

All Hands on Deck: Enabling Social Innovation

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Abstract

Social innovation's rather unsympathetic relationship with promoters of Intellectual Property (IP) and commercialization as the holy grail of economic success is not a deficiency; it is quite intentional. The process of creating lasting change on complex challenges takes time and requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. Intermediary action-oriented agencies like SI Canada can provide the network and process innovation infrastructure to support the development and testing of transformative ideas. Synergistically, academy-based knowledge brokers like The/La Collaborative can help leverage knowledge and skills to produce the evidence needed for systems-level investment in these transformative ideas.

Introduction

“Canada faces significant social, environmental and financial challenges. Such challenges — for example, poverty and homelessness, youth unemployment, demographic change and the marginalization of certain populations — require creative thinking and collaboration due to their complex, multi-layered nature. They call for social innovations that explore new approaches to building resilience, fostering inclusion and enhancing sustainability.”

— David Johnston, Governor General of Canada.ⁱ

The statement raises the question: what exactly is social innovation? How does it build resilience, foster inclusion, and enhance sustainability? Where does it happen, and how do we do more?

This is an area of deep thought for SI Canada, The/La Collaborative, Tamarack, and others who work to support the application of social innovation across issues and sectors. How do we ensure our offerings are relevant, open, responsive, and intentional when issues are interconnected and problems systemic?

The Stanford Social Innovation Review defines Social Innovation as *“[A social innovation can be a product, process, or technology, but it can also be a principle, an idea, a piece of legislation, a social movement, an intervention, or some combination of them.](#)”* Action Lab Founder Ben Weinlick in his recent piece, *“[What do we really mean when we say innovation and social innovation?](#)”* believes that there is not just one definition and recognizes the need to leave room

for emerging definitions. *At Action Lab, they speak of it as “both about the processes of coming up with a relevant innovation and the relevant **outcomes** that emerge.”ⁱⁱ We like the following definition of innovation from long-time Canadian Social Innovator Al Etmanski: “*Innovation is a mix of the old, the new and a dash of surprise.*”*

How it is done matters; a social innovation approach builds inclusion and action into the process. “Rather than just talk about an issue, a social innovation approach helps facilitate a diverse collective to make ideas tangible and testable. By testing proposed solutions before investing in pilots, it helps a collective surface assumptions that would have caused bigger problems if left unchecked.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In its simplest form, Social Innovation is innovation that works to drive social and environmental outcomes. And yet, Social Innovation is so much more. Social innovation aims to address the root causes of complex challenges and, if successfully implemented and scaled, has the potential to impact entire systems.

Individuals and organizations working in their communities on innovative solutions to complex issues such as housing, poverty, food security, climate change, equity, and reconciliation face several obstacles. For instance:

- They value being part of an ecosystem but find it hard to connect to peers outside their location or focus area.
- They have difficulty accessing national and charitable funding and investment needed for solutions to move beyond the prototype and pilot stage.
- They need help to quantify their impact and articulate their value proposition to funders, governments, and the public. Conversely, philanthropic and government funders need new knowledge and strategies to support communities and nonprofits better.
- They require policy support through comprehensive social innovation policy to address municipal, regional, and national barriers to implementing and scaling specific solutions.

These challenges can look different depending on the actor and the phase of innovation they are engaged in. Still, for innovations to reach their potential, the common threads remain:

- Systems-level challenges cannot be solved in isolation, so support from intermediaries and ecosystem builders (SI Canada, Tamarack, others) is key.
- Resources are scarce, the work is hard, access to shared public infrastructure, capacity building (universities), and philanthropic support is required.
- Enabling government policy (regulation and funding) to support the solutions is needed.

The similarities between social innovation and innovation are sometimes obscured when innovation is erroneously confused with invention. But innovation is not invention. On the one hand, chances are, someone has already thought of, tried, tested, failed, or successfully developed an idea of great use to a community. On the other hand, the capacity to iterate, adapt and improve or address barriers to implementation also requires innovation processes, namely

those associated with design and growth. These barriers can be policies, attitudes, or insufficient resources. They are often systemic, and failure to address them, even when symptoms are treated, leaves the problems to persist. An affordable housing complex can be built but the impacts of the financialization of housing continue, individuals can escape poverty, but wealth and income inequality continue to increase.

The difference between social innovation and traditional innovation is not one of essence but of focus. Rather than working to create profit for individuals and enterprises, social innovation works to increase the well-being of communities and the planet. **What this means is that social innovation's rather unsympathetic relationship with promoters of IP, commercialization, and economic success as the holy grail is not a deficiency; it is quite intentional.**

The process of creating lasting change on complex challenges takes time and requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. Social innovation often happens in the “community,” but not all problems can be solved at the grassroots level, and if they can, success is limited and short-lived without collaboration. The collaborators or “enablers” of social innovation include but are not limited to intermediaries, academic institutions, governments, foundations, investors, and corporations. This is not to say that governments and intermediaries cannot drive innovation because they absolutely can and do. MindLab in Denmark, Nesta, and Alberta CoLab are all great examples, but in general, innovation happens at the enterprise and individual levels.

