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“Make it easy, make it sexy”

Lessons learned from a community composting program pilot

June 3, 2025

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20th Annual Assembly of the Canadian Association
for Food Studies



Overview



Why does this matter?



What is community composting?



How did I do this research?



What did I learn?



We still waste a lot of food...



23% of the garbage that we bury in landfills across Canada is food (ECCC, 2020)



In 2023, the climate impact of methane released from landfills was equivalent to burning **170 BILLION LITRES** of gasoline!

(Estimated from the NRCan GHG Equivalencies Calculator based on ECCC, 2025)

And our soil keeps being degraded



In the past 100 years, we have lost 25 to 35% soil organic carbon due to industrial agriculture (Smith et al., 2001)



Solution: Let's make some compost!



- Turn organic waste materials into soil amendment (“black gold”)
- Mega composters or anaerobic digesters exacerbate waste distancing (Clapp, 2002) and environment injustices (Morrow & Davies, 2022)
- Facilities shut down due to odour problems (Saltman, 2018)
- Mostly available in urban areas due to high cost



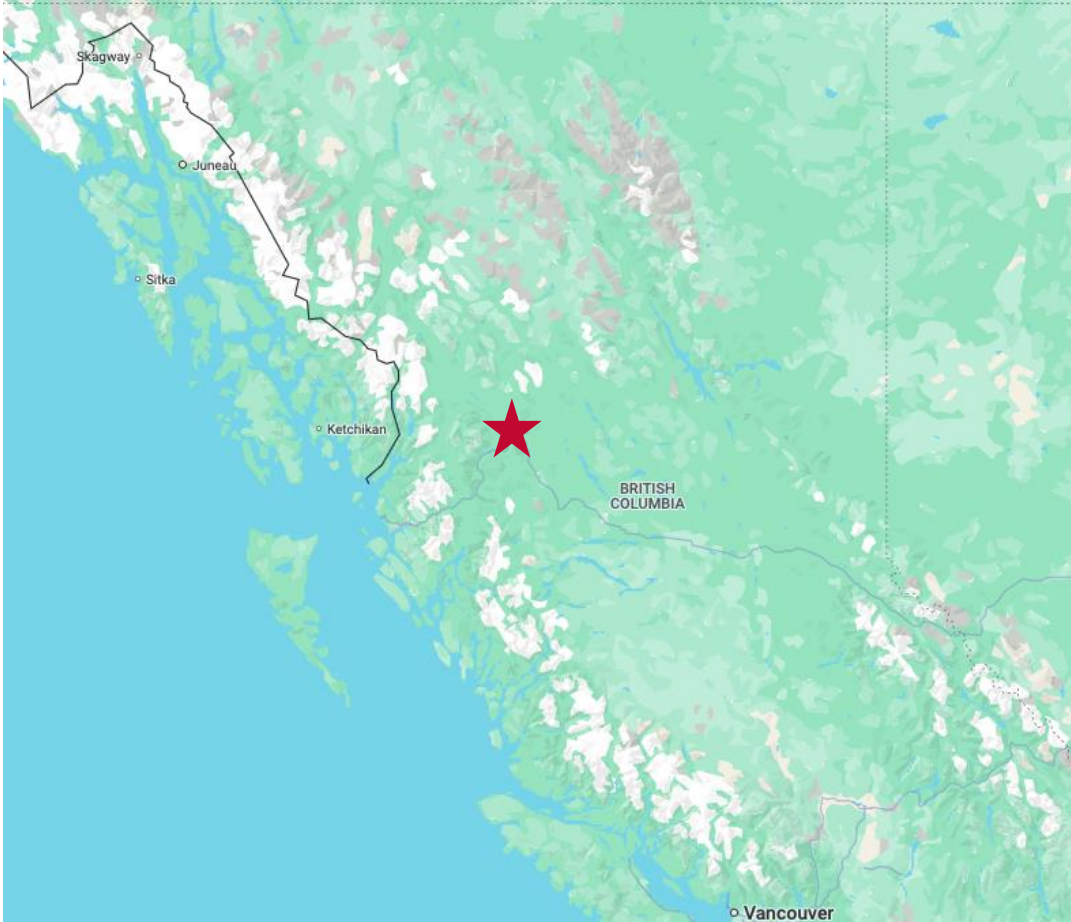
Let's try community composting instead



- Self-organized by community gardens, non-profits, or small businesses (Libertelli, 2022)
- Keep nutrients, materials, knowledge, and skills within a community
- “Slow composting” with intentionality and care (Morrow & Davies, 2022)



