery - TBD** (Hybrid - in class & (online) group participatory exercises)
- **Accredited through Brandon University Senate Policy** - Non-credit Certificate

PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

WORKSHOP ALIGNMENT

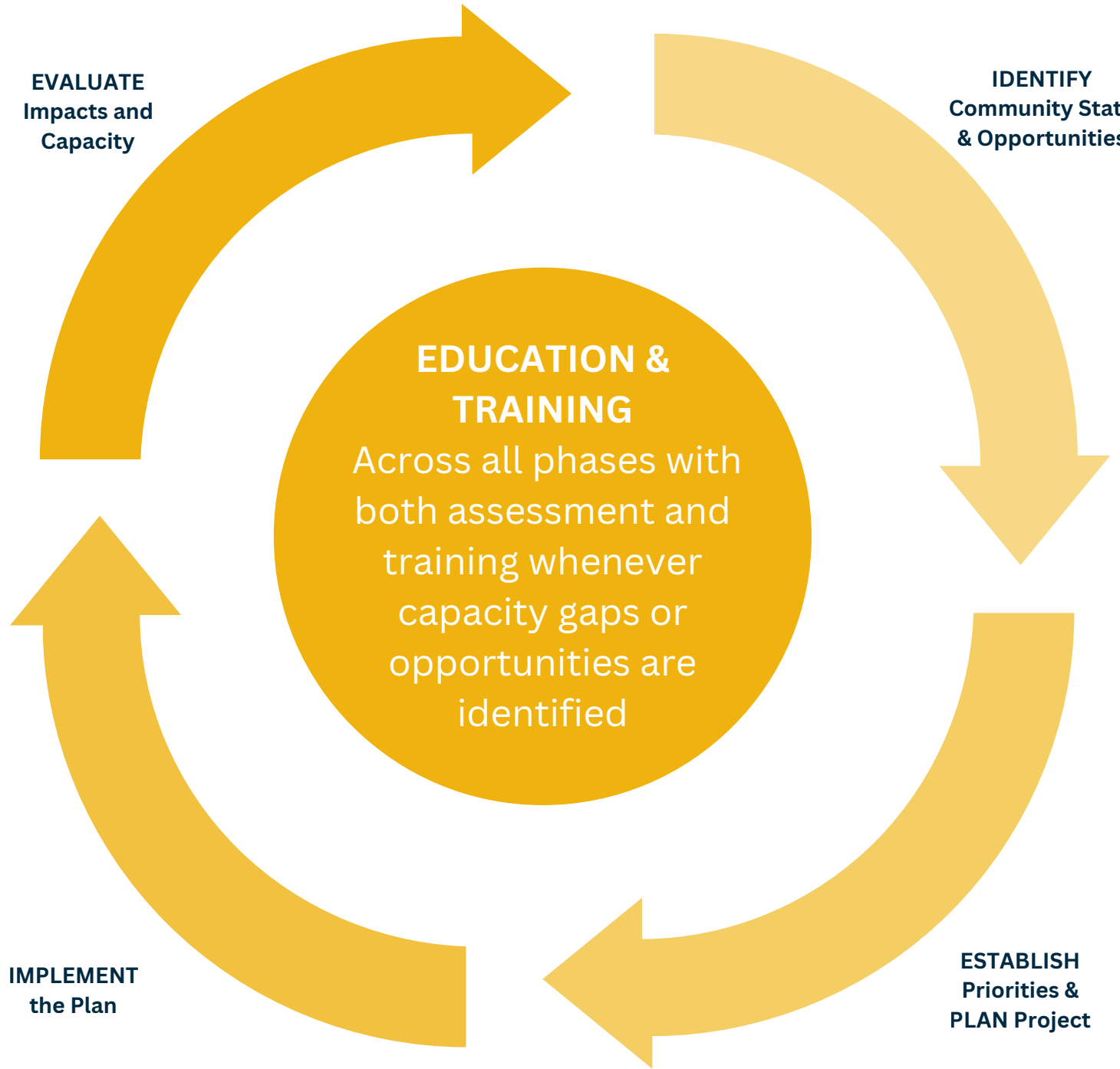
- **Develops Practical Applications**
 - Finding relevant databases/sources of data, understanding the composition of databases, developing digital skills in using the database(s), communicating data for different purposes and audiences
- **Tailored to Community needs**
 - Addresses the Rural Readiness Framework - Core Competency - Research & Data - Basic & Intermediate levels
- **Preparation for BU 1st year level studies**
 - Complements but does not duplicate existing research methods courses at undergraduate and graduate levels
 - Coordinates with learning exercises / professional development - e.g. Master of Arts in Rural Development - 88:602 Advanced Skills for Rural Development (*A practicum course*)

