SOCIAL INNOVATION: NEW SOLUTIONS TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation - new ideas, concepts, or strategies to solve social problems - can take many forms; social innovation can occur through nonprofits, government, the private sector, the “fourth-sector” of social enterprise, foundations & philanthropists, or various combinations of those sectors. Many, including the United States federal government, are looking to invest in social innovation. In order to invest wisely, there needs to be a common definition of social innovation, an understanding of a common social innovation process, common indicators to measure effectiveness and quality of social innovation – and a tool to measure potential social innovations against the common definition, process, and indicators.

The first three chapters offer a common definition, process, and indicators of quality. Chapter one surveys definitions of social innovation and related concepts, and offers a common definition that explains that social innovation must be both social (solves a social problem or meets a social need) and innovative (a completely new approach, not just new to the individual or organization). Chapter two analyzes many processes outlined by experts in a variety of social change fields, including social innovation, social entrepreneurship, public policy, organization change management, problem solving, and service. The analysis demonstrates that while these processes are from different fields and use different terminology, they all follow a similar pattern that begins with defining the problem and identifying solutions, delves into implementation,
and then focuses on evaluation and scaling or diffusion. Chapter three discusses three cross-cutting characteristics of high-quality social innovation – collaboration, complexity, and capacity.

Chapter four offers a starting point for a common tool to measure social innovations. This tool is a series of questions – a checklist – based on the first three chapters to evaluate whether something is social innovation, the effectiveness of the design, implementation, evaluation, and scaling of that innovation, and of the quality of the social innovation based on the cross-cutting qualities identified. Chapter five offers an analysis of which sector – nonprofits, government, business – is best at social innovation as defined by this thesis. The conclusion offers some recommendations for advancing the social innovation field. A more common and complete understanding of social innovation is key to harnessing the power of social innovation to solve stubborn social problems.
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INTRODUCTION

Social change has driven my academic and professional career; making things better and solving problems is my passion and gives my life and work meaning. This dedication to social change has taken me from student leadership positions in high school to serving as the co-chair with the Lt. Governor of a statewide multi-sector alliance in Minnesota during college. I then served for two years through the AmeriCorps national service program before I began my graduate school career studying policy and social change, starting the Masters in Advocacy and Political Leadership before coming to the MALS program at Georgetown. I currently work with a global nonprofit dedicated to engaging youth, ages 5-25, in solving social problems through service. Solving problems is my life’s work.

Throughout my career, I’ve interacted with people working to meet community needs and solve problems in and through nonprofits, government, and business. I’ve seen many, many ideas and effective practices that, if adopted widely, could go a long way towards solving some of our biggest social problems. However, I’ve also learned that the solutions we currently have will not solve all our problems. Every nonprofit and the vast majority of government programs are focused on meeting a need or solving a problem. Many in the private sector and all foundations and philanthropists invest in work that helps solve problems. There are countless programs focused on solving any problem one can name. Still, problems remain unsolved.

I’ve learned that no single solution will solve problems; no single organization will completely solve a problem, nor will a single sector. The key to social change is for all individuals and organizations in all sectors to work together to try as many ideas and strategies as possible. As I look ahead to the future, I do not want to work only in public
policy, or only in nonprofits, or only in corporate social responsibility. I want to bridge those fields and work towards social change in a more universal way.

Social innovation is the best strategy I’ve found to do that. It’s comprehensive and inclusive of work in all sectors and recognizes the need for new solutions, not just more of the same. This thesis is my attempt to understand the social innovation field. Social innovation is complicated – and so is studying it. There are different definitions of social innovation, different forms of social innovation in different sectors, implemented in different ways, addressing different issues, with different outcomes. It’s a messy, complicated – and exciting – field of study.

That messiness and complexity is what makes social innovation such an intriguing area of study, but also creates difficulty in defining exactly what social innovation is: “Generally speaking, no agreed definition of ‘social innovation’ exists. The term has developed several overlapping meanings invoking concepts such as institutional change, social purposes and public good. …if we wish to establish social innovation as a respectable field of enquiry, a satisfactory and comprehensive definition of the term is of absolutely fundamental importance.”¹ A comprehensive definition of social innovation must go far beyond a basic definition; this thesis attempts to do just that – offer a common definition, a common process, common characteristics, and common set of measures based on the common definition, process, and characteristics. I hope this overview of social innovation is helpful to others like trying to decide where to invest their passion and energy to change the world.

CHAPTER ONE
DEFINING SOCIAL INNOVATION

Overused & Underdefined

After reading several definitions of social innovation, it quickly became clear that there is no single definition of social innovation. Each expert describes social innovation differently, and many descriptions of social innovation include other concepts that need their own definition. Even though definitions of social innovation vary, most have some common elements. It’s a changing field, as even experts in the field continue to update their definitions. The first “Editors’ Note” in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* defined social innovation “…as “the process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems.”*¹

This “Editor’s Note” was published in 2003. By 2010, in “Rediscovering Social Innovation” in the same publication, the editors redefined social innovation as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.” ²

Paul Light, one of the most prolific authors on the subject of social innovation,³ defined social entrepreneurship (a specific form of social innovation) in 2006 as “an effort by an individual, group, network, organization, or alliance of organizations that seeks sustainable, large-scale change through pattern-breaking ideas in what


² Ibid.

³ Light has written over a dozen books examining innovation in all sectors.
governments, nonprofits, and businesses do to address significant social problems.”

By 2008, he had shortened this definition to “efforts to solve intractable social problems through pattern-breaking change, thereby reserving the question about who acts as an entrepreneur and where entrepreneurial activity occurs for further research.” This distinction is helpful in differentiating between social entrepreneurship and social innovation. Throughout his books, he often uses the terms entrepreneurship and innovation interchangeably.

Light goes on to say that innovation “is one of the most overused, underdefined terms in organizational life. No one seems to be sure just what the word means.” He quotes Lawrence Lynn saying it must be “an original disruptive act”, and provides three qualities that separate innovation from simply something new. To not simply be something new, Light says that innovation must “involve more than whatever is new to a given organization. …involve more than simply doing the public’s business well … and involve the broader public good.” He is quite emphatic about this final point: “if it does not advance the public good, why bother? … If a given act does not add public value, it should not be labeled innovation. To do so is to define innovation downward.”

Paul Light isn’t the only one to use entrepreneurship and innovation interchangeably. Jane Wei-Skillern defines social entrepreneurship as “innovative


5. Ibid.


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activity with a social objective in either the private or nonprofit sector, or across both, such as hybrid structural forms, which mix for-profit and nonprofit activities. …[or] as an innovative, social value-creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sector. Strict definitions of social entrepreneurship focus on the “for-profit” element. For my purposes, I will use sources that reference social entrepreneurship or social innovation, as long as their thoughts about social entrepreneurship apply to social innovation as well.

Definitions of innovation vary slightly depending on which sector the author focuses their writing. Christian Bason defines innovation in the public sector as “the process of creating new ideas and turning them into value for society. … The concept of innovation therefore places a laser-sharp focus on whether the organization is able to generate and select the best possible ideas, implement them effectively, and ensure they create value.”

A Common Definition

Even though there are slight differences, each of the definitions cited (and the many not cited) all share several common elements. Common, core elements of social innovation are:

(1) It is something new – a new approach, a new idea, a new strategy, a new program – that’s not just new for the organization implementing it, but “pattern-breaking” or even “disruptive”;

(2) It solves a problem – creates social value, serves the public good, improves people’s lives in some way, leading to transformative, societal change;

7. Ibid.


(3) It can be done by anyone – nonprofits, governments, businesses, foundations, the academic community, individuals, or some combination.

Further exploration of these three core elements is crucial to fully understanding the definition of social innovation used in this thesis.

**Something New**

The first quality of social innovation is that it is something new, a new idea, strategy, or program – something new for society, not just for the organization. Paul Light contrasts two types of innovations: “Innovations in what an agency does (sometimes called *technical innovation*) are closely related to innovations in how it does it (*administrative innovation*). Some researchers argue, for example, that technical innovations almost always provoke administrative innovations….“\(^{10}\) Light finds that even though the two types of innovation are closely linked, most of the case studies he used in his books demonstrate only one of these types, not both. For the purposes of this thesis, I argue that social innovation is almost always a technical innovation – something new in what an agency does, not something new in how an agency does its work. Unless how an organization is doing its work is causing a problem or an impediment to solving a problem, administrative innovation is likely to be a change to an existing idea or something new only for the organization, not a new idea for solving a social problem.

Christian Bason categorizes public sector innovation into four “P” categories: process, product, positional, and paradigm: “Process innovation focuses on the inner life of the organization. Product innovation has to do with changes in what is delivered

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to individuals and entities outside the organization. Positional innovation is when a product or service is placed in a new context, and therefore gains new significance for users, or targets new user groups. Paradigm innovation is when the organization’s existing mental model is changed completely.”

Bason places these four categories of innovation on a compass-like circle, with one P in each of the four cardinal directions. He also categorizes innovations on a spectrum of incremental to radical. The center of the circle represents incremental change while the outside line of the circle represents radical change. Thus, the “four Ps, combined with the spectrum from incremental to radical, constitute the innovation space. The innovation space gives us a coherent model for thinking about what is the ‘newness’ of a given change and about in what way something is new.”

Key to the definition of social innovation used in this thesis is the scale of “newness” – recognizing that some innovations are more new than others. The definition of social innovation used in this thesis is more focused on the radical change (the outside of the innovation space circle) than it is on incremental change (the inside of the innovation space circle.)

Connecting back to Paul Light’s two types of innovations, process innovation and paradigm innovation are both “how” or administrative innovation, innovation that changes how an organization does its work, but not necessarily what that work is. Product innovation and positional innovation are both “what” or technical innovation, innovation that changes what an organization does, solving problems in new ways. Again, because the definition of social innovation used in this thesis is new ideas that


12. Ibid.
solve problems in new ways, while process and paradigm innovation are innovative and good for organizations, they are not necessarily true social innovations. Product or positional innovations are more likely to be true social innovations.

The key is that the innovation cannot only be new for the organization, or a new way of doing the same work; social innovation must be a new idea or strategy to address a problem. Many, many organizations’ activities might be social (does good, helps solve a problem) or they might be innovative (new ideas or activities, not just new for the organization), but not all are social innovation, combining new ideas with solving problems. “Innovation may promote greater efficiency in how we use resources, but not greater effectiveness in how they are directed at the most difficult and complicated problems,” wrote Michael Edwards, who focused on the end result of social innovation – social transformation: “much more than efficiency, effectiveness, and even innovation. The essence of transformation – like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis – is a sense that something radically better and different can emerge from old patterns and structures when they are broken up, shaken up, and superseded.” “Radical” is a word used by both Edwards and by Bason; it’s a good descriptor of social innovation, one common to many definitions, including the one used for this thesis. To be true social innovation, the idea must be radically new.