A case study in the Hazeltons



Map Source: Google Maps

- Traditional territories of the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations
- Population: Approx. 5,000 (Statistics Canada, 2022)
- All waste goes to the Hazelton Landfill (no disposal fee)
- High demand for soil amendment, but no local composting infrastructure

MASH starts community composting



Making **A**griculture **S**ustainable in the **H**azeltons
Community Composting Pilot from June to November 2024



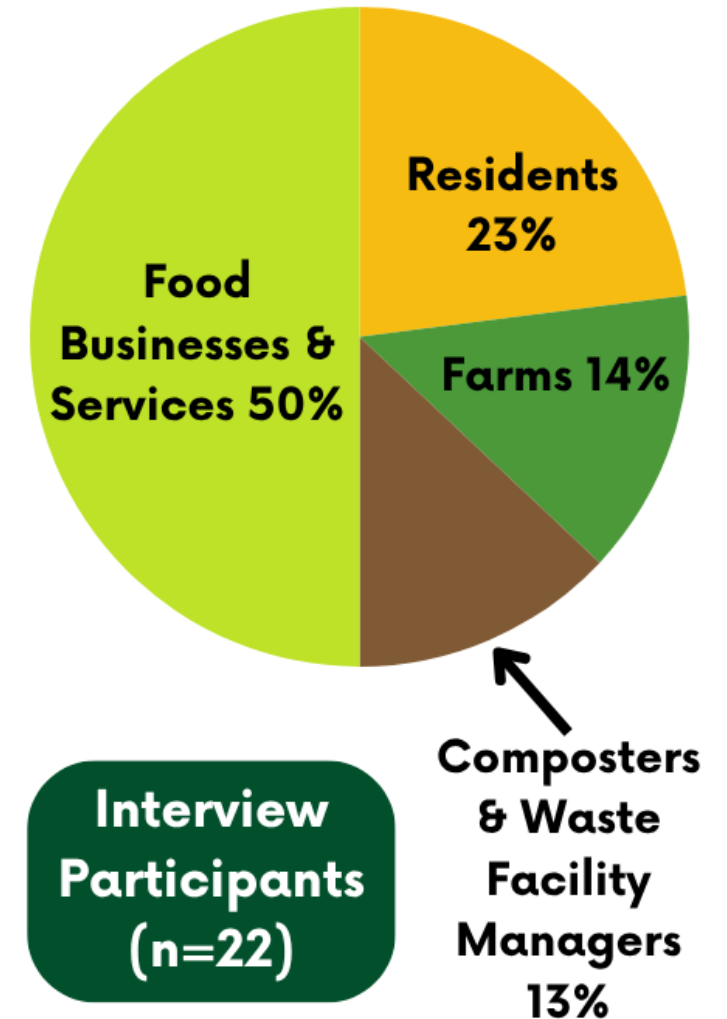
Research Question

**What factors influence the success of
community composting in the
Hazeltons?**

Listening to different perspectives



- Semi-structured interviews to collect feedback about the community composting pilot
- Started out with a grounded theory approach for coding and building a model (Gioia et al., 2013)
- Pivoted to a grounded dynamic model (Costanza, 2023)
- Revised model based on focus group discussion (n=5)