PULSE OF RURAL MANITOBA – COMMUNITY DATA & CAPACITY

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

- **Community practitioners** - challenged in applying database to develop and apply community profiles - baseline of information for identifying / prioritizing CED projects, applying data for projects, collaborating with project partners
- **BU Students** - providing senior undergraduate and graduate students in relevant social science disciplines practical experience applying demographic databases to community profiles and projects
- **Canadian Armed Forces members** - unfamiliar with applying databases for coordinating planning and engagement on base (and on deployment in other communities (nationally / internationally))

Tailoring **EDUCATION & TRAINING** to improve readiness in Community Development Projects



IDENTIFY, ESTABLISH & PLAN - *conduct PLAR capacity assessment and required training for community profiling, data use and project planning*

IMPLEMENT - *Starts project with required training before implementation begins*

EVALUATE - *Key Role at this stage is to conduct post PLAR assessment that evaluates capacity built through training and project participation*

COMMUNITY CAPACITY APPROACH: COMMUNITY MATURITY MODELS

Initial

- Reliant on Community Governance Roles, Community Volunteers / Champions
- Operations are administrative and often ad hoc
- Training is limited and reactive

Intermediate

- Some operations adopt formal processes with consistent performance expectations
- Performance reviews highlight skills gaps requiring training

Advanced

- Operations integrate workplace competencies
- Training is designed systematically and collaboratively with staff

RURAL READINESS FRAMEWORK

Power Skill for Readiness	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Communication	Able to identify and communicate with different audiences using visual, verbal and basic digital tools	Able to respond to communication needs and tailor information to different audiences; use more robust digital tools	Able to develop and implement communication strategies using a wide variety of tools
Community Engagement	Able to identify and engage with community actors; able to identify the needs of the actors	Able to build an inclusive and collaborative set of relationships with community actors, collectively identifying priorities	Able to develop strategic collaboration and community development plans
Research Methods and Data Analysis	Understand and able to support basic data collection and analysis	Understand and can implement common mixed methods of data collection and analysis	Able to design research approaches and strategies and use advanced data collection and analysis
Project Management	Basic understanding of project management requirements and tools for the community	Able to implement basic project management tools and reporting for the community	Able to design and analyze project management systems and reporting for the community
Leadership	Able to guide small teams to deliver on basic plans and projects	Able to lead larger teams and to respond to changing circumstances	Able to design and implement strategic plans for teams and community

RDI RURAL CAPACITY LEARNING PATHWAYS



Non-credit Workshops & Micro-credentials

- Competency-based
- Recognizing different competency levels/maturities
- RPL Eligible
- Recognition - RDI/BU Certificates / Digital Badges

