On June 4th, 2015, CIFAR convened a roundtable with Dr. Charles Nelson and Toronto-area community and government leaders to discuss recent research on adversity and early child development. Dr. Nelson, a word-leader in developmental neuroscience, and a senior fellow in CIFAR’s research program on Child & Brain Development, spoke about the role of early experiences as the brain undergoes rapid development during the first years of life. Highlighting the impact of stressors that can occur in early childhood (e.g. addiction, institutionalization, poverty, and neglect), Dr. Nelson brought forward discussion on how brain development depends on access to an “expectable” environment. He noted that if this is violated during sensitive periods of development, there is a great risk of derailing healthy brain development into adulthood. More than 25 decision makers attended this roundtable, including individuals from United Way Toronto, Toronto Women’s City Alliance, Ministry of Children and Youth Services, and City of Toronto (Children’s Services and Social Development, Finance and Administration Divisions and Toronto Public Health).

The roundtable discussion effectively helped to better position these leaders to act in their workplace and broader community. Overall, 94% of respondents came away from the discussion with an improved understanding of the impacts of poverty on the developing brain, 81% of respondents gained new ideas, and 81% indicated that they would integrate the knowledge or ideas gained into their decision making or practice at work. The roundtable dialogue also catalyzed real
change in practice. Through a six-month follow up survey, a respondent from the City of Toronto’s Social Development, Finance and Administration Department at the time, indicated that the knowledge gained at the event was applied to the development of the City’s Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Through follow-up conversations with the participant, now at Children’s Services, and supports the Toronto Child & Family Network (TC&FN), a unique opportunity was identified for CIFAR to help inform the transformation of the TC&FN in their efforts mobilize the systems intersections that will improve child & family well-being in Toronto. This led to the creation of a partnership between CIFAR and the TC&FN to develop a workshop as part of CIFAR’s on-going Change Maker series, themed around a core aspect of the TC&FN transformation planning: how to build thriving neighbourhoods to support child and family well-being. The workshop brought CIFAR Fellows Mario Luis Small (Social Interactions, Identity & Well-being) and Candice Odgers (Child & Brain Development) together with over 50 community and government leaders who discussed how social inequalities within and between neighbourhoods can impact social capital networks and, in turn, neighborhood outcomes. The workshop proved to be highly beneficial with over 90% of workshop survey respondents coming away with new ideas that would benefit their work and 97% planning to integrate those ideas into their decision-making or practices at work.

Impact assessment has been a foundational activity of CIFAR’s knowledge mobilization unit. Evaluating the success of its activities, both over the short and long term, has enabled CIFAR to better appreciate how effective it has been in its goal of better positioning stakeholders to act and to iterate and build upon its best practices. As is clear from the above-mentioned case, it has also had the unanticipated benefit of enabling CIFAR to develop opportunities for sustained engagement with its knowledge user communities.

ABOUT CIFAR
Established in 1982, CIFAR is a Canadian-based, global organization, comprised of over 400 fellows, scholars and advisors from more than 130 institutions in 17 countries. CIFAR brings together outstanding researchers to work in global networks that address some of the most important questions our world faces today. Our research is focused on improving human health, transforming technology, building strong societies and sustaining the Earth. Our networks help support the growth of research leaders and are catalysts for change in business, government and society.