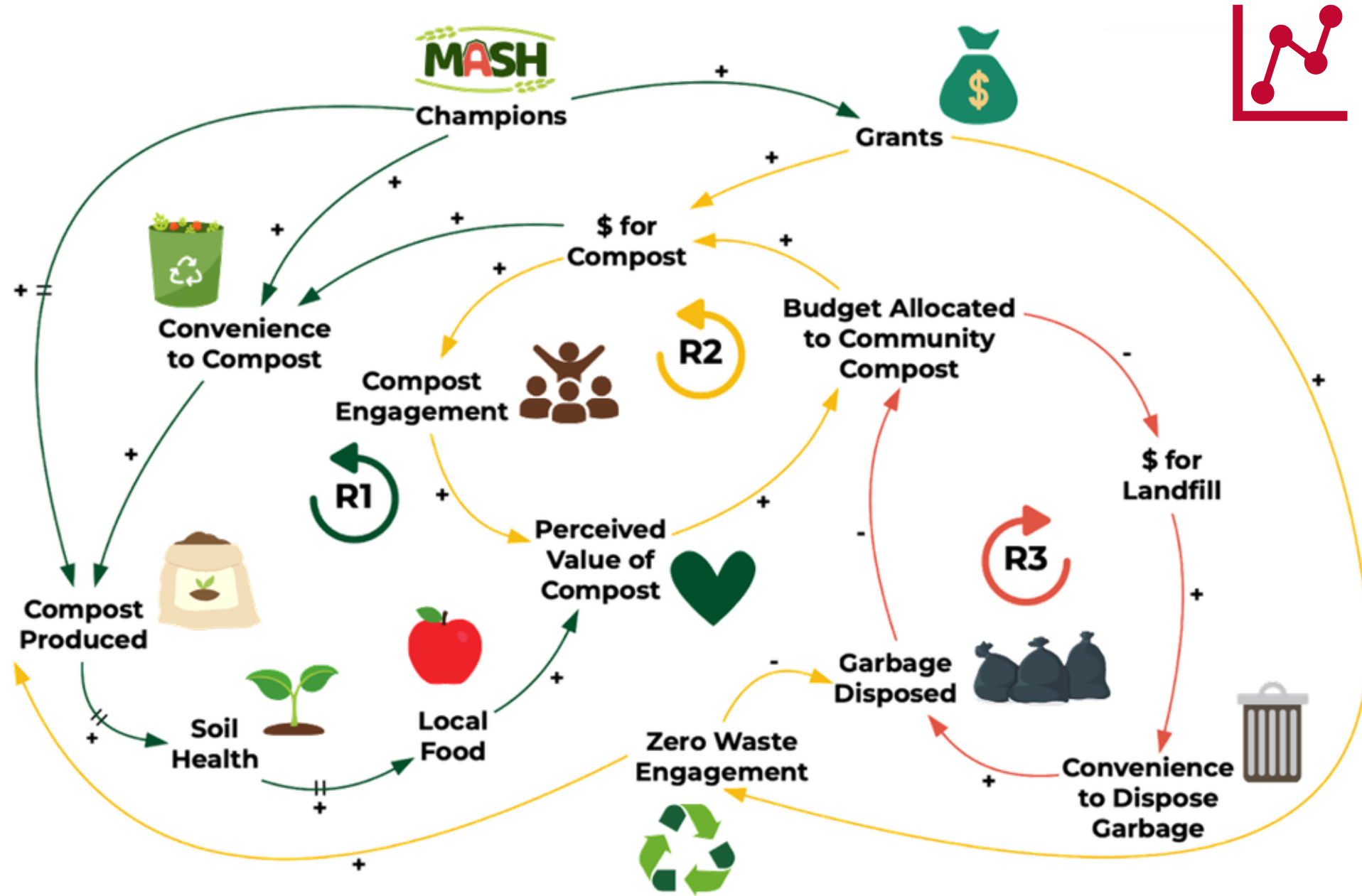


Causal loop diagram

How do I read this diagram?