**Solving Problems**

The problems that social innovation address aren’t easy or simple problems. If a problem was easy to solve, if there is already a proven solution identified, there is little

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14. Ibid.
need for social innovation. The types of problems that social innovation address are “large, difficult, even seemingly intractable public problems, or what Wilfred Drath (2001) calls emergent problems: complex problems that are as yet ill-defined and for which no clear solutions exist. Other authors have called them developmental problems (Janstsch, 1975; Bryson, 1981; Nutt, 2001).”\(^ {15}\) Once a problem is defined and a possible solution or solutions exist, it still exists as a problem because the solutions still have to be implemented and be successful before the problem ceases to exist;

“Emergent or developmental problems are one of three closely linked problem types (the other two are programming and operational problems). Programming problems are created once emergent problems are understood and applicable values, norms, goals, and directions are articulated. … Once a strategy is set, the problem becomes operational…”\(^ {16}\) Most problems are addressed in clear order. A problem begins as an emergent problem. Once the problem is defined and solutions identified, it becomes a programming problem. That is, a program, or strategy, must be defined to implement the solution. Once a strategy is defined, it becomes an operational problem; the solution has to be implemented effectively. Unless a problem is completely solved, it’s likely to stay in or repeat these stages indefinitely. While this author implies that social innovation is more concerned with emergent problems, social innovation clearly addresses the other types of problems as well. Even if solutions are identified, social innovation can bring new strategies or operational practices to implementing those solutions – or identify a brand new solution. That said, programming and operational


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
problems can be considered as “easier” problems to solve since they are about implementing a solution that has already been identified.

A similar approach to defining the type of problem based on its difficulty is used by Bela Banathy. She categorizes problems into two categories: structured and unstructured. “Structured problems, on the one hand, can be explicitly stated and imply that a theory concerning their solution is available. … Unstructured problems, on the other hand, are manifested with a feeling of unease, and they cannot be explicitly stated without oversimplifying them…”\(^\text{17}\) Structured problems are easy to describe; unstructured problems are difficult to describe. If a problem can’t easily be described, it’s difficult to identify a solution.

Banathy further explores the concept of defining problems based on their difficulty and complexity by summarizing Cartwright’s 1973 categorization of problems into four categories: simple problems, compound problems, complex problems, and metaproblems:

Simple problems can be understood in terms of a specified number of calculable variables and are subject to analysis and optimization. Compound problems are defined in terms of an unspecified number of variables that are calculable. They are addressed by analyzing and optimizing a selected set of variables. Complex problems are definable in terms of a specified number of incalculable variables and are approached by exploring all variables and initiating systemic change in the overall situation. The least precise, metaproblems are made up of an unknown number of variables and are addressed by exploring those that are most relevant to contemplating solution to the problem situation. The design of social systems deals with both complex and metaproblems.\(^\text{18}\)

Whether organized into Crosby and Bryon’s three categories (emergent or


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
developmental, programming, and operational), Banathy’s two categories (structured or unstructured), or Cartwright’s four categories (simple, compound, complex, and metaproblems), the categories are organized by the level of difficulty in solving the problem – those problems that are “easy” to solve and those problems that are “hard” to solve.

The “easy” problems are Crosby and Bryon’s programming and operational problems, problems that have solutions, but solutions that still need to be fully planned and implemented. The “easy” problems are Banathy’s structured problems, problems that can be easily and clearly defined with plenty of ideas about how to solve them. The “easy” problems are Cartwright’s simple and compound problems, problems with calculable variables, problems where people know if they take x action, y result with happen.

The “hard” problems are Crosby and Bryon’s emergent or developmental problems, problems that aren’t defined or don’t have solutions. The “hard” problems are Banathy’s unstructured problems, problems that can’t easily be defined without oversimplification. The “hard” problems are Cartwright’s complex and metaproblems, problems with incalculable variables, problems where we don’t know for sure what the results of actions they take will be.

Put simply, “easy” problems are those well-defined problems that have clear solutions. “Hard” problems are those complicated and difficult-to-understand problems that have no clear solution or where the currently identified solutions aren’t working. Social innovation is focused on the hard problems while more traditional programs – social activity that doesn’t necessarily fit the definition of innovative – focuses on the “easy” problems. That said, new solutions can always be helpful for all problems; easy
problems are still problems, and require high-quality programs to continue to implement solutions in an effective way. Social innovation can play a role in addressing these problems, but new ideas are more important for “hard” problems.

Any Sector

Of course, not everyone shares a definition of social innovation. As a result, many organizations call what they’re doing “social innovation” when it is either just a “social” activity or an “innovative” activity. Conversely, some organizations are being socially innovative, but probably aren’t calling what they’re doing “social innovation.”

For many nonprofits, social innovation is exactly what they do. Many nonprofits are founded because the founder has a new idea about how to solve a problem. (Of course, many nonprofits are duplicative, trying to solve the same problems in the same ways as other nonprofits. These nonprofits are social, but not social innovation.) Some of what government does is by nature social innovation. New policies or programs developed to solve a problem might be social innovation, but are likely just called good public policy. Businesses might call social innovation their corporate social responsibility. Just as with nonprofit activities, not all corporate social responsibility is social innovation, but some is. The key point, in Paul Light’s words, is that “socially [innovative] activity can flourish in a business, social benefit agency, or even a government bureaucracy. Although the field has long concentrated on social benefit organizations as a source of case studies and insights, …traditional boundaries between sectors are breaking down….”

Whatever they call it, organizations in all sectors – public, private, and nonprofit – are achieving social innovation.

Specifically, Light argues that “[t]he choice must also include government. Government is not only a potential funder of social innovation, but it can be the source of breakthrough thinking as well. It might be difficult to find, but government does produce change.”\footnote{20} While much of the field, as Light references, has been focused on the nonprofit sector as a source of social innovation, other experts have focused on the other sectors. Michael Edwards, writing from a business perspective, sees it differently: “Clearly, not all social innovations [the process of finding innovative and effective solutions to social and environmental problems] originate from business and the market, since they can and do spring from government and civil society too … but, at least among philanthrocapitalists, the link with business and the market is often assumed.”\footnote{21} Edwards places philanthrocapitalists in the middle of a spectrum with “pure civil society activity, or as pure as is possible in a world where everyone must make a living and raise funds for the work they want to do” at one end and “pure commercial activity, or as pure as possible given that business and the market should operate under rules and regulations that govern public safety and the like” on the other. Philanthrocapitalists are somewhere in between, and include individual social entrepreneurs, social enterprises (basically nonprofits that operate as a business or businesses that operate as a nonprofit), venture philanthropists, and corporate social responsibility.\footnote{22} While his observed source of innovation (business and the market) might be different than many other social innovation experts, his definition of social innovation is very much the same.

\footnote{20. Ibid.}

\footnote{21. Edwards, \textit{Small Change}, 23.}

\footnote{22. Ibid., 18-23.}
This thesis accepts each of these experts’ claims, and stipulates that social innovation can and does take place in all sectors. (The real question is: are all the sectors equally as good at social innovation? That question will be explored later.)

Another key question when defining who does social innovation is whether it is more likely to be an individual or an organization that drives social innovation. Paul Light explores this issue, summarizing Bill Drayton (another social innovation expert) that “there is no chance of success without the talent, creativity, and entrepreneurial intent of the individual.”23 Light also finds that organizations themselves “were often an afterthought in the definitions I read. Indeed, many definitions focused on organization and management as adversaries of change. … Although organizations impose clear operating constraints, they also provide essential capacity.”24 It’s clear that Mr. Light has struggled with this question for years. Ten years earlier, he summarized that “[t]he relative impact of entrepreneurs versus organizations is far from resolved among scholars who study nonprofit and government innovation, largely because the field serves two very different audiences.”25 That is, the field serves both individual innovators as well as organizations. Since all organizations are made up of individuals, and most individuals work within the context of an organization, it’s difficult to separate the two.

The difficulty in separating individual from organization is well summarized in this statement about the role of individuals in government innovation:

24. Ibid., 9-10.
25. Light, Sustaining Innovation, 10.
The biographical nature of most studies of bureaucratic entrepreneurship and innovation has tended to emphasize the critical role played by leaders ‘whose actions produced innovative or unexpected policy changes’. This ‘Great Man’ model, as Morris and Jones (1993:3) describe it, assumes that innovation is driven by a select few who alone possess the requisite attributes necessary to steer change through the institutional and organizational labyrinths of public sector organizations. Whilst this approach offers little hope of developing a systemic theory of public sector innovation, and may be criticized for oversimplifying what is a complex and multi-faceted phenomena, there is no disputing that the personalities and actions of individual actors are critical to explaining innovative bureaucratic change….  

While this is an observation about studies of innovation in government, the same “Great Man” model – the role of a leader – is a consideration of innovation in any sector. The individual clearly plays a key role. However, several others note that organizations themselves can’t be ignored. Andrew Gollner, summarizes the essential role organizations play in social change: ‘The road to our societies’ rejuvenation begins within the walls of our institutions. Transformations … demand no less than a “new bottom line” in the management of government, business, and labour … new institutional priorities, roles, structures and values … [to] take us through the challenging decades ahead.’27 Gollner’s statement is particularly powerful: the road to change begins within organizations, and organizations must adjust to a new bottom line that includes social change.

Social innovation occurs within the context of our society; both organizations and individuals live and work within that context. “The work of leadership in context is understanding social, political, economic, and technological “givens,” … those taken-  


for-granted system and practices that shape social activities… Those who seek to
tackle major social problems can’t afford to ignore traditional systems, but they can’t
afford to assume that they are static either.”28 Organizations are the heart of traditional
systems; nonprofit organizations are the heart of our social system, government
organizations are the heart of our political system, and businesses are the heart of our
economic system.” Social innovation must involve these systems in some way at some
time. Even an individually driven innovation will interact with organizations at some
point.

Clearly, the individual versus organization debate isn’t going to be settled soon,
nor does it really need to be. The important point for the definition of social innovation
used throughout this thesis is that individuals working independently of an
organization, individuals working with an organization, and organizations without a
specific individual can all be the source of social innovation.

Again, the definition of social innovation for this thesis:

(1) Social innovation is something new – a new approach, a new idea, a new strategy,
a new program – that’s not just new for the organization implementing it, but “pattern-
breaking” or even “disruptive”;

(2) Social innovation solves a problem – creates social value, serves the public good,
improves people’s lives in some way, leading to transformative, societal change;

(3) Social innovation can be done by anyone – nonprofits, governments, businesses,
foundations, the academic community, individuals, or some combination.

CHAPTER TWO
THE SOCIAL INNOVATION PROCESS

How does social innovation actually happen? Social innovation, like any social action, is a process that can be described. Some experts have outlined the steps a social innovation goes through; many other experts have outlined processes similar to social innovation, including the public policy process and the problem-solving process. Comparing several of these processes side-by-side reveals that whatever form of or setting in which the process takes place, most social change processes follow a consistent pattern.

Paul Light describes social innovation as “a relatively simple but dynamic process…: Imagining a new equilibrium; Discovering a new opportunity; Inventing the idea for change; Launching the idea into action; Scaling up for high impact; Diffusing the idea; Sustaining the momentum; Navigating the changing social ecosystem.”¹ The “Capital Ideas: How to Generate Innovation in the Public Sector” compares social innovation to the adoption of new products. “Innovation in the private sector follows a process from invention to wide adoption of new goods or services. Social innovation follows a similar cycle and there are six stages from inception to impact. 1. Prompts, inspirations, and diagnoses; 2. Proposals and ideas; 3. Prototyping and pilots; 4. Sustaining; 5. Scaling and diffusion; 6. Systemic change.”² Light has eight steps while “Capital Ideas” has six; they both start with problems and solutions, go to

¹ Light, The Search For Social Entrepreneurship, 58.
implementation, focus on scaling up and diffusing the idea, and continuing until the desired change is achieved.