RPL bridging to For-credit programs

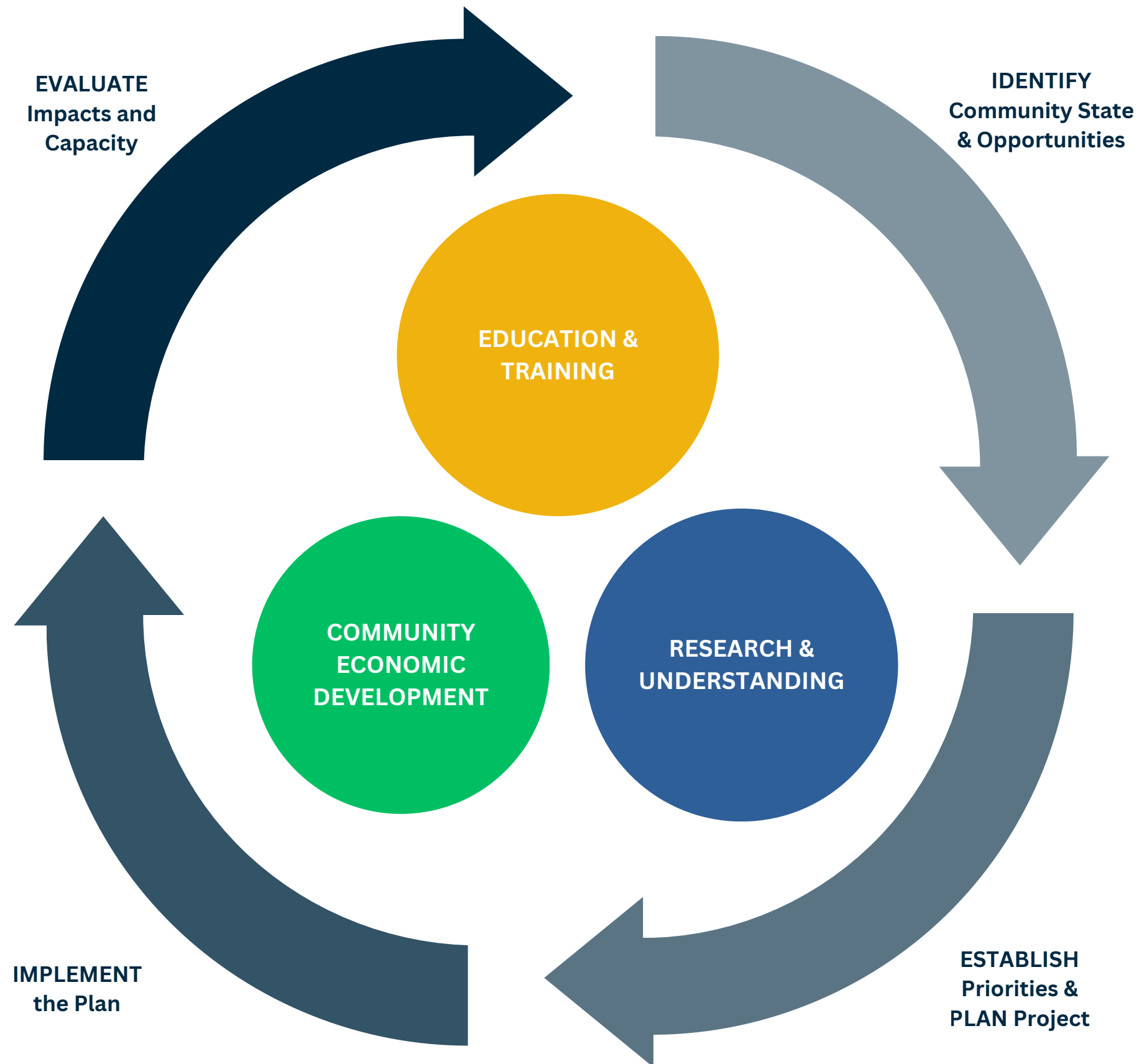
Workshops for CED Practitioners and Canadian Forces members

RPL ASSESSMENTS: Non-formal credentials

EXAMPLE: Canadian Armed Forces Training Plans

- Infantry, Artillery, and Support units, and Brandon - Reserve Force
- Rank and Training Plan Evaluation: Equivalent Course or Unallocated Dept. or Faculty credit | French Language Studies
- Option for Experiential Learning Portfolio
- Tailored Workshops and Courses for CAF members
- Expansion of CFB Shilo
- Canadian Military Veterans Family Connected Campus Consortium:
<https://sites.google.com/uAlberta.ca/cmVF3c/home>
 - *Goal: Expand PSI engagement with CAF; Establish Reciprocal Recognition for recruitment into the CF or Veterans' credit upon admission to PSIs*

Community Readiness Case Studies



READINESS DOMAINS

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Assesses, recognizes and builds capacity via certified training at Brandon University or other organizations