- One part of a system affects another part of the system
- + Links that are supporting
- Links that are opposing
- ⚡ Links that take a longer time relative to the rest of the diagram
- Ⓜ Reinforcing feedback loops

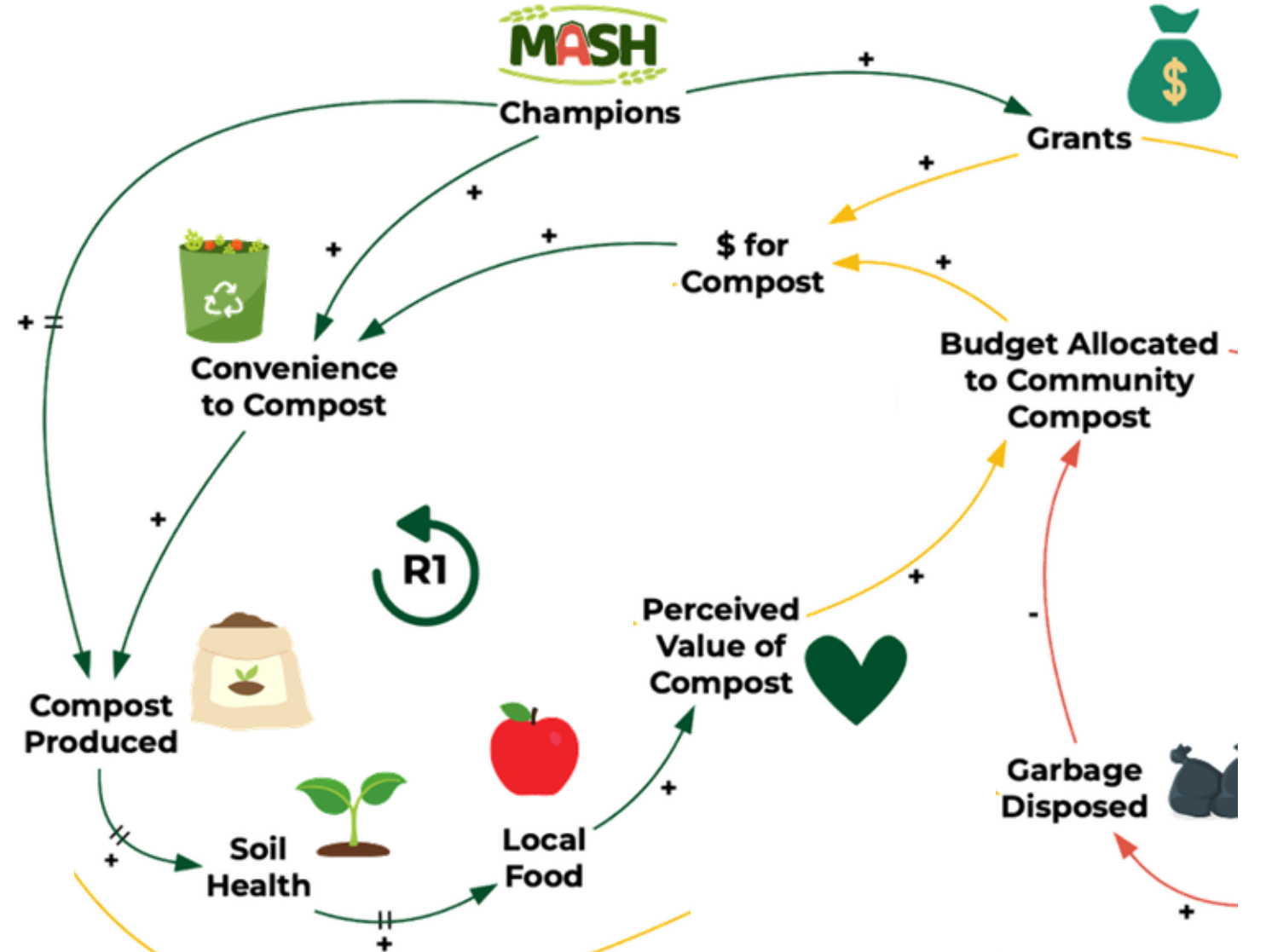
“Success to the successful”
system archetype
(Branz et al., 2021)



R1: The virtuous cycle of compost

"The crew that they had over there, they were super friendly. And just like I say, they walked buckets over to the back room and they took full ones out. We didn't have to do anything."

- Participant 16 (Business)



R3: The vicious cycle of garbage

"I paid the same amount of taxes whether I put nothing out on the garbage day or five...Unfortunately, the stick isn't there on that other side right now in our waste system."