Since the primary goal of social innovation is to solve a problem, it’s also helpful to examine a few definitions of problem solving. In *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World*, Bela Banathy describes problem solving as “a disciplined inquiry concerned with (1) the finding/selection of the problem to address, (2) the analysis and structuring of the problem, (3) the selection of methods by which to address the problem, (4) the resolution of the problem, and (5) the presentation and evaluation of the resolution.” She also references the problem-solving process defined by Newell and Simon in *Human Problem Solving*. They outlined the following actions humans take when attempting to solve a problem: “First, we translate the information about the problem into a problem formulation by rational analysis. Once the problem is formulated and analyzed, we select a method appropriate to solving the particular problem. Then we apply the method, monitor it, and terminate it in case it is deemed to be inappropriate.” The problem-solving process follows very much the same steps that social innovation experts have outlined: starting with the problems and solutions, and then implementing the innovation. Problem-solving as a method is less concerned with scaling and diffusion than social innovation is because their goal is to find and implement a solution to a particular problem; others can take a proven solution and scale it. The other difference between problem-solving and social innovation is a focus on monitoring and evaluation. Since social innovation is all about trying new ideas, it’s important to take a cue from the

problem-solvers and measure whether and how innovation is having an impact on the problems being addressed.

Social change and solving problems is also one of the primary goals of public policy. While there are countless works on public policy, many outline a process similar to the one defined by Crosby and Bryson as the policy change cycle, “the general process by which leaders and constituents tackle public problems … 1. Initial agreement to do something about a public problem; 2. Problem formulations; 3. Search for solutions; 4. Proposal formulation; 5. Proposal review and adoption; 6. Implementation and evaluation; 7. Policy continuation, modification, or termination.”5 Again: problems, solutions, implementation, and evaluation. Scaling and diffusion isn’t included; this makes sense as public policy, by its very nature, has inherent scale and diffusion. Most public policies automatically apply to everyone governed by the policy.

Another perspective on the process of social innovation is to examine the process from the view of an individual innovator. David Gershon outlines three stages that constitute the “path” a social entrepreneur must follow: “The first stage is the development and testing of the social innovation prototype to achieve a proof of concept. The second is the demonstration of the prototype with a larger and more diverse audience to determine if the social innovation is capable of going to scale. And the third stage is taking the social innovation to scale to further the desired social change.”6 Douglas,  

4. Ibid.  
5. Crosby and Bryson, Leadership for the Common Good, 360.  
Melville, and Walesh also outline a three-stage process for people they describe as “civic revolutionaries” – discover, decide, and drive. Civic revolutionaries must “discover” the problem and possible solutions, “decide” on what actions to take and how to implement social “experiments”, and “drive” action, mobilizing others to ensure change. The service-learning field, which engages students in solving problems through community service linked to academic content, encourages students to follow a five-step process to organize their projects: Investigation, Preparation & Planning, Action, Reflection, Demonstration/Celebration. While these individual-focused processes are somewhat different than the social innovation, problem-solving, or public policy processes summarized earlier, they are based on many of the same elements. Discovering, investigation, and developing a prototype fit squarely into the identifying the problem and solution steps; deciding, preparation & planning, action, and demonstration of the prototype are all about implementing the innovation; driving, reflection, demonstration/celebration, and taking the innovation to scale are all about letting others know about the innovation and convincing them to adopt it.

A Common Process

In description after description of social innovation to public policy and problem solving to service and civic engagement, the same key steps are outlined again and again. For the purpose of this thesis, the social innovation process is as follows:

1. Identifying and defining the problem to be addressed


2. Identifying, defining, and selecting possible solution(s)
3. Planning for and implementing the innovation
4. Review, evaluate, and continue or adjust innovation
5. Scaling and diffusion of successful innovations

The rest of this chapter will further explore each of these steps, with a focus on what is necessary at each step for social innovation to be successful.

**Step One: Identify & Define the Problem(s)**

The first step in social innovation is to identify and define the problem. This step is crucial because it determines everything that comes after. “Recognizing and naming a new problem involves new appreciation of how a part of the world works, and what is wrong with it, or how it might be considerably better. This appreciation subsequently shapes the way a public problem is defined, the solutions considered, and the accommodation of stakeholder interests.”

Social innovators recognize and name problems in a variety of ways. “Finding and identifying the problem is often the crucial step. One of the best ways to identify problems is to pay attention to what bugs you and other people. Like the princess and the pea, innovators have to pay attention to hidden problems, things that get swept under the mattress.” Of course, problems are much more than the things that “bug” you. Social innovation isn’t about making things more convenient or less frustrating. Social innovation is focused on solving serious problems that affect many people’s lives. However, the point that simple observation is often an


effective strategy for identifying problems is important.

**Types of Problems**

Since social innovation is focused on solving public problems, it’s helpful to categorize public problems in some ways. They can be categorized by issue area – health, education, environment, housing, employment, human rights, infrastructure, etc. One concern with organizing problems into issue area is that so many issues are interdependent on others. Housing might depend on employment which might depend on education which might depend on infrastructure or human rights. So, it’s helpful to look at problems in a non-issue specific way.

Public policy analysis provides some cleaner categories. Leon Ginsberg summarizes four premises of social policy outlined by R. B. Dear in 1995, adding “One might also define those premises as large social problems.” The four problems are: limited resources, unmet needs, unfairness, and lack of consensus. “Public opinion is what synthesizes the four concepts described above and is what M.G. Ross (1967) described. A social problem is what the society, which means the majority of the people or the opinion leaders who can sway a majority, believes is a social problem.”

This observation is particularly important: a problem is a problem when people believe it to be a problem. So, a key step in identifying and defining a problem is to listen to other people. (Of course, there are also problems that people may not be paying attention to, but that are still in need of solutions, and of greater public awareness. Even with these

problems, there’s likely to be someone who thinks it’s a problem, even if it’s not the majority.)

Barbara Stone organizes all public policies and programs into four areas as well, which are strikingly similar to the four problems outlined by Dear as summarized by Ginsberg. Stone’s four “problems” are equity, efficiency, security, and liberty. “Equity is defined as ‘treating likes alike.’ Efficiency is ‘getting the most output for a given input.’ Security is the ‘satisfaction of minimum human needs.’ Liberty is the ability to ‘do as you wish as long as you do not harm others.’” Stone notes that these four areas can serve as goals, justifications, criteria, standards, or values.

Limited resources is similar to efficiency; if we do not have unlimited resources, we must use those resources in the most effective and efficient ways possible. Unmet needs is similar to security; basic human needs – shelter, food, health, education, employment, clean air and water, etc – must be met for basic survival. Unfairness is similar to equity; inequities, including those due to limited resources. Lack of consensus is similar to liberty; people don’t always agree on problems or solutions, and generally don’t like being told what to do by others. Social innovations should address one or more of these issues; social innovations should increase available resources or use existing resources in new ways, increase efficiencies, meet people’s basic needs, and/or increase freedom of choice. Even though both Ginsberg and Stone are writing within the context of social policy, social innovation must address the same premises and problems, whatever its form or setting.

While these four categories aren’t the be-all, end-all categories of all problems, they provide a simple, yet comprehensive framework within to place most social issues, and provide an easy measure by which to judge potential social innovations: is it addressing one of these issues? If not, it may not meet the social component of the social innovation definition.

**Redefining Problems**

A recurring theme in texts focused on the process of identifying and defining problems is advocacy for redefining problems – examining and thinking about problems in new ways. Seidman and Rappaport, in *Redefining Social Problems*, explore why they say their answer to the question of whether social problems should be redefined is an “unequivocal ‘yes.’ … The often unexamined and implicit premises and processes undergirding our culture’s construction of social problems create simple, stereotyped problem definitions leading to similarly narrow and constrained solutions.”\(^{13}\) The key point here is that solutions depend on the definition of the problem, or as Seidman and Rappaport say, “… the content of appropriate solutions is often implied by the definition of what needs to be solved. To focus on the process of problem definition is to incorporate a more substantial portion of psychology, specifically, its understanding of processes of appraisal, social construction of reality, problem finding, and definition of the situation.”\(^{14}\) So, it’s important to focus on the process of how problems are identified and defined; sociology and psychology play as big a role as politics and economics.

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The real issue is that it’s not a simple task to just step back and analyze one’s own way of identifying and defining problems because we’ve been trained by the society in which we live to look at problems and issues in certain ways, to think in particular ways.

…the way organizations and even whole societies think about certain common economic and social questions will tend to be governed by deeply inscribed habits of thought. This raises an important question about the relationship between human agency and the organizational system, or institutions, that underpin it. Do certain kinds of institutions produce characteristic pathways for new thinking? Do they habitually avoid or block other kinds of changes that are not intelligible to them? In other words, is innovation an essential quixotic or creative process, capable of ‘breakthroughs’ and ‘paradigm changing’ outcomes? Or do we get only the innovations our institutions permit? That final sentence is most important: do we only get the innovations our institutions permit? That is, do we only identify and define problems that our organizations and “deeply inscribed habits of thought” allow us to see? I’ll be honest; I don’t normally venture into big sociological questions. Thinking about how and why we think the way we do is not one of the primary topics of this thesis. The relevant point is that if we really do identify and define problems in a particular way that we’ve been trained by society to do so, that may be why we still have so many problems. If we’ve only been thinking about problems in an in-the-box way, to get the new ideas and solutions that social innovation requires, it’s important to take a step back from the engrained ways of looking at problems and redefine them.

Not redefining problems not only limits the number of possible solutions discovered, but can lead to ineffective solutions. Seidman and Rappaport describe the negative effects of solutions to problems that aren’t redefined: “Several other difficulties

15. Considine, Lewis, and Alexander, Networks, Innovation and Public Policy, 3-4.
result as is evidenced most clearly from an analysis of the proposed solutions and their efficacy. First, these solutions are often ineffective. Second, these solutions often perpetuate the problems they were designed to solve. Third, these solutions are often iatrogenic, in that they cause more problems than they solve. No one truly interested in solving a social problem would intentionally advocate or implement a bad solution, but it sometimes happens unintentionally.

“[Sociologist Robert] Merton blamed what he called the “Imperious Immediacy of Interest, which occurs when people so desire a particular outcome that they simply ignore the potential for unintended consequences that should be perfectly clear.” If we’ve defined a problem in a certain way, we’re likely to only see certain solutions – and to be so certain that those solutions are the right ones, that we suffer from the “Imperious Immediacy of Interest.” It’s not that people don’t care about possible negative effects of solutions, it’s that their definition of the problem has made them desire only a certain solution and limited their view of the possible negative effects of that solution.