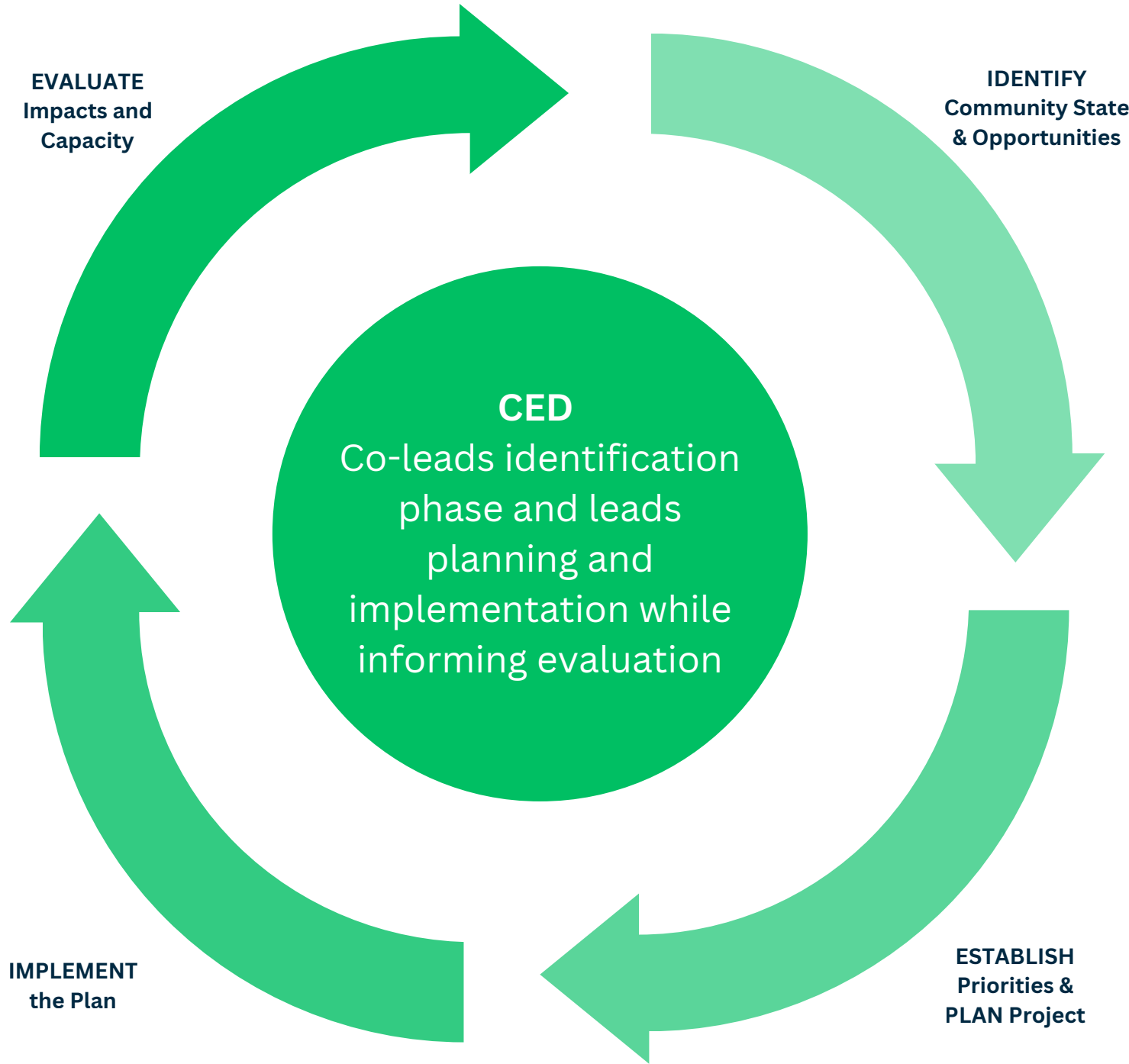
COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (CED)

Drives improvement in community wellbeing through community-centred project planning and implementation

RESEARCH & UNDERSTANDING

Informs priorities through community asset mapping and profiles. Assesses the project impacts and outcomes through evaluation methods. Contributes to broader understanding and informs policy regarding place-based capacity and CED development.