Intermediaries and ecosystem builders are crucial

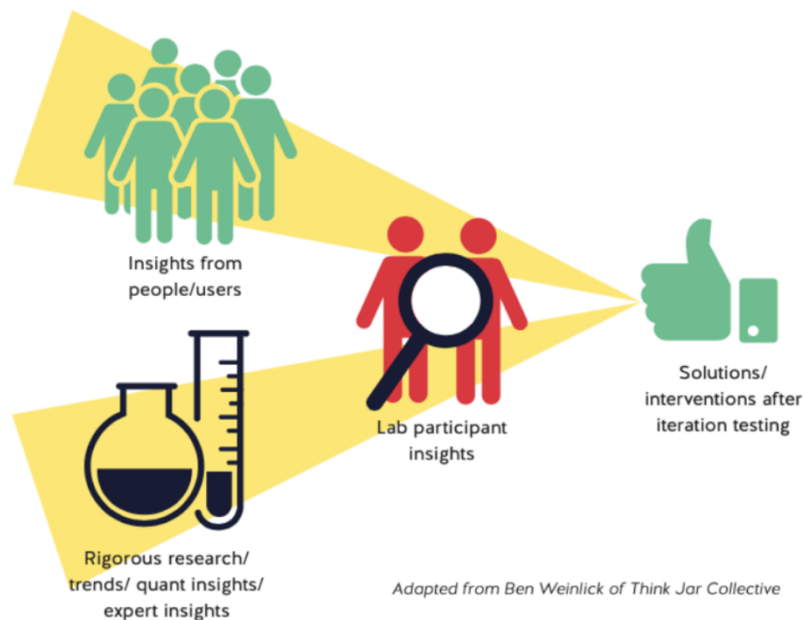
As it turns out, what is required to support social purpose organizations, be they non-profits or social enterprises, to achieve success is not terribly different from what is needed to support enterprises working in traditional innovation. A scan of available literature quickly reinforces the unique and complementary role intermediaries play in the innovation process, regardless of a project’s intent. A study of public sector intermediaries and the digital community published by the OECD in 2020 found that [“the intermediary is present from the beginning to the end of the co-creation processes, with its activities extending beyond co-creation processes to ensure post-project continuity between the involved actors.”](#) And in a case study of Singapore’s Manufacturing Sector, published by Science and Policy in 2022, [researchers found that intermediaries nurture ecosystems in four major steps: \(1\) developing the ecosystem vision, \(2\) forming the ecosystem community, \(3\) orchestrating the ecosystem resources, and \(4\) materializing the new value proposition.](#) For healthy social innovation ecosystems, the intermediary provides similarly critical connectivity, legitimacy, and coherence, recognizing that the complexity of any one problem domain prevents a single actor from achieving success alone. While interest is high across the board, **less than half of social sector organizations agree their organization employs staff familiar with adequate knowledge of the types of routines, approaches, and techniques associated with innovation processes and whose job it is to apply them.** This includes: conducting primary and secondary research, allocating resources to evaluation, research, and development and creating time and space to explore operational improvement, and many more.^{iv} **Knowledge mobilization that targets increased capacity for**

innovation in the social sector requires strategies and policies to support these activities, which are needed to create solutions that address the most pressing social and environmental problems.

Access to shared public infrastructure is needed for Social Innovation to meet its potential.

Innovation policies and national research funding organizations have the opportunity to support better the unique connection that thrives at the interface of lived experience and academic rigor in research. The value of each is powerful, and investing in innovative partnerships that foster these synergies is key to building our capacity to grow out innovations that work with and for the community.

Like traditional innovation, clusters, incubators, labs, and accelerators require resources and support for problems to be defined and solutions to be developed, implemented, and scaled. The “Lab to Market” process is different but equally crucial.



Enabling government policy (regulation and funding)

All innovation requires a supportive political environment and enabling policies. But not all strategies can support innovation in the social sector. Innovation is a means to create impact, but in the social sector, the processes and activities that create impact only rarely aim at producing or commercializing IP, products, and services more efficiently or at a lower price. This is not, as one might mistakenly assume, because the social sector is unconcerned about economic efficiency.

The federal government recently acknowledged the dire need for businesses to step up their research and development game, investing \$2.6B in innovation that leads to the commercialization of globally competitive ideas. Although designed to catalyze greater R&D in the business community, this sizeable investment must also be directed to process and program innovation in our social sector where underinvestment leads to much more expensive long-term challenges - think healthcare, supports for our energy transition, affordable housing, and more.

Intermediary action-oriented agencies like SI Canada can provide the network and process innovation infrastructure to support the development and testing of transformative ideas. It can leverage a systems approach to create pathways and reduce barriers to implementing and scaling social innovations. Synergistically, academy-based knowledge brokers like The/La Collaborative can help leverage the knowledge and skills to produce the evidence needed for systems-level investment in these transformative ideas. Whether these ideas begin their life in the community, in the labs of the academy, or in the collaborative spaces between sectors, they are as necessary as the next technology developed to compete with Apple.

Even in traditional innovation contexts, IP and commercialization have limited value. Innovation stakeholders – for instance, those in the research office of higher education institutions – are often encouraged to use IP production output as measures of the impact of research partnerships and/or R&D activities: the information is readily available in the data around industry liaison and contracts and easily tabulated. The absence of data on other aspects of innovation activities obscures their importance. But innovation processes and skills that revolve around valuable and competitive “know-how” (process knowledge), for instance, those that underpin incremental improvement of available technology can often be, as Breznitz puts it, “the unsung hero of economic growth”. The very same heroes work in the social sectors, but they are working in considerably less favorable conditions to tackle vastly more wicked problems.

To support and enable Social Innovation and growth-based innovation in the social sector, policies and strategies need to be designed to create impact at the level of systems. Great societal challenges happen at a global level and social problems are eminently wicked. In such contexts, piecemeal approaches to innovation are eminently inefficient. The sort of innovation that is needed to address wicked problems in the social sector needs to build on individual social sector organizations’ capacities to feed into systems-level dynamics and fully realize their potential in the knowledge economy.

ⁱ [Social Innovation Generation: Fostering a Canadian Ecosystem for Systems Change](#)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.actionlab.ca/blog/what-do-we-really-mean-by-social-innovation>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. <https://www.actionlab.ca/blog/what-do-we-really-mean-by-social-innovation>

^{iv} Ibid. + SICanada 2021 Strategic Clarity