Besides increasing the likelihood that we’d avoid ineffective problems that only make things worse, what do we gain from redefining social problems? “We expand the possible “universe of alternatives” (Sarason, 1972) for understanding the nature of a social problem and constructing potential resolutions. However, this is not a guarantee of defining the problem “correctly” or designing the “right solutions.” It simply makes us


17. Steven M. Gillon, That’s Not What We Meant To Do: Reform and Its Unintended Consequences in Twentieth-Century America (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).
aware of the options and encourages a more thoughtful analysis.”¹⁸ Redefining problems opens the door to a greater number of solutions, and more thoughtful solutions. Once we question our very definition of the problem, that forces us to question and further examine the possible solutions.

The definition of a problem doesn’t only affect the solutions identified; it also affects how other people see the issue and what they think about it. “A good idea can give the issue momentum; it is a compelling way of defining or framing the problem and attendant solutions so that key stakeholders are convinced the issue can and must be addressed….”¹⁹ Redefining the problem can engage more people in solving the problem and make it more likely that solutions will be identified and implemented. “Leaders exercise extraordinary power over change processes when they help people see a new problem, or see an old problem in a new way. This change in people’s perspective is a major conceptual and political accomplishment because how a problem is formulated has a powerful impact on how it is addressed, and indeed whether it is addressed at all.”²⁰

Clearly, how a problem is defined is critical; since the “hard” problems being addressed by social innovation are likely to be old problems, redefining those problems in new ways is a key part of identifying new solutions and engaging new people in the problem-solving process.


²⁰. Ibid. 216-217.
Input & Thinking Tools

The problems being addressed by social innovation “cannot be remedied by a single group or organization. Indeed, extensive collaboration and consultation among numerous stakeholders is necessary to achieve significant improvements. These problems resist any short-term, piecemeal solution because they are embedded in a complex system of interconnection and feedback effects.”

Whether defining, or redefining, a problem, gathering input and listening to others – especially those affected by the problem - is critical. “The nature of a problem can only be understood by exploring it through the eyes of those who are experiencing, discussing, and defining it. Problem-solving can only begin when the nature of a problem has been read and interpreted by all stakeholders who voice their contextual understanding of issues embedded in their lived experiences.”

Writing with a global perspective, McIntyre-Mills pays particular attention to cultural differences and the need for everyone involved in defining a problem to listen to others who have an interest in solving the problem.

The way we understand the nature of a problem will shape the way in which we go about trying to solve the problem. The first step in solving problems is understanding the way in which different groups define the problem. The next step is to help all stakeholders understand how ‘the other’ defines the problem. To help solve problems with “the other,” we have to realize that the definitions of problems and solutions are based on deeply held assumptions about the world. … If we can understand that the closest we can ever get to a shared sense of ‘truth’ is through listening to and understanding the frame of reference of the other, then the first step will be taken.

21. Ibid., 15.


The concept of “others” is important. There is always more than one side to an issue. One person or organization cannot define a problem alone. Input from and involvement of others is an indicator of success of social innovation.

While input (opinions or personal viewpoints) is a key part of defining an issue, research (hard facts) are also important. “There is widespread agreement that social science research has done relatively little to solve social problems (Berger, 1976; Cook, 1979; John 1976). Common to these assessments is the assumption that social science is best suited to generate solutions, when in fact it may be better equipped to address how problems get defined in the first place.”24 This contrast is important because it moves the primary emphasis of research from defining solutions to defining problems; it recognizes the importance of this first step in the social innovation process, and offers a set of tools – social science research – to this step.

**Step Two: Identify, Define, and Select Possible Solution(s)**

Once a problem is identified, the next step is to identify possible solutions. Often, identifying problems and identifying solutions go hand-in-hand and are done by the same people at the same time. It’s not a simple process, however. “Whole solutions do not just appear out of the blue. They take time, tenacity, and rigorous thinking. The process begins by identifying the major questions the social innovation needs to answer in order to be successful. Then it goes through a painstaking testing process to answer these

Engaging many people and gathering ideas and input is just as important during this phase of the social innovation process as it is during the problem definition phase.

**Gathering Input & Ideas**

The concept that all of us are smarter than some of us is critical to social innovation. Nalebuff and Ayres, in describing how everyday ingenuity can help solve problems, describe the importance of engaging non-experts to gather new ideas. “In fact, nonexperts sometimes have the advantage of not being constrained by the accepted wisdom. It’s easier to think outside the box when you don’t even know where or what the box is.” Not knowing “that’s the way it is” or “that was tried once but failed” may help the nonexpert conjure new ideas that the expert would not have discovered.”

This isn’t a new idea – the benefit of getting a fresh perspective on something is just common sense – but is even more important when trying to tackle hard-to-solve problems.

One specific form of consulting with nonexperts is “[c]o-creation, a term first used by management thinkers Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), is … a creation process where new solutions are designed with people, not for them … going far beyond committee meetings, traditional stakeholder hearings and customer research.” Instead of having “experts” design solutions, the co-creation approach goes to the real “experts” – those directly affected by the problem being addressed. Bason notes that co-creation is similar to participatory design, co-design, design attitude, and design thinking.


“approaches that in recent years have been emphasized as absolutely central to innovation.” Not only are all of us smarter than some of us, we’re even smarter when the "us" includes those with first-hand experience of the problem, and those who will have to live with the solution. Bason describes two major benefits to co-creation: divergence and successful execution. “Divergence means that a greater variation of different ideas and suggestions are brought to the table, providing inspiration and giving public servants a wider palette of options to choose from before decision making and implementation. … [It] triggers dialogues that can enable new common interpretations of problems, challenges and opportunities.”28 Because one of the differences between social innovation and regular social activity is the newness of ideas, a “wider palette of options” is critical to the success of social innovation.

Successful execution is the other benefit Bason describes. Successful execution results because “co-creation anchors the creative process with the people it concerns… who will ultimately use the new services…. where the first designs are imagined, should in fact be viewed as the beginning of the execution of the policy. Connecting end-users and other stakeholders to the entire creation process – not just to final piloting or implementation”29 is an indicator of the potential success of a social innovation. Engagement during the early phases of social innovation leads to people owning the problems and the solutions, which make it much more likely that the innovation will be accepted and implemented.

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
Input is also important during this phase because resources available for implementing social innovations are limited. Most of the time, solving a social problem requires significant resources, resources that might be dedicated to solving other problems or providing other programs and services. John Ackerman and David Coogan, in exploring the role of rhetoric – public speech and dialogue – note that public debates, even debates where the vast majority might agree that the end goal would advance the public good – take place in the real world, not the ideal world, a world where there are always at least two sides to every issue and a world with finite resources and capacity. They caution against thinking that any “determination or improvement that will somehow escape the paradoxical conditions of exclusion/inclusion. Certainly there are on occasion win-win conclusions to a public dispute, but the public sphere, particularly when deliberating the most serious of social issues, is mostly a space of limited inclusion and not one that excludes exclusion.”30 Putting aside the debate as to how true and to what extent in specific situations, it is an important perspective to remember – that however good-hearted and well-intentioned a social innovation is, there is likely to be debate, and possibly controversy over its implementation, or the resources required for its implementation. Involving more people in identifying solutions that they believe in makes it more likely that the solution decided upon will exclude fewer people.

Visioning & Design Process

The process for identifying innovative solutions is much more than simply solving a problem. Solving a problem is often a simple calculation based on known variables; a problem is occurring because of y factors so we need to do z. For example, if there are a lot of car accidents at this intersection because cars aren’t slowing down at the yield sign, installing a stoplight might solve the problem. That’s a good social activity, a good change. An innovative solution might be to figure out why the yield sign isn’t working and to figure out a new way to get people to change their behavior or to identify a brand new traffic control system. Those types of innovative solutions require something different.

Several experts on social innovation and social change describe the differences between problem solving and envisioning new solutions. David Gershon writes, “Problem solving as a way of thinking is well suited for the goal of discovering how to fix something that may be broke in an already designed system. When the goal, however, is to invent a new system or help people create a picture of what they wish for their future, we need a different type of thinking process.” This different type of thinking process is less about solving problems and more about designing solutions.

Bason outlines such a design process that includes the following dimensions:

Knowing the present in concrete terms through design research, often applying the tools of ethnographers, harvesting deep knowledge about people’s lives.

Analyzing the present state of affairs by structuring our knowledge and generating the abstract analytical categories that help us see individual dimensions

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or parts.

Synthesizing from the different parts to potential new, holistic solutions, interpreting the findings and generating a divergence of ideas and concepts, shaping possible solution that take account of complexities at an (abstract) systems level.

Creating the prototypes of solutions that can be tested and assessed for their practical usage, and implemented.\(^\text{32}\)

Engaging people in such a process is one way to meaningfully gather their input and ideas and to invest them in solving the problem. As Gerhson writes, “To engage people wholeheartedly in a social innovation they need to believe… that if successful, it has the potential… to solve an important social problem… the whole problem, not just part of the problem. If people do not believe that [it] can solve the whole problem, they will be unwilling to invest their time and their hearts.”\(^\text{33}\) For social innovation to be effective, a design process – any well thought out design process – needs to be implemented in order to identify comprehensive solutions to problems in which people will be invested in helping implement.

**Step Three: Plan for and Implement the Innovation**

After the problems have been identified, with much input from others, and possible solutions have been dreamed up and decided upon, again with much input from others, it’s time to plan for implementation and to put that plan into action. Three publications from The Young Foundation (The Open Book of Social Innovation, Capital Ideas: How to Generate Innovation in the Public Sector, and Social Venturing – all

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published in 2009 or 2010) provide detailed ideas and information about how to implement a social innovation. While there are many steps involved in planning for and implementing an innovative idea, there are four categories of best practices: how to pilot or test an idea, where to house the idea, how to finance an idea, and how to build partnerships – with both individuals and organizations – around the idea. (These publications also include information on how to identify problems and solutions, and on scaling and evaluating, all of which are covered in other sections of this thesis.)

**Testing the Idea**

One of the early steps in implementing an idea is to test it out. Applying the innovative idea to one or more specific instances of the problem to be solved will allow the innovator to see if the idea is feasible and actually works. “Once a promising idea has been proposed, it then needs to be tested in practice… One of the common themes of contemporary social innovation is that it often works best by moving quickly into practice, rather than spending too long developing detailed plans and strategies.”

34 Early tests that are unsuccessful can be just as valuable as successful tests because difficulties faced can force the idea to be further developed. Once an idea has proven successful in one or a few sites, it can be tested in more sites before full scaling up. Because social innovations are new ideas targeted at especially tough problems, there’s no guarantee that any social innovation will be successful, and before investing extensive human, physical, financial, or social capital in the innovation, it’s important to test the idea to ensure that it

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does what it is meant to do.

**Organizational Form**

Another early step in the implementation process is to identify what organizational structure will host the idea and its related programs and resources. It’s incredibly difficult for an individual, alone, to implement an innovative idea. Individuals may be able to identify a social problem and come up with an innovative solution on their own, but most ideas need to live somewhere. Many individual innovators form their own companies or nonprofit organizations that they lead, so it may seem like it’s primarily that individual implementing the change, but the need for an organizational structure of some kind is strong. *The Open Book of Social Innovation* publication reports “that many innovations take shape within organisations – public agencies, social enterprises, mutuals, co-ops, charities, companies as well as loose associations. But the many examples… also show a field that is grappling with how to escape the constraints of organisation so as to make innovation itself open and social….”\(^3^5\) This struggle to free social innovation from organizations may succeed in the future, but for now, most innovators are forced to choose an organizational structure. Paul Light points out that “choice of sector clearly has implications for organizational structure” and compares a for-profit structure with a non-profit structure: for-profits have “ample access to raise capital and reward performance” but “must distribute profits to their investors and shareholders” while social benefit organizations can “push their profits back into the organization where they can be used for expansion” but “have only limited access to debt

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and no access to equity.” Light’s arguments center mostly on the financial aspects, which is certainly important, and one of the most critical steps of the implementation phase, but there are other issues to consider when choosing the organizational structure. The organizational structure must be one open to innovation and with the necessary capacity to sustain the innovation. (Capacity of an organization for innovation will be further explored in the next chapter.)