Supporting COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (CED) through applying the readiness framework.



IDENTIFY - works with the research outcomes to map the current community state and priorities

ESTABLISH, PLAN & IMPLEMENT - the CED element leads both the planning and delivery of the project

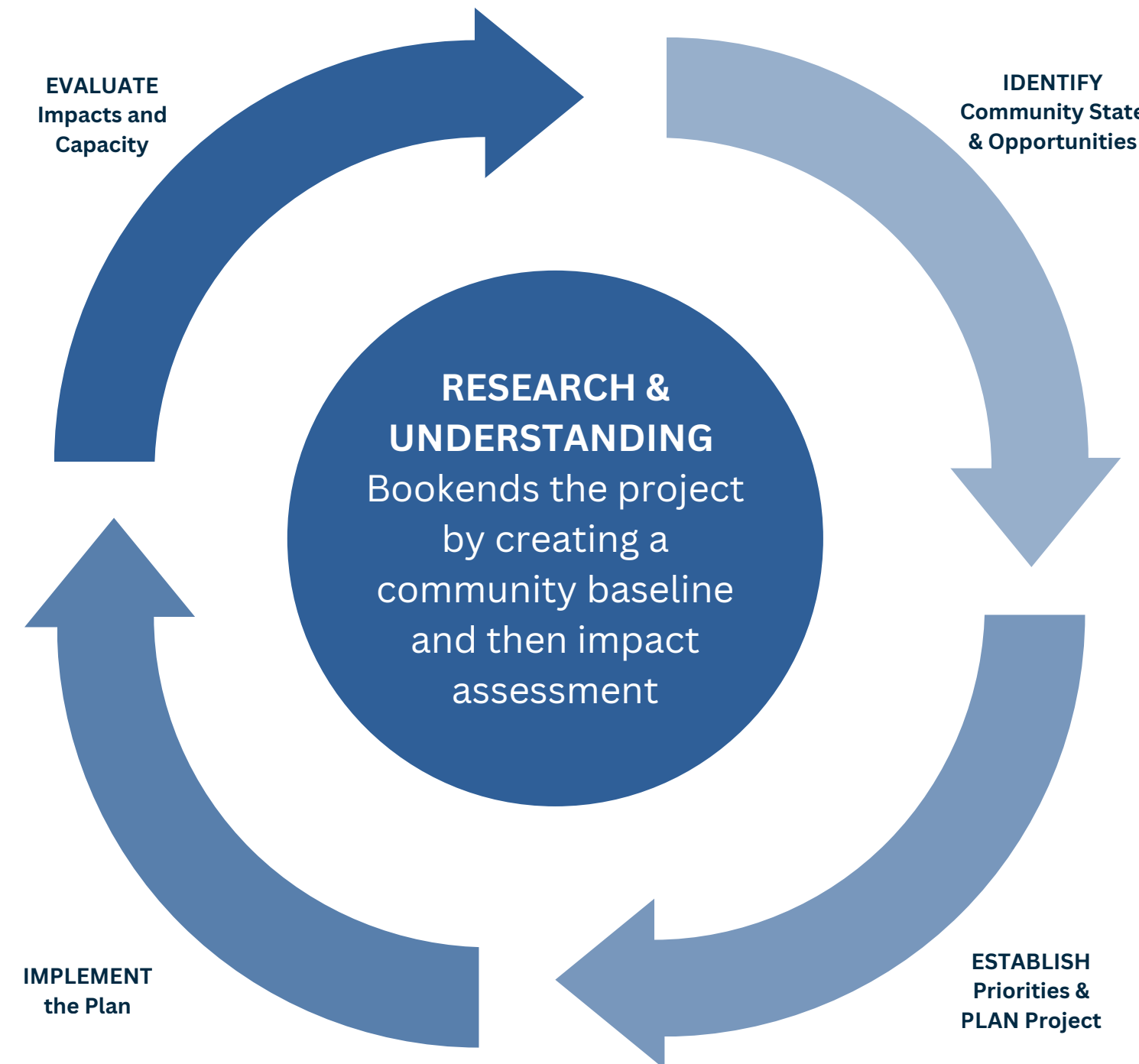
EVALUATE - CED informs the assessment of impacts and outcomes and provides community context to the findings