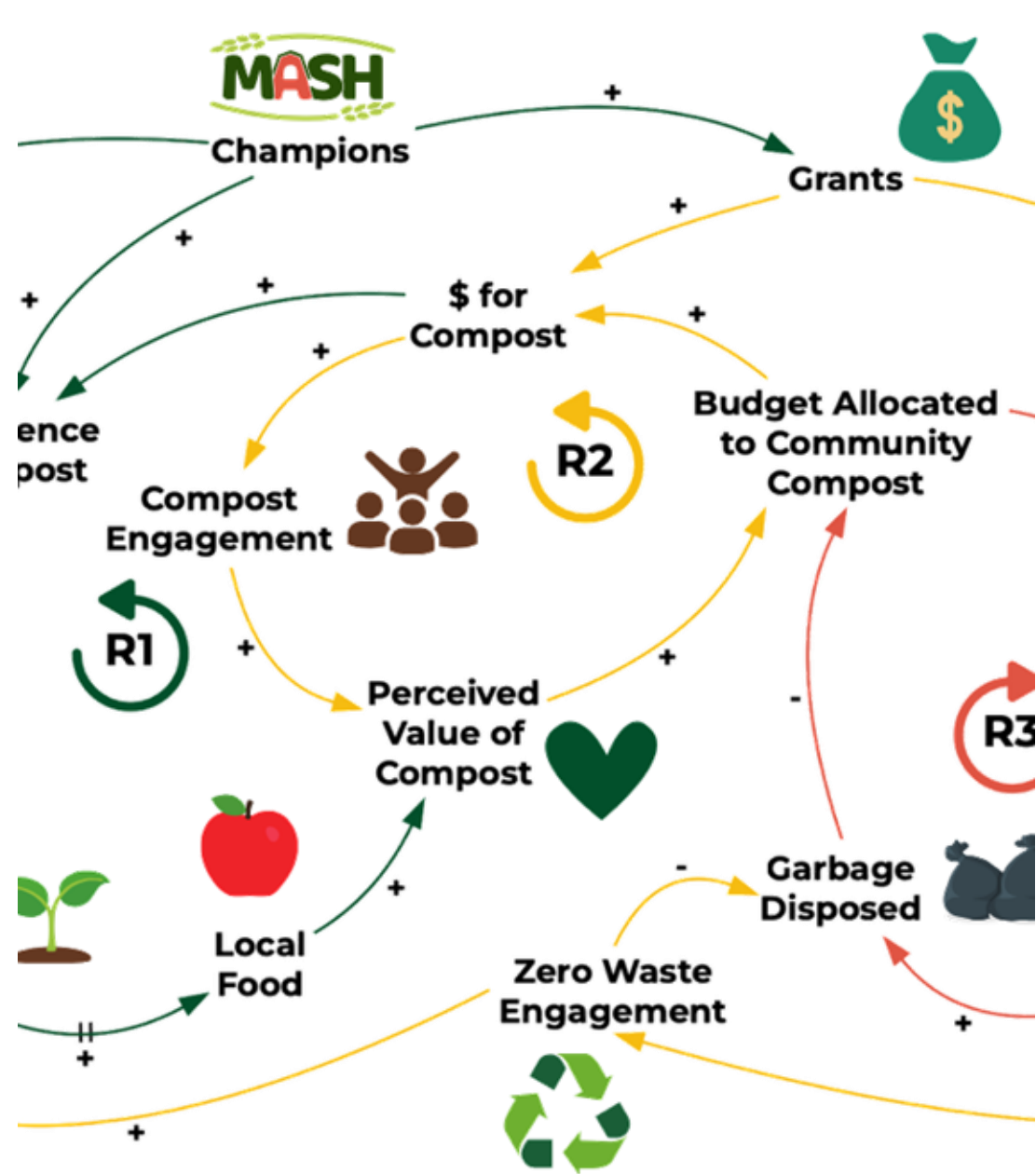
- Participant 22 (Resident)