**Partnerships**

Another indicator of a successful social innovation is partnerships. To solve problems in new ways, individuals and organizations need to work with other individuals or other organizations, taking advantage of the systems and supports that already exist in society. “Coalitions and networks are increasingly turning out to be the key to successful change… in the social field the drive [for innovation] is more likely to come from a wider network, perhaps linking some commissioners in the public sector, providers in social enterprises, advocates in social movements, and entrepreneurs in business.” Most effective social innovations cross sector-boundaries in some way, many times through collaborative partnerships. (The topic of collaboration will be further explored in the next chapter.)

**Funding**

While some of the best social innovations might be effective because they are low-cost, every innovator needs to support their work, and all the expenses that come with it – staff, program supplies and other direct costs, communications and marketing

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efforts, etc. The forms of funding available depend on choice of sector for the innovation. Funding also depends, of course, on whether there are any examples or evidence that the innovation is effective, and on the ability of the innovator to connect and “sell” the idea to potential funders or investors. Partnerships and the engagement of others throughout the process can be helpful in securing funding.

**Step Four: Evaluate the Social Innovation**

After an innovation has been implemented, the next step is to evaluate the results; planning for evaluation must be done before implementation so that the right information is collected to be able to evaluate the innovation. Thinking about evaluation before implementation can also lead to better results. “The creation of public value must be based on more than an abstract hunch that a given innovation will produce some benefit. Hard questions must be asked about whether the innovation is actually likely to work. As a general rule, innovating organizations take care to specify the goals of their work and the results by which they expect to be measured. They know they are creating public value not because their innovative acts are novel or win awards but because those acts have clear impacts.”

Veena Pankaj and Heather Peeler, both from the Innovation Network, a resource center that specializes in social innovation evaluation, highlight the importance of evaluation in a summary of a webinar they presented on the topic: “In our experience, evaluation empowers organizations and becomes a catalyst for social change. Believe it or not, evaluation is easier than one might think. And, evaluation is high-

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impact; a little bit goes a long way.”³⁹ Pankaj and Peeler recommend using a logic model to structure evaluation of social innovation. “A logic model is a commonly used tool for clarifying and depicting a program and its intended outcomes. It shows the relationships between what is put into the program (resources), what the program does (activities and outputs), and what results (outcomes) the program produces over the short and long term.”⁴⁰ The logic model is one of many possible evaluation tools, but the core elements of the logic model are similar to many other tools.

A report on evaluation in the nonprofit sector published by The Innovation Network highlights several best practices of evaluation, including the importance of using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The report finds that nonprofits are more likely to use quantitative methods: “…monitoring and tracking (compiling statistics, surveys, grant reports) than … [the] richer analysis and context (interviews, focus groups, observation, case studies)” that results from qualitative data collection.⁴¹

Another key evaluation practice highlighted by The Innovation Center’s is to include both process and outcome evaluation. The three primary questions that most evaluations answer are: “How much[/many]? … How well? … What difference did it make? What changes did the work bring about? The first two questions describe a

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⁴⁰. Ibid.

process evaluation, while the third question describes an outcomes evaluation.” 42 It’s important to evaluate how the innovation was implemented as well as what results it had.

Beyond the use of logic models, collecting both quantitative and qualitative evaluation data, and evaluating both the process and the outcomes of evaluation, there are, of course, many more details about how to evaluate innovations (including specifics about what and how to measure) and there are many best practices and evaluation procedures that should be followed to have an accurate and meaningful evaluation of a program. This thesis will not further explore evaluation forms or best practices in detail, but will instead say that high-quality evaluation is an important step in the social innovation process.

**Step Five: Scale and Diffuse Successful Innovations**

If a social innovation makes it successfully through the implementation phase and through evaluation, is shown to have a real impact on the problem, the final phase of the social innovation process is to spread the innovation – to scale up or diffuse the innovation. Scaling and diffusion are similar, but distinct concepts. Scaling an idea means that more people are involved in implementing the idea in new places. Diffusion is much more focused on the communication and sharing of the idea. Scaling and diffusion are symbiotic in nature; scaling can lead to diffusion, and diffusion can lead to scaling. The simplest definitions of scaling and diffusion found in my research follow:

Scaling is a slightly misleading term, because it carries with it a connotation that it’s an easy thing to do. It isn’t. Scaling isn’t a mechanistic process, like blowing air into a balloon and watching it expand accordingly. … Scaling – ensuring wide take-up of innovative new solutions across geography and time – depends on people. Even if one public organization has successfully demonstrated that a new

42. Ibid., 17.
practice, approach or method is highly valuable, there is no guarantee that it will ignite the interest of anyone else. ... Scaling, however, is no worse than other labels such as ‘dissemination’, ‘take-up’, ‘replication’ or ‘diffusion’. All are terms that seek to capture the key question: how do we move from successfully doing something new in one setting, to doing it in all relevant settings?  

Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. It is a special type of communication, in that the messages are concerned with new ideas. ... When new ideas are invented, diffused, and are adopted or rejected, leading to certain consequences, social change occurs.  

In order for a socially innovation program, idea, or concept to scale up or diffuse through society, it must be “adopted” by more and more people. Everet Rogers, an expert on diffusion, describes five characteristics of innovations that determine the likelihood that an innovation will be adopted, including relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability:

1. Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes.

2. Compatibility is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters.

3. Complexity is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use. Some innovations are readily understood by most members of a social system; others are more complicated and will be adopted more slowly.

4. Trialability is the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. New ideas that can be tried on the installment plan will generally be adopted more quickly than innovations that are not divisible.

5. Observability is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. The easier it is for individuals to see the results of an innovation, the more likely they are to adopt.

43. Bason, Leading Public Sector Innovation, 200.

In general, innovations that are perceived by receivers as having greater relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability, and less complexity will be adopted more rapidly than other innovations.45

Social innovators need to consider these characteristics from the beginning phrases of the social innovation process, especially during the solution-design phase and the implementation phase. If an innovative idea can’t eventually exhibit these characteristics, the innovation will very likely stay limited to the pilot or early implementation sites. A good idea doesn’t become a true social innovation until it actually helps solve a large social problem, which requires the social innovation to be scalable and diffusible.

**Adopters**

Rogers divides the population into four groups: early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. The distribution of the percentage of the population in each group follow a bell-curve. Early adopters and laggards each represent approximately fifteen percent of the population while the early majority and late majority represent approximately thirty-five percent each. The early adopters have a “high tolerance for experimentation and seek out innovation”; the early majority “wait for the innovation to be proven and accepted”; the late majority “wait until an innovation is well established and participate because of necessity or to avoid social ostracism”; the laggards “will never voluntarily accept the innovation and it is not worth spending time trying to convince them.”46 These groups are based on Rogers’ study of 1,500 innovations over 50 years in a variety of fields representing all sectors. To scale an idea, social innovators

45. Ibid., 35-36.

must especially focus on the early adopters and plan to make it easier for the early majority to adopt the innovation, knowing that the late majority will come and to forget about the laggards once the first two groups have adopted the innovation.

To secure the early adopters and to bring the early majority on board with an innovation, social innovators must navigate through the innovation decision process: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Rogers defines the five steps of the innovation decision process:

1. Knowledge occurs when an individual is exposed to the innovation’s existence and gains some understanding of how it functions.

2. Persuasion occurs when an individual forms a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation.

3. Decision occurs when an individual engages in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject the innovation.

4. Implementation occurs when an individual puts an innovation to use.

5. Confirmation occurs when an individual seeks reinforcement of an innovation-decision already made, but he or she may reverse this previous decision if exposed to conflicting messages about the innovation.47

This process is fairly straightforward, but is not easy. Bason outlines several strategies for scaling up public sector innovation that would help move people along the innovation decision process. Strategies include legislation requiring the innovation be implemented and forcing people to adopt it, creating demand for the innovation (both positive and negative demand – carrots and sticks), documenting results and sharing stories and evidence that show the success of the innovation, engaging sponsors and champions to

47. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 164.
help convince others, road shows to demonstrate the innovation, and communicating through professional networks and association since such a large number of people participate in these types of gatherings with their job.  

Gershon includes a diffusion strategy in his social change framework: “Select an outreach strategy that supports the diffusion process. Develop communication mechanisms to aid the diffusion process. Identify potential partner organizations where team leaders might be found and develop benefits for the organizations’ participation. Train and coach team leaders. Track results based on the diffusion model.” Both Bason’s and Gershon’s strategies focus primarily on communication strategies.

There are certainly non-communication elements in scaling up an innovation – building a new infrastructure or incorporating into an existing infrastructure, securing new funding, ensuring continual evaluation and quality control, etc. Communication, though, is key to scaling and is essential to diffusion.

There are many forms of communication ranging from mass media strategies to one-to-one conversations. The communication form most relevant to social innovation is social marketing. “Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society.” In 2011, social marketing relies heavily on social

48. Bason, Leading Public Sector Innovation, 201-204.


media, social networks, and technology as primary vehicles to spread the message. Causes on Facebook, trending hashtags on Twitter, viral videos on YouTube, e-mail forwards from websites. While these are certainly important for the population as a whole, the early adopters are the part of the population that uses these tools more than the population as a whole.

Alan Andreasen, an expert in social marketing, outlines four approaches: the education approach, the persuasion approach, the behavioral modification approach, and the social influence approach. “The education approach begins with the primary assumption that individuals will do the right thing if only they understand why the need to do what is being advocated and know how to carry it out.” Andreasen notes that operating from the assumption that doing the right thing is enough of a motivator to overcome current behavior and beliefs, social pressure, etc. is a weakness of this approach. After all, if “because it’s the right thing to do” was enough of a reason for everyone to do something, we wouldn’t likely have many social problems to solve. The next approach is the persuasion approach, which takes the education approach one step farther. “Adherents to this approach have a fundamental belief that action takes place only if people are sufficiently motivated. Thus, the goal of the persuasionist is to discover the careful arguments and motivational hot buttons that will get the educated consumer to “get off the dime.” This approach recognizes that people usually need more motivation than “it’s the right thing to do” and motivates people based on their beliefs and emotions.

51. Ibid., 9.

52. Ibid., 11.
The next approach takes persuasion yet another step farther and focus on training people to change their behavior. “This [behavioral modification] approach is based on the premise “that people do what they do because they (a) learn the techniques necessary for the action and (b) find the outcomes rewarding. Behaviorists emphasize training and modeling of desired behavior and then give careful attention to rewarding the behavior when it occurs. 53 The fourth, and final, approach look past changing individual behavior and focus on society as a whole as the way to get to a largest number of individuals; “… advocates of [the social influence approach] argue that campaigns directed at influencing community norms and collective behavior are the most cost-effective way to reach and change individuals and families. Thus, they see changing social norms … as the best way to convince individuals that they must act in the prescribed way or risk social isolation.”54

Only the most effective innovations are scalable and will be diffused, guiding potential adopters through the innovation decision process using a variety of strategies, including social marketing. It is these innovations that will truly change the world.

