

## **Building More Just and Equitable Societies Through a Social Innovation Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

We strive to live in an equitable society that recognizes that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and adjust to imbalances. This article frames a process to create the conditions to identify and invest in an ecosystem's legitimate changemakers leading to a more just and equitable society. Creating these conditions starts with adopting recognized ecosystem principles for practical application.

The article is framed within 15 years of publishing the Social Innovations Journal, which now has a repository of more than 1,250 articles; hosting social innovations awards in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, New Jersey, and Bogota (Colombia); and hosting social innovation incubator labs for 10+ years. This work has inspired leaders and organizations to continue to dream by creating spaces for social innovators to tap into their own creativity, providing social entrepreneurs with an environment to grow their ideas, challenge social innovators to become better versions of themselves and transform social entrepreneurs and their organizations into changemakers.

This article provides a brief history of the roots and evolution of social innovation in our ecosystems, outlines the key elements and principles that create the conditions to identify legitimate contributors, and outlines the societal impact and improvement (i.e., foster the development of relationships among funders and actors resulting in social investments) if the principles are adopted.

### **Introduction**

We strive to live in an equitable society defined as recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances. This article frames one process and strategy to develop and outline ecosystem principles to realize a more just and equitable society.

The article is based on our collective experience over the last 15 years of publishing the Social Innovations Journal, which now has a repository of more than 1,250 articles; hosting social innovations awards in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, New Jersey, Bogota (Colombia); and hosting social innovation incubator labs for 10+ years. Our work has inspired leaders and

organizations to continue to dream by creating spaces for social innovators to tap into their own creativity, providing social entrepreneurs with an environment to test and grow their ideas, challenging social innovators to become better versions of themselves and transform social entrepreneurs and their organizations into changemakers.

We have realized that ecosystems need formalized principles and strategies to guide their work to achieve a more just and equitable society. This article provides a brief history of the roots and evolution of social innovation strategy in our ecosystems, outlines key questions that will identify social innovation ecosystem principles with the purpose of identifying legitimate contributors, and outline expected societal impact and improvement returns (i.e., foster the development of relationships among funders and actors resulting in social investments) if the principles are adopted.

The work of the Social Innovations Journal and related institutes and lab has inspired leaders and organizations globally to continue to dream by creating spaces for social innovators to tap into their own creativity, providing social entrepreneurs with an environment to test and grow their ideas, challenge social innovators to become better versions of themselves, and transform social entrepreneurs and their organizations into changemakers. Our work is motivated to advance our collective living in an equitable society, defined as recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances.

This article is intended to be applicable to:

- a) all types of social sector organizations, regardless of type (e.g., private, public, or not-for-profit), sector, maturity level, or size;
- b) all types of social innovations (e.g., product, service, process, model, and method, ranging from incremental to radical);
- c) all types of approaches (e.g., internal and open innovation, user-, market-, technology- and design-driven innovation activities); and
- d) all individuals and communities who want to innovate and create change within their ecosystem.

## **History and Background of the Social Innovations Journal, Institute, and Lab**

In 2008, we launched **The Social Innovations Journal™** in a journey to perhaps altruistically change the world for the better. We had a simple mission: to create a space for social sector leaders like ourselves to share their ideas and, in the process, to inspire others to dream and innovate. Over time the journal expanded to include the **Social Innovations Institute and Lab™**, whose mission is to teach and inspire civic, government, social, and private sector leaders to understand better and undertake the process of innovative thinking and social entrepreneurship to achieve social impact. The three initiatives housed by Social Innovations Partners have resulted in what we have termed the Social Innovations Strategy.

The Social Innovations Journal, Institute, and Lab have all been dedicated to social innovators and entrepreneurs who work at the cross-section between the private sector, government, and

not-for-profits and align to pursue collective social impact goals and public policy. The Social Innovations Journal (SIJ) provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making practitioner-shared and research-driven content freely available to the public supports a greater exchange of knowledge. The mission of the Social Innovations Journal is to promote innovative ideas informed by data and research, incubate social innovation and thought leadership, and spark a culture of innovation leading to improved social sector products and services, systems, and policies.

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) defines social innovation as a mechanism that “can concern conceptual, process or product change, organizational change and changes in financing, and can deal with new relationships with stakeholders and territories.” The OECD’s Forum on Social Innovation identifies the core components of social innovation as:

- “Identifying and delivering new services that improve the quality of life of individuals and communities.” and
- “Identifying and implementing new labor market integration processes, new competencies, new jobs, and new forms of participation, as diverse elements that each contribute to improving the position of individuals in the workforce.”

In the words of the OECD, “Social innovation is distinct from economic innovation because it is not about introducing new types of production or exploiting new markets in itself but is about satisfying new needs not provided by the market (even if markets intervene later) or creating new, more satisfactory ways of insertion in terms of giving people a place and a role in production. The key distinction is that social innovation deals with improving the welfare of individuals and community through employment, consumption or participation, its expressed purpose being therefore to provide solutions for individual and community problems.”

### **The Challenge to Create More Equitable Society Ecosystems**

The field of social investing is exploding with the proliferation of diversity, equity and inclusion values, constituency engagement, and civic activism. However, there are shortcomings between the sense of urgency to be a responsive social investing organization and the practical applications to implement new strategies and initiatives that authentically include equity constructs leading to sustainable long-term equality and justice system and practice changes.

Aaron Proietti, the founder of Today’s Innovator, believes that “having the conditions for change are much more important than the ideas themselves.” In this context, we argue that just as important, if not more, as the product (e.g., innovations and ideas) is the process and creating the conditions for new strategies and initiatives to take root, leading toward more just and equitable ecosystems.