CED TYPOLOGY APPROACH

	GRASSROOT <i>(Initial)</i>	DIRECTED <i>(Intermediate)</i>	IMPOSED <i>(Advanced)</i>
OWNERSHIP	Locally-driven and initiated by community members/groups.	Internal/external-driven on essential services. For community, not with.	External-driven, multi-community infrastructure or institutional development
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	Community is usually very engaged	Engaged - but might only be to share information or token approval	Little to no involvement or input from community
CAPACITY	Low capacity required – builds the capacity/empowerment during	High (external?) capacity required – might build moderate capacity/empowerment	External Capacity required - Does not build capacity or empower community typically
	<i>Example: Community Gardens</i>	<i>Example: Bike Paths</i>	<i>Example: Provincial roads</i>

Source: Modified from Matarrita-Cascente & Brennan, 2023

Using RESEARCH to build UNDERSTANDING of community readiness & capacity.



IDENTIFY - co lead this phase with CED to create the community baseline and identify both priorities and gaps.

ESTABLISH, PLAN & IMPLEMENT - supports CED through both baseline data and using evidence from other communities to help decide and plan projects. Also lead the development of indicators of success for the project.

EVALUATE - Assess the impact of the project outcomes for the community. Includes findings in broader understanding.

ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

RESEARCH & UNDERSTANDING

Bookends the project
by creating a
community baseline
and then impact
assessment

Key Principles:

- Communities are project partners
- Equitable and Respectful Acknowledgement of Local Expertise
- Collaboration on Design, Implementation of the Community Research Project
- Research Project focuses on Community Priorities
- Measurable Learning Opportunities in the Project's Research Activities
- Recognition of Gap Training and Experiential Learning
- Project-based Experience Empowers Social and Community Change
- Shared Project Deliverables and Knowledge Mobilization