53. Ibid., 12.

54. Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE

COLLABORATION, COMPLEXITY, AND CAPACITY

Throughout my research, several key elements necessary for social innovation were examined again and again. These elements weren’t quite definitional in nature, and they weren’t single steps in the social innovation process. Instead, three key elements of social innovation emerged as cross-cutting qualities necessary throughout the entire social innovation process for social innovation to be successful: collaboration with other innovators, the ability to understand and manage complexity, and the development of internal capacity. Individuals and organizations attempting social innovation must know how to work collaboratively with others, must understand and be able to navigate the complexity inherent in our social systems, and develop internal capacity that encourages, facilitates, and sustains social innovation to occur.

Collaboration

Partnerships and collaboration is inherent in engaging others in defining problems and devising solutions; partnerships and collaboration is key to the successful implementation of an innovation and essential to scaling and diffusion. In short, partnerships and collaboration are everywhere, and absolutely necessary.

Collaboration is “a predictable outcrop of the New Economy. The world has become too complex and interdependent, and resources too scarce, for any one institution or sector to effectively respond to today’s challenges and opportunities. Partnerships are a means of getting things done that individual organizations would be unable to achieve
alone.”¹ That there have always been partnerships, both intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral. Governments have worked with other governments, businesses with other businesses, nonprofits with other nonprofits, and organizations in each sector have partnered with organizations in the other sectors in various ways. “Yet partnership does seem to have been rediscovered. … These new forms of tri-sectoral partnerships, also called ‘new-social partnerships’ are being offered as a more effective way to address social and environmental problems.”² Even though these new-social partnerships may be more effective in addressing social problems, they come with their own challenges. They require new management and governance structures; with decisions and management of joint programs spread across multiple existing systems, new decision and implementation processes must be developed.

**Benefits of Collaboration**

Through collaboration, individuals and organizations can pool resources, act collectively, and achieve synergy. “Because alliances capitalize on the resources and capacities of more than one organization and capture synergies that would otherwise often go unrealized, they have the potential to generate mission impact far beyond what the individual contributors could achieve independently.”³ Gershon identifies a primary outcome of collaboration as “the ability to transform our faltering or dysfunctional social systems much more rapidly and with far greater equality. By effectively working together

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² Ibid.

we can achieve the force multiplier of synergy. Synergy is defined as “the working
together of two or more people, organizations, or things that produce a greater result than
the sum of their individual capabilities or effects.”⁴ Beyond doing more with the same
amount, or even fewer, resources, some experts even go so far as to say that collaboration
is essential to survival of organizations: “Survival in all sectors will depend on the ability
of people to tap into the new information networks. The notion of splits between the
private and public sector are becoming increasingly blurred and… an ability to use
political, social and economic networking will be essential.”⁵ While it is debatable about
whether collaboration is necessary for survival, the debate is largely over about whether
collaboration is necessary for thriving.

Collaboration demonstrates civic capacity, “the extent to which different sectors
of the community – business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, non-
profits, and others – act in concert around a matter of community-wide import.”⁶ The key
word is “act” – civic capacity is not just the ability and willingness of organizations to
work together, it is about whether they actually do work together. Briggs explains:
“Civic capacity might be thought of as the extent to which the sectors that make up a
community are (1) capable of collective action on public problems… and (2) choose to
apply such capability…. It is my contention, then, that capacity per se can only be

⁴ Gershon, Social Change 2.0, 224.
⁵ McIntyre-Mills, Global Citizenship and Social Movements, 88.
meaningfully assessed in the context of effort.”

Collaboration is not truly collaboration when it is theoretical; it is only collaboration when organizations actually work together in meaningful ways.

Collaboration is a diffusion strategy. Experts on the relationship between networks and innovation in the public sector note that cross-sector relationships are most often noted within literature on the public sector “in the context of the diffusion of innovative ideas and practices… [because of] “the role networks play in promoting trust and facilitating the free flow in information between actors both within and across organizational boundaries… networks help mitigate barriers in the decision-making process… whilst promoting social learning….”

Collaboration spreads information and best practices more quickly to more people; collaboration facilitates grassroots adoption of innovation because more people are involved with implementing the innovation. Collaborative partnerships “provide the twin ingredients of effective public action: legitimacy and productive capacity. Legitimacy confers vital informal authority to be heard in the public square, to act on public problems, and to have other players respond to one’s actions. Productive capacity is the means for learning, adapting, and operating to generate visible results.” Simply, collaboration makes it more likely that people will consider and act on a social problem.

Collaboration helps innovators think in new ways and begins move society to a

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 54.

“higher level of performance”: “When all the parts of a system being working together and there is no “other” to combat or protect against, more innovative and generative solutions start to emerge. I call the process of bringing the whole system into collaboration building a unitive field.” ¹⁰ Sustained and deep collaboration recalibrates society and over time, permanently changes the way individuals and organizations interact and work together.

**Challenges to Collaboration**

The biggest challenge to collaboration is that, despite it becoming more common, “it is hardly the norm. For it to become a strategic lever for social change, we as a human community need to develop a new competency. … We need to move from a single-cell social organism to a multicellular social organization.”¹¹ That is, for society to evolve to a higher form of life, it must learn to collaborate, and develop new capacities and functionality. As with any form of evolution, that takes time.

Another obstacle to collaboration is that “it is often difficult to create cooperation among diverse organizations, especially when they have histories of conflict or see their interest as divergent, even when it may be in their long-term interest to work together.”¹² Working with others requires giving up some level of control, investing precious resources in others, and working in a different structure. This is especially difficult when

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¹¹ Ibid., 224.

there are inherent trust issues or long-standing competitiveness.

All partnerships are not truly collaborative, which presents another difficulty: the need to differentiate between poor partnership and effective collaboration. Some “effective partnerships are not always democratic in the way we have traditionally thought about the exercise of voice and shared power. Some declared partnerships are not the genuine article at all: they are unequal and limited contracting relationships dressed up as opportunities for the “partner” with few evident alternatives.”\textsuperscript{13} Collaboration is not just working together; collaboration is authentic partnership where all parties contribute to the partnership and where all parties benefit from the partnership.

**Forms of Collaboration**

There are several forms of collaboration; Xavier Briggs, who studies collaboration as “civic capacity” describes three forms of partnership: organizations, projects, and coalitions. The partnerships activities these forms take on range from creating or launching new programs (organization), joint-implementation of programs (projects), and gaining public support for innovation (coalitions.) Briggs notes that “prospective partners can answer the question “How partnered should we be?” in a variety of ways, from limited “parallel play” to much more integrated arrangements, wherein resources are shared, accountability is more extensive, and activities are coordinated or even completely redesigned under a shared management approach.”\textsuperscript{14} Collaboration represents a higher level of partnership; “parallel play” is a non-

\textsuperscript{13} Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving*, 38.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 132.
collaborative form of partnership while partnerships with “more integrated arrangements” are really collaborative.

Many define partnerships in various levels, with collaboration as the highest level of partnership. One example of this is Paul Light’s differentiation between cooperation, coordination, and collaboration:

Cooperating – using resources to assist other agencies; contributing resources, promote others, share information;

Coordinating – organizing or combining resources to more effectively reach a mutual goal; reconcile activities – adjust or combine existing programs, share resources, producing joint projects;

Collaborating – collectively applying resources toward problems that lack clear ownership; sharing program responsibilities, creating new systems, models, paradigms, collective vision and planning.\(^\text{15}\)

At all levels of partnership, there are also different goals and outcomes of a partnership. Briggs makes a “distinction between alliances that do work (produce services or other outputs) and coalitions that influence decisions (about resources or policy). This feature is the tension between collective action as pressure politics… and collective action as coproduction.”\(^\text{16}\) Both are important to social innovation – collective action as coproduction to plan for and implement the innovation, and collective action as pressure politics to build support for the innovation and for scaling and diffusion.

**How to Collaborate**

As with every aspect of social innovation, there are many, many details about

\(^{15}\) Light, *Sustaining Innovation*, 77.

\(^{16}\) Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving*, 224-225.
collaboration that will not be fully explored here. Many of the experts cited throughout this thesis focused on collaboration; two of those experts each identify four best practices. The first recommends that partners focus on mission and vision, clarify roles, define values, and invest for impact. These previous four practices are nearly identical to the following four practices: “Identify strategic partners who provide mission-critical assets you do not possess. Create a visioning process. Establish a detailed written agreement and communication protocol for addressing issues in the relationship. Carefully align with a partner around the key metrics for evaluating a project’s success.” It is important for collaborators to choose partners carefully, know why they need each other, develop a shared vision, specify roles and responsibilities of each, and communicate clearly and honestly.

**Complexity**

Another recurring theme in social innovation and social change literature is complexity; social innovators are attempting to solve complex problems within complex systems that make up a very complex society. Our society is difficult to navigate and a social innovator must be able to understand the nature of complexity in order to be able to have an idea about how their innovation will affect and change society. There is a difference between the world being complicated and being complex. The clearest description of that difference I found in my research is this:


In a complicated world, the various elements that make up the system maintain a degree of independence from one another. Thus, removing one such element (which reduces the level of complication) does not fundamentally alter the system’s behavior apart from that which directly resulted from the piece that was removed. Complexity arises when the dependencies among the elements becomes important. In such a system, removing one such element destroys system behavior to an extent that goes well beyond what is embodied by the particular element that is removed.

Complexity is a deep property of a system, whereas complication is not. A complex system dies when an element is removed, but complicated ones continue to live on, albeit slightly compromised. Complicated worlds are reducible, whereas complex one are not.\(^\text{19}\)

Some social innovations target complicated problems while some target complex problems. While complex systems are more difficult to understand and predict how an innovation will change the system than complicated ones, it is important for any social innovator to understand how different parts and agents within a system relate to one another.

Social complication and social complexity result from the interconnectedness of everything – and everyone – within a system. “The innate features of many social systems tend to produce complexity. Social agents, whether they are bees or people or robots, find themselves enmeshed in a web of connections with one another... The remarkable thing about social worlds is how quickly such connections and change can lead to complexity.”\(^\text{20}\) Complexity theory studies these connections, and how social agents affect each other:

Complexity theory states that non-linear dynamics are the result of interactions and the interconnectivity of separate agents within or outside a system. …most


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 18.
existing theories, at least in the social sciences, stress complexity as a result of interconnection. In fact, most social science theories stress that relatively autonomous actors (individuals, groups and organizations that can act as a unit) are connected to one another and may affect one another and the interaction patterns that occur in a larger unity of actors (i.e., in a system).\textsuperscript{21}

In the context of social innovation, it is especially important to understand how organizations function as social agent, or as a “networked organization” – when the organization “is part of a variety of external networks that are fluid and chaotic… part of a “multi-organization field,” or “multiactor network”… Anyone who wants to influence an organization’s behavior has to understand and design these internal or external networks.”\textsuperscript{22} To plan, implement, or scale a social innovation, the social innovator, whether individual or organization, must be able to navigate this interconnected network of individual agents and networked organizations.