The Social Innovations Strategy, driven by principles, ensures initiatives and investments are designed by an ecosystem’s most passionate social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers.

Without creating the conditions and outlining a public engagement process to find and support and ecosystems legitimate changemakers, despite the best intentions and belief that current services and products are relevant to a community, most initiatives and investments do not have the intended impact or sustainable change simply because the design was based upon perceptions, systemic barriers with racial undertones, and not reality. The only way to ensure initiatives and investments are relevant and authentic is to invest in the service models designed by an ecosystem's most passionate social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers who have incorporated the input and feedback of the proposed community benefactor. In many cases, the social innovator or entrepreneur breaks the rules, moves faster, and finds opportunities in unexpected places (not those that check every box) that should receive ecosystem support and investments.

The Social Innovation Strategy shifts an ecosystem's mindset from one of competitor to one of collaborator and shifts the focus to creating the conditions to find and invest in an ecosystem's most passionate social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers. National, regional, and local social investors need local ecosystems to create these conditions to ensure that legitimate contributors are identified and receive support and financial investments. By investing in a process to create the correct conditions, ecosystem social investors can begin to invest in new strategies and initiatives that incorporate equity constructs yielding long-term sustained system, policy, and practice changes toward a more just and equitable society.

### **The Strategy to Create More Equitable Society Ecosystems**

The traditional strategy for ecosystems is to recognize and support innovative and entrepreneurial organizations and ecosystem changemakers by teaming up with a diverse range of passionate people and partners within an ecosystem. These teams combat issues across multiple cause areas with the most effective model possible with the purpose of redefining how these sectors intersect and help transform and collaborate with the communities they serve with new models never before thought possible.

The Social Innovations Strategy and Processes are different. Specifically, the social innovation strategy and focus is to create and realize a more just and equitable society and, when feasible, engage the public in the nomination and voting process. This process creates the conditions for an ecosystem to identify and invest in legitimate changemakers. The Social Innovations Strategy also teams up with a diverse range of passionate people and partners. It also engages the public to identify legitimate contributors and increase their impact by fostering the development of relationships among investors and actors.

For definition purposes, an ecosystem is a social sector ecosystem is a community (i.e., city, region, state) that includes the following fundamental supports, working in tangent with each other, as outlined by Daniel Isenberg, Babson College:

1. Financial Capital (grants, crowdfunding, venture capital, debt, etc, generated from Community Foundations and other organizations)
2. Culture/community of support (success stories and societal norms)
3. Market demand (beneficiaries, partners, networks, etc.)

4. Human Capital/Talent
5. A strong policy and regulatory environment
6. Supports (legal, accounting, bankers, training, and education)

For definition purposes, principles translate values into actionable choices, strategies, and practices. Principles are a set of recommended guidelines that must be adopted and followed in order to ensure quality and reliability. Guidelines are recommendations that can be adopted and practiced. Standards are established norms or requirements. An equitable society is one in which all community residents can participate and, as a result, prosper.

The goal of an equitable society must be to create an environment and platform that allow the participation of all community residents, thereby ensuring a pathway for all to reach their full potential. An equitable society creates a path from hope to change.

Finally, for definition purposes, the public is defined as anyone who lives in the geographic location of the defined ecosystem.

For the Social Innovations Strategy to succeed, it requires the development of recognized principles for ecosystems to adapt. This article provides the vocabulary, fundamental concepts, and principles of a just and equitable social sector ecosystem and its systematic implementation. It is applicable to:

- a) Ecosystems implementing a social innovation culture to identify legitimate contributors;
- b) Social sector organizations that need to improve their ability and process to effectively design and manage innovation activities;
- c) Social sector investors seeking confidence in the innovation capabilities of an ecosystem and/or organization;
- d) Ecosystems seeking to improve communication through a common understanding of the vocabulary used in social innovation; and
- e) Technical assistance and training providers in the assessment of, or consultancy for, social innovation culture, process, or service models to increase social impact and a more just and equitable social sector.

### **Social Innovations Ecosystem Principles**

To be successful, the social innovation strategy needs recognized principles. The six Social Innovation Ecosystem Principles below outline six suggested and important, in our view, elements of a social sector ecosystem working toward a more just and equitable society. Each principle is outlined within multiple phases recognizing that an ecosystem will be in different stages at different times in development and that there is always space for growth and improvement.

- 1) Equitable Representation of Government, Private Sector, Foundations, Intermediaries, Academia, Not-for-Profit, Service Recipients, and Community Leadership.

- 2) Clearly defined categories that reflect the primary ecosystem social challenges that are documented by verified data and trends.
- 3) Engagement of the public in the identification and nomination process of an ecosystem's most passionate social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers.
- 4) Engagement of the public in the public voting process where votes are cast on the merit of the innovation and impact.
- 5) Engagement of ecosystem investors to listen to community voices and design solutions to invest in the new and emerging ecosystem's most passionate social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers.
- 6) Foster new relationships among funders and an ecosystem's most passionate social innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that Ecosystem Principles should be recognized and adopted. To create formalized, recognized, and adopted principles, we are testing them with Social Innovator Ecosystems across the globe to establish their legitimacy and formalized adoption. Based upon our past 15 years of work in the Social Innovations space, we expect the six proposed principles to evolve through this process, resulting in global adoption and recognition.

The purpose is to ensure we live in more equitable societies, defined as recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances. This article framed a process to create the conditions to identify and invest in an ecosystem's legitimate changemakers leading to a more just and equitable society.

This article provided a brief history of the roots and evolution of social innovation in our ecosystems, outlined the key elements and principles that create the conditions to identify legitimate contributors, and outlined expected societal impact and improvements.