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CONCEPTS: COMMUNITY CAPITALS & MATURITY MODELS

Initial

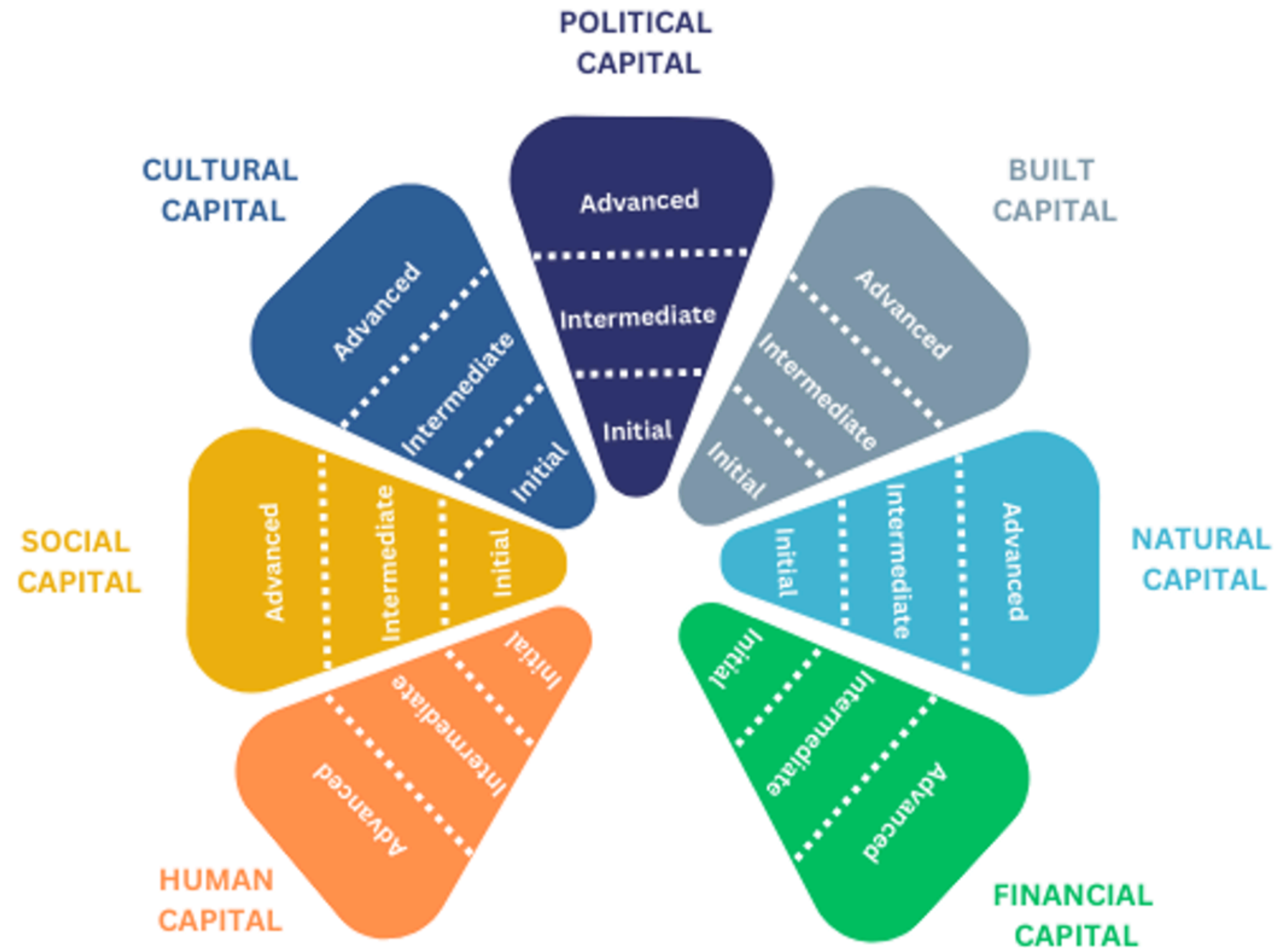
- Reliant on Community Governance Roles, Community Volunteers / Champions
- Operations are administrative and often ad hoc
- Training is limited and reactive

Intermediate

- Some operations adopt formal processes with consistent performance expectations
- Performance reviews highlight skills gaps requiring training