Interconnectedness does not only apply to the individual and organizational agents in a system, but to the problems themselves. “It is essential to think in terms of the interconnectedness of social problems and achieve the intellectual dexterity to see the connections and avoid thinking in terms of categories or boxes… [and] address the bigger picture. …problem solving at all times needs to avoid pinning down, limiting, categorizing and refining down.” Understanding the interconnectedness of problems and of the individuals and organizations that will interact with the solution is critical to the success of social innovation.


\textsuperscript{22} Crosby and Bryson, \textit{Leadership for the Common Good}, 5.
Capacity

The final common theme running through the literature on social innovation and social change is the need for internal capacity of organizations (and individuals, to some extent) necessary for innovation to occur. Organizations involved in social innovation need to develop and maintain the capacity of the organization to allow innovative ideas to occur, and to implement those ideas.

Innovation Triggers

Organizations that are most likely to lead social innovation build internal capacity for innovation and incorporate innovation triggers into their organizational structure. “Across the classic innovation literature, the following triggers of innovation are often highlighted: research and development; new technology; efficiency demands; employee-driven innovation; citizen centered innovation.”\(^\text{23}\) When these triggers are present and are high priorities of an organization, it is more likely that innovations will be developed and successfully implemented by that organizations.

Adam Yarmolinsky, in describing how to turn ideas into programs in the public sector, offers three sets of suggestions specific to spurring innovation in government: making it easier for people to move from positions implementing and managing programs to creating new ideas and new programs, increasing the number of opportunities to test out new ideas on a small scale, and providing resources and staff time to turn an idea into a program design that can be implemented.\(^\text{24}\) Each of these is a matter of organizational


\(^\text{24}\) Adam Yarmolinsky, “Ideas Into Programs,” in *Strategic Perspectives on Social Policy*, eds.
policy, and innovative organizations develop policies that facilitate these types of activities.

**Leadership**

Leaders in an organization determine how innovative an organization is likely to be, both by intentional decisions about the importance of innovation to the organization and the development and support of innovation triggers in an organization, and also by leadership style. Crosby and Bryson, in describing leadership in a “shared-power” world, point out that “the old image of the leader as the one in charge of a hierarchical organization to diminish considerably…. At the start of the twenty-first century, images such as “catalytic leader,” “co-leader,” “connective leader,” “quiet leader,” and even “invisible leader” have become prominent.”25 Organizations with the most capacity for innovation are often led by these kinds of leaders.

This new form of leadership resulted from a more connected world. “Leaders rooted in a networked world may or may not have positions of authority. They inspire and motivate constituents through persuasion, example, and empowerment, not through command and control. …In the effort to tackle public problems, leadership and power must be consciously shared….“26 The more leadership and power is shared in an organization, the more everyone within the organization is empowered to present new ideas, try new things, and be innovative.

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26. Ibid.
Knowledge Management

An organization can only be innovative when it knows what it knows and takes advantage of what it knows. “Knowledge management is a process of codifying what an organization knows. If people have a problem, they can look at the firm’s database to see what solutions others have employed. In this way, knowledge management is a tool to help people find solutions to their problems.” Knowledge management is critical to realizing there is a problem, to redefining the problem, to identifying solutions, to tracking implementation best practices, to evaluation, and to scaling. Information is key during each step of the social innovation process, and an innovative organization must keep and manage its information in a way that it can be easily access and used throughout social innovation. If those implementing the innovation don’t have the right information, they may not be able to make the right decisions to ensure successful implementation.

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CHAPTER FOUR
CRITERIA TO EVALUATE SOCIAL INNOVATION

Reviewing the literature about social change and social innovation helped define social innovation, develop a common set of steps in the social innovation process, and identify several qualities that socially innovative individuals and organizations need to possess. What the literature did not provide was clear criteria about how to evaluate social innovation – clear indicators of whether something was actually social innovation or not, indicators examining the quality of implementation of the social innovation, and indicators measuring whether the individual or organization innovator demonstrate the necessary qualities an innovator needs for their innovation to be successful. This chapter will identify criteria in each of those three categories based on the information presented in the first three chapters.

All criteria are framed as yes-or-no questions. I recognize that not all answers are that simple, and that many answers will be a “yes, but…” or a “no, but…”. However, the social innovation needs a simple and straightforward set of criteria – a checklist of sorts – by which to measure social innovation. The following three sets of questions attempts to provide such a measurement tool.

Set One: Is it Social Innovation?

This first set of criteria helps measure whether a particular idea or program is actually social innovation, and is based on information from chapter one.
Newness

These questions evaluate the “newness” of the idea – whether an idea is truly innovative or just a good idea, and are based on the “Something New” section in chapter one.

Is the idea innovative? Is it a new approach not just for the individual or organization implementing it, but a new approach that no one has thought of or applied to this particular problem before? Is it a radical (vs. an incremental) innovation? Does the innovation change what the work to solve a problem is (versus changing how existing work is being done more efficiently or effectively?)

Problem-Solving

These questions evaluate whether the innovation might lead to social change, and are based on the “Problem Solving” section of chapter one.

Is the innovation social in nature? Does it solve a problem and improve the public good? Does the innovation attempt solve a large, difficult, intractable, unstructured – or “hard” social problem (versus changing an “easy” problem)? Will people’s lives improve because of this innovation?

Openness

These questions evaluate the dependence of an innovation on a particular sector, and relationship to existing organizations, and is based on the “Any Sector” section of chapter one.

Is the social innovation being implemented by a nonprofit, government, business, foundation, individual, or some combination? Is the innovation effort being led by an
individual within some kind of organizational structure or with some organizational support? Does the design of the innovation allow for it to be implemented within existing systems and structures?

**Results**

For a new idea to be considered social innovation, it must answer yes to all questions in sets one and two. Yes answers are preferred for set three because they indicate a greater likelihood of new solutions and of the innovation actually being implemented, but are not absolutely necessary for something to be considered social innovation.

**Set Two: Evaluating the Work of Social Innovation**

This second set of criteria evaluates how effectively a social innovation is created, designed, implemented, evaluated, and scaled, and is based on chapter two.

**Problem Definition**

These questions evaluate how the problem to be solved by the social innovation was defined, and are based on the section in chapter two about the first step in the social innovation process.

Did the innovator redefine the problem to be solved, and think about it in new ways? Did the innovator engage other people in identifying the problem? Did the innovator consult with those directly affected by the problem to get more information about the problem before designing a new solution?
Solution Design

These questions evaluate how possible solutions were identified and selected for implementation, and are based on the section in chapter two about the second step in the social innovation process.

Did the innovator consult with both experts and non-experts? Were the solutions designed through co-creation, with people and not for people? Were those responsible for implementing the innovation and end-users and other stakeholders involved in identifying possible solutions? Was there a shared vision developed before specific strategies or details were planned? Was a design approach used that analyzed and synthesized information?

Implementation

The questions in this section evaluate how easily and effectively the innovation can be implemented, and is based on the section in chapter two about the third step of the social innovation process.

Is the innovation able to be piloted or tested on a small scale before full-scale implementation, and if so, was it tested? Did the innovator investigate and decide on a specific organizational setting or form for the innovation? Did the innovator form new partnerships to implement the innovation? Is the innovation affordable and able to be fully funded with available sources?

Evaluation

The questions in this section measure whether the innovation is being effectively evaluated, and is based on the section in chapter two about the fourth step of the social
innovation process.

Is the innovation able to be measured, and if so, was it measured? Did the innovator develop a logic model to facilitate evaluation? Did the evaluation of the innovation include both qualitative and quantitative data and analysis? Did the evaluation of the innovation measure both process and outcome indicators? Did the innovator use the evaluation data to change the innovation in any way, or use the data to make the case to others?

**Scaling & Diffusion**

These questions evaluate the likelihood that an innovation will be scaled or diffused, and are based on the section in chapter two about the fifth step of the social innovation process.

Is the innovation perceived as better than other ideas? Is the innovation compatible with existing values and experiences of adopters? Is the innovation easy to understand? Is the innovation able to be tried out by early adopters? Are the effects of the innovation easy to see and share with others? Did the innovator strategically share the innovation with potential early adopters? Did the innovator share knowledge of the innovation with others and present a persuasive case for adoption? Did the innovator effectively use social marketing (especially social media and other technology) to spread the innovation? Does the marketing strategy both educate and persuade?

**Results**

Answers to the questions in this set collectively measure the quality of the innovation as demonstrated throughout the social innovation process. The most
promising social innovations should answer yes to nearly every question. However, “no” answers don’t necessarily mean that a particular innovation won’t be successful. The most important questions are those related to the third step – implementation. The second most important set of questions are those in the fifth section, focused on scaling and diffusion. Scaling and diffusion are critical to the social change component of social innovation. Successful innovations must be scaled in order to achieve real impact on a problem. Solving a problem in one or a few locations isn’t enough. “Yes” answers to the questions in these two sections are primary indicators of whether a social innovation will be successful.

The rest of the questions are secondary indicators – indicators that provide a good gauge as to the likelihood of success, but are not absolute requirements. The first two sections of questions, related to the first and second steps – identifying and defining the problem and possible solution(s) indicate a higher likelihood of success, but it is certainly possible for a social innovation to come to someone in a moment of inspiration without going through either of these steps in a meaningful away. The fourth section of questions, related to evaluation, also indicate a higher likelihood of success, but it is possible for a social innovation to be successful without any measurement of its success. Of course, without measuring impact of the innovation, it can’t be proven whether the innovation is really working or not, but that doesn’t preclude success.

**Set Three: Cross-Cutting Characteristics**

This third set of criteria evaluates the individual or organization leading the social innovation, and whether they possess the characteristics typical of successful innovators,
and is based on chapter three.

**Collaboration**

The questions in this section evaluate the level of collaboration present among those implementing the innovation, and are based on the “Collaboration” section of chapter three.

Are collaborative partnerships established to implement the innovation? Does the partnership include partners from more than one sector? Does the partnership exhibit characteristics of collaboration, and not just cooperation or coordination? Has the partnership identified whether its primary outcome is to do work, to influence decisions, or both? Did partners develop a shared vision? Does each partner benefit from the partnership? Is each partner contributing significant resources to the partnership? Is there a written partnership agreement? Are clear roles and responsibilities for each partner defined?

**Complexity**

The questions in this section evaluate the likelihood that an innovation accounts for the complex nature of the systems it interacts with, and is based on the “Complexity” section of chapter three.

Does the innovator understand the concepts of social complication and social complexity? Did the innovator study the connections among all social agents connected to the innovation? Does the innovator take time to regularly examine the innovation within the bigger picture?
Capacity

The questions in this section evaluate the internal capacity of the individual and organization innovators to facilitate and sustain innovation, and are based on the “Capacity” section of chapter three.

Are there innovation triggers present in the organization(s) participating in the innovation? Does the leader(s) of the innovation operate in a shared-power way? Do the innovators have a knowledge management strategy in place and if so, do they take use it?

Results

The importance of collaboration places particular importance on positive responses to the questions in the first section. It is less important for the complexity and capacity questions to be answered “yes” but are still good measures to gauge the likelihood of success of the innovation.