R2: The sexy intervention loop

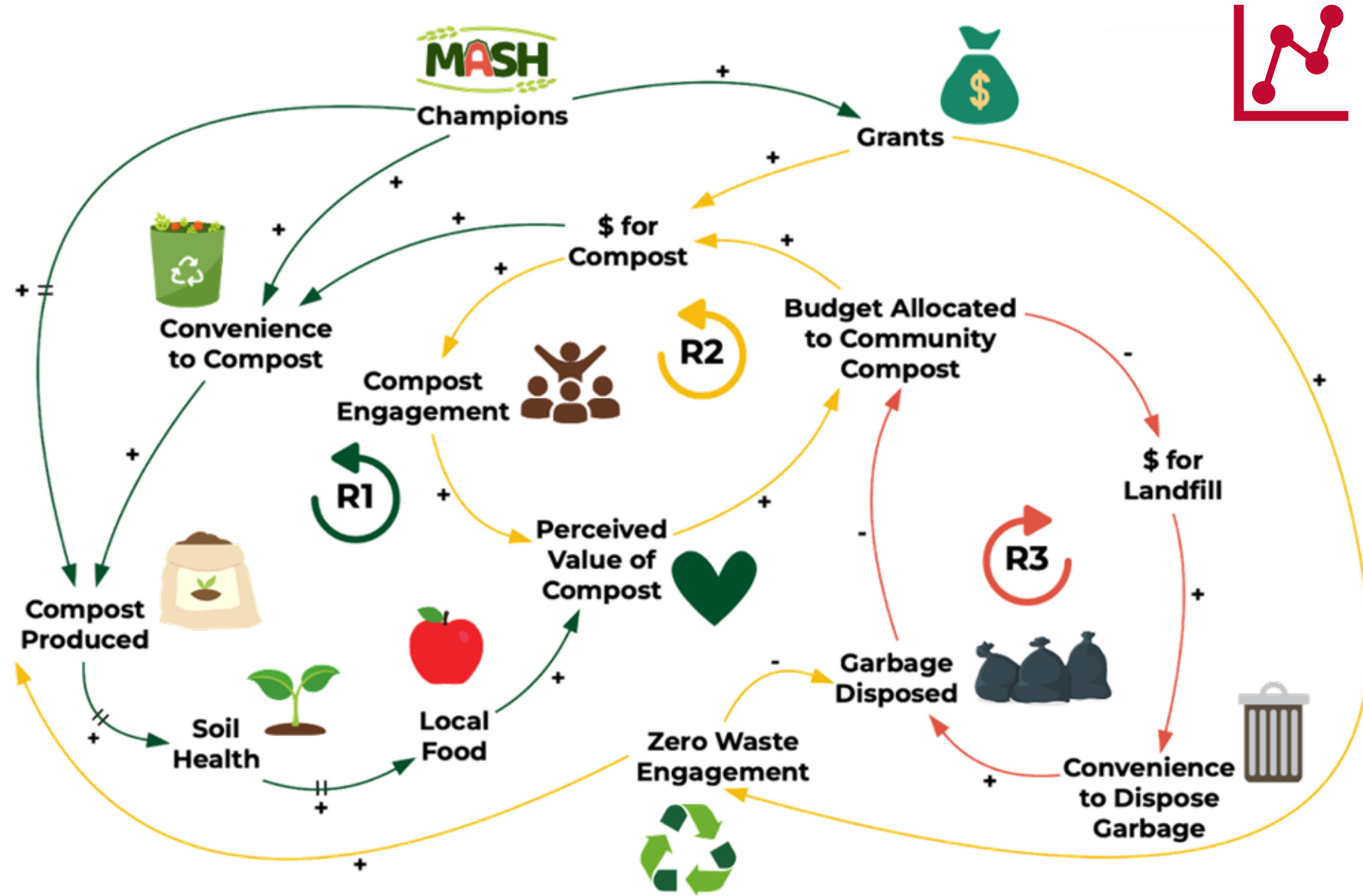
“That’s how you make it sexy is put it on Instagram...You make it cool to do. The kids will start doing it. Make composting cool.”

- Participant 19 (Business)



Shifting the system

It's all about the money!



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