Advanced

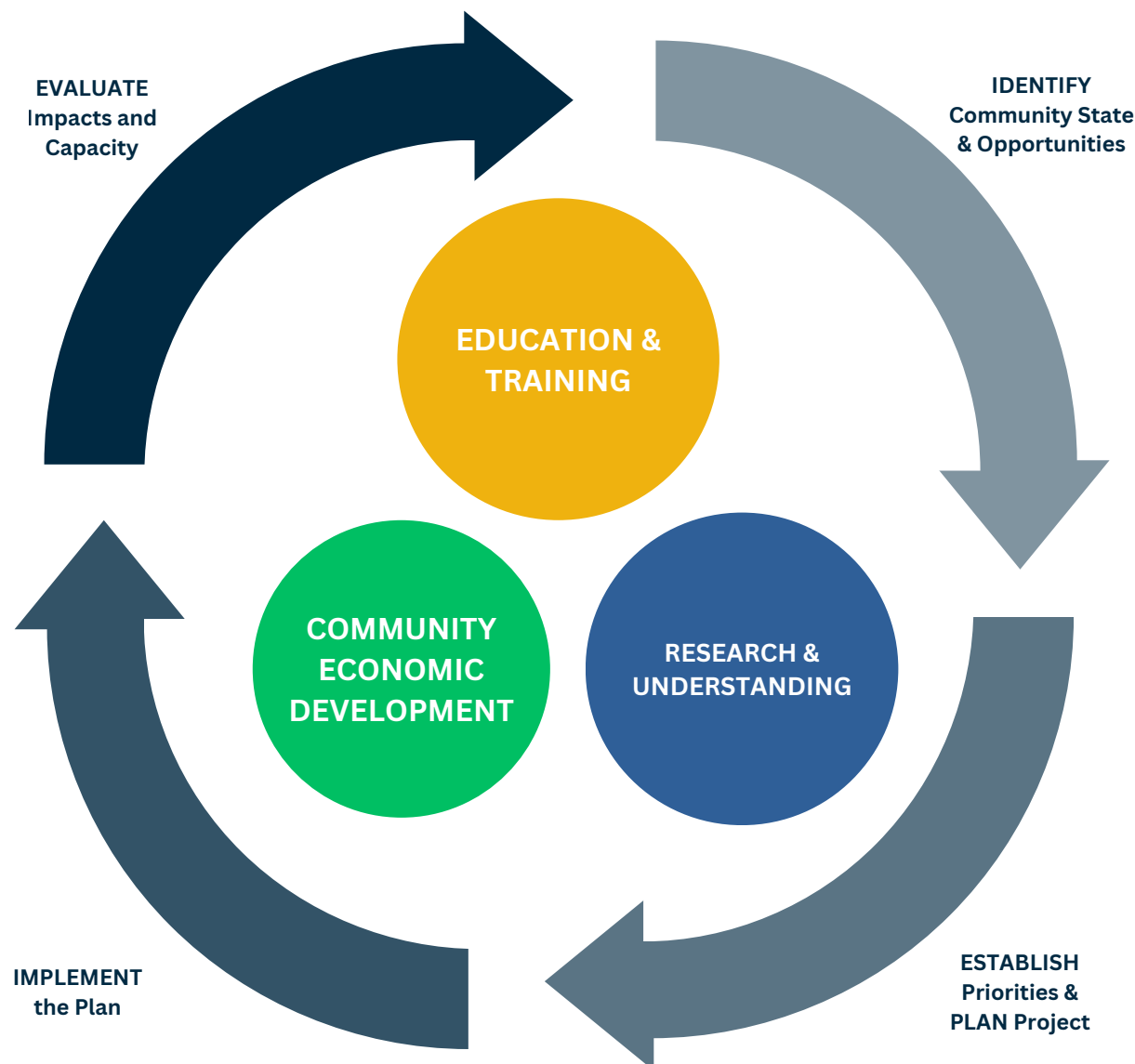
- Operations integrate workplace competencies
- Training is designed systematically and collaboratively with staff



ACTION RESEARCH EXAMPLE

3-Phase RDI – Shilo Community Readiness Project

Apply community-based research approach to identify community priorities, compile an inventory of community data and skill sets, and determine which opportunities and paths best align with the community's strengths, needs, and priorities



- P1**
- Conduct CFB Shilo Community Profile and Asset Mapping
 - Profile community project team's CED Power Skills & Project-Specific Skills
 - Conduct a Gap Analysis to establish the Community Research Plan
- P2**
- Conduct training to enhance Skill Sets needed for the Community Research Plan
 - Conduct the Community Research Project
- P3**
- Conduct Impact Assessments of the Training and the Community Research Project

Community Case Study – Community project incorporating PLAR/RPL

Partnership between RDI and rural community team members prioritizes plans to implement a CED project.



RPL identifies baseline CED skills and impacts on the training and CED project outcomes.

Case Studies are action research focused; building rural capacity through experiential learning.

Case Studies serve as iterative evidenced-based assessments of the Rural Readiness Framework and RPL process.

*Thank You - We
appreciate your
reflections and
suggestions*

*Will this Case Study approach
achieve change?*

*Will this approach work for
enhancing the readiness of the CFB
Shilo project team?*

*How can we improve it/What are
we missing?*



Invitation to participate in our Capacity Building Research Project

1 hr interview and discussion via video call focused on:

How do you build/support capacity in communities or organizations?

Formal consent is required:

Ethics Certificate approval from Brandon University Research Ethics Committee

Anticipated Interview Dates:

May - June 2026

For more information or agreement to participate, contact:

Gary McNeely – mcneelyg@brandonu.ca

Wayne Kelly – kellyw@brandonu.ca