A Note

While I’ve noted varying levels of importance to particular questions, overall, the more positive responses, the higher quality the social innovation. I am not an evaluation expert, and I’m sure those that are would find flaws in these questions. My goal here is not to develop a comprehensive and scientific evaluation for social innovation, but to make the point that the social innovation field has not yet clearly defined itself and what makes high-quality social innovation. These questions offer a starting point for further discussion and development of formal evaluation measures and are based on my synthesis and analysis of the writings of dozens of experts on social change and social innovation.
CHAPTER FIVE

WHO'S BEST AT SOCIAL INNOVATION?

The question that originally inspired this thesis was: which sector is best at social innovation? I asked this question after reviewing information about the new Social Innovation Fund grant program administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency. (The organization I work for considered applying.) The most interesting requirement to me was that it required the applicant to be a grant-making nonprofit or foundation, with a commitment from a foundation or the private sector to match 100% of government funding. This implies that the Obama Administration thinks that nonprofits are the best source of innovation, and that the role both the government and the private sector should play is that of funder.

That got me thinking... are nonprofits really the best source of social innovation? Shouldn’t the government and the private sector be doing more to solve problems through social innovation besides throwing money at others’ innovation? Clearly, the public and private sectors are just as influential, if not more so, than nonprofits and individuals. The government can legislate an innovation into existence; the private sector can easily harness the power of the market to spread an innovation. It seems governments and the private sector have let themselves off the hook for social innovation. Both government and business will continue to do good, of course, but let the truly innovative ideas and new solutions from the nonprofit sector.

Those are the thoughts and questions I started with. My original plan for this thesis was to spend several chapters analyzing several case studies of social innovation
from each sector. The plan was to develop a set of criteria, similar to what was detailed in chapter four, and then to apply that criteria to each sector’s case studies, and arrive at a clear ranking of which sector was best at social innovation and why.

So, I set myself down that path. I ran into a major obstacle when it came time to choose the case studies. I had noted example after example of social innovation throughout my research. However, when it came time to select the examples I’d actually use, I quickly realized that the only examples I was finding were nonprofit examples. All of the examples I had come across from government and business didn’t fit the definition of social innovation presented in chapter one. They were social, or they were innovation, but they weren’t social innovation. The other major complication was that there was no uniformity or consistency to the information available about the examples; there was no easy way to compare a paragraph in an article, a sidebar in a book, or an online profile of an innovation award winner to each other. In the end, I realized I couldn’t accurately apply the criteria I had developed to enough case studies to make that format worthwhile.

I’m certain (or at least hoping) that there are examples that I’m not finding. That said, after dozens of hours spent searching – online, in dozens of books on social innovation, and reflecting on years of conversations about organizations who solve problems – I’m already ready to deliver my verdict: nonprofits are simply better at social innovation. Governments and business both help solve problems, but mostly in traditional ways with existing ideas and strategies.

Most social innovations in government failed the “newness” test or the “what vs. how” test. That is, the innovation may have been new to government, but they weren’t
new to society. Many other innovations in government changed how government did its work, but not what the work was. The Social Innovation Fund simply funds innovations being implemented by the nonprofit sector; government has very little role in the innovation besides the dollars. The innovations of the Harvard School of Government Innovations in Government award mostly fall into two categories: better, more efficient systems or greater citizen involvement.

All of these things – investing tax dollars in innovative nonprofits, improving systems leading to greater efficiencies, and engaging citizens in the process of government – are great. They no doubt help solve a problem, but social innovations must meet the definitions of both of those words: social and innovation. Just continuing to attempt to solve a problem with existing strategies or just doing the same thing in an innovative way isn’t really social innovation.

Similar observations were made by experts on innovation in government, including this one in 1988: “The majority of these studies focus almost elusively upon organizational change and innovation in public sector administration and management. … Beyond these narrow confines, it turns out we know very little about governmental innovation, except to say that it has something to do with ‘policy development’, ‘implementation skill’ and ‘institution building’.”1 Unfortunately, over twenty years later, it seems we still know very little about government innovation beyond improving administration and management – that is, innovation that truly changes what government does, not just how it does it. This same 1988 book also found that studies of innovation in

government were “… more likely than not to focus upon the role of government in aiding
the innovation of others – such as firms and research institutes. … But this still does not
tell us about government as government. This is our second puzzle: What kind of
innovation model helps explain what governments do when they innovate?”2 Once again,
twenty years later, my observations of the examples of innovation in the government
sector were the same. Many examples, including the Social Innovation Fund, were
eamples in which government supported, financially or otherwise, innovations in other
sectors.

Why have observations made about innovations in government twenty years ago
still seem to be true in 2011? One expert offers one possible explanation: “…relatively
few ideas seem to come from inside government itself. The contribution of government
people is likely to be more in detail and implementation, matters I shall come to shortly.
The so-called policy planning staffs of departments and agencies usually serve merely as
a conduit for ideas from outside.”3 Even assuming this is true, one would think that there
would be social innovations that would result from government action, even if the idea
came from somewhere else.

Another explanation offered by experts focuses on the bureaucracy inherent in
government. “Behavior in government organizations is harder to change than in other
organizations – and bureaucratic organization in government is particularly resistant to

2. Ibid., 5.

change.”4 “The bureaucrat is shaped by the immediate demands of his job, and his job is primarily to see that things get done, within the existing institutional framework. … Because the primary responsibility of the bureaucrat is not to figure out the best way to do something, but to get it done.”5 Perhaps there’s a divide between the leaders in government (those elected to serve in government) and the bureaucrats (those hired to serve in government.) Maybe those elected, who come up with ideas, and those hired, who must implement ideas, are too separate – resulting in the idea and implementation processes being too separate as well.

"Finally, one of the most significant challenges to realizing the potential of innovation in government is that of ‘scaling’…. Even when studies show that if only every local government, region, public agency or department adopted the most innovative practices of their peers, it would be transformational, it is extremely difficult to make ‘scaling’ happen in practice.” Since scaling and diffusion is a critical element to social innovation, perhaps there are plenty of innovations being implemented locally, but few outside the location of implementation know about the innovation, and so the innovation isn’t able to change society as a whole.

All of the examples I found from the private sector failed the same test. They were likely social, but they weren’t particularly innovative. Most examples from the private sector fell squarely into a corporate social responsibility strategy: donating money or goods, allowing or encouraging employees to volunteer (including doing so during

their paid work hours), or being socially responsible in their operations (going green, progressive human resource policies, etc.) Just as with the good things government does, these things are all helpful, but they’re not new. In order to really solve problems we need to radically rethink how we tackle problems. Being socially responsible may have been social innovation when the concept was new decades ago, but it’s enough to be considered social innovation any more.

Some businesses come close. For example, IBM has for years donated dollars or technology to schools or nonprofits in order to solve problems and let their employees volunteer. Giving more money or donating new technology or letting employees volunteer more during work hours is wonderful corporate social responsibility, but it isn’t particularly innovative and I wouldn’t classify these activities as “social innovation.” However, a new strategy that IBM has recently adopted as part of the celebration of their centennial anniversary is strategically applying employee volunteering by matching employee expertise with community needs. Employees aren’t just sent out into the community to volunteer with whatever cause they may care about; they’re dispatched where their professional expertise can be put to use. For example, IBM employees will serve as mentors to middle school students participating in Youth Service America’s STEMester of Service program, combining employee’s technology and engineering experience with science, technology, engineering, and math based service projects designed to improve students’ academic engagement and workforce skills and improve the community by addressing a local environmental problem through service.

The obvious reason for why social innovation doesn’t come from the private sector is that as a society, we don’t expect this from business. While we expect businesses to be responsible and to do good for the community, we recognize that this isn’t the primary role of business. It’s nice, but not necessary. However, many argue that this isn’t true – and were doing so at least as early as nearly forty years ago! Andrew Gollner, writing about corporate strategy for social change details one of the early – and best known – attempts at defining corporate social responsibility by the Committee for Economic Development in the early 1970s. The C.E.D. outlined three levels of corporate responsibility. The first level, the inner circle represents the primary mission of the corporation – production of goods and services that lead to profit. The second level, the middle circle, represents responsibilities directly related to the production of goods and services, and conducting its activities in a legal and responsible way. Gollner describes the third level, the outer circle:

The third circle represents, as the C.E.D. puts it, “newly emerging and still amorphous responsibilities that business should assume to become more broadly involved in actively improving the social environment.” This third level of responsibility involves corporate participation in the creation of a healthy society. Corporate involvement at this level is frequently, and falsely, describe as just plain “do-gooding,” as the manifestation of a corporate “soul,” as a demonstration of “social duty” or good citizenship. In fact, the model developed by C.E.D. suggests that responsibility at this level, as at the previous two levels, is inseparable from the central economic function of the corporation. The development of a healthy community is not simply a moral imperative but an economic one and should be supported by the corporation for reasons of enlightened self interest.”

Even though the C.E.D. defined social responsibility as core to the responsibilities of the

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private sector, and much more than just doing good, nearly forty years later, it’s still not a perspective shared by most. While many businesses are social contributors, it’s limited to the business being a good citizen, not because they’re truly interested in solving a problem that deeply affects their own business, their employees, their customers, or the community and society in which they operate their business. The private sector doesn’t yet place solving social problems as one of its core responsibilities, even if it would be good for business.

That leaves nonprofits. While business may be great at innovation, but not at the social dimension and while government may be great at social programs, but not at innovation, nonprofits combine both: social and innovation. However, social innovation through nonprofits isn’t enough to solve our problems.

Why is civil society important? Not because it does one thing or represents one single point of view, but because it provides a space free of government control and the pressures of the market, a space in which private citizens can organize for public work… By itself, of course, civil society does not bring social transformation, since solutions to problems like poverty and conflict require government and businesses to put them into practice. But civil society is the place where these problems usually surface for attention, and from where pressure is exerted to make these institutions take up the challenge and perform in the public interest.7 …

It’s time for social innovation to become the responsibility of all sectors.

CONCLUSION

Social innovation is the best way to solve social problems. Current strategies and solutions might be working to meet short-term needs, but are not fully solving problems for the long-term. Individuals and organizations from all sectors need to invest in recent social innovations that need to be scaled; they also need to invest in the capacity to develop and implement new social innovations.

Corporations need to move beyond traditional corporate social responsibility, and invest a growing percentage of their CSR efforts – employee volunteerism, sponsorships and donations of funding, goods and services, sustainability efforts, etc – to those that demonstrate they are tackling a problem in a new way. Those in the private sector also need to see that social change as a core part of their business strategy and identify how can their products and services help solve a problem. That is, how can social change become one of the outputs of the business? How will the products or services provided help customers meet a need or solve a problem in their community?

Governments need to move beyond internal innovations of how they do their work, and to identify social innovation that changes what their work is. Government is unique in its ability to scale innovation. Local and state government should be a laboratory for solving problems, in partnership with other sectors. Federal and global government organizations should focus on identifying and scaling innovation from any sector, much like the Social Innovation Fund. Every department and agency should have an innovation fund – to identify and support effective innovations – and staff dedicated to thinking of new ideas and new ways to solve problems. Beyond funding innovations, the
most effective innovations should be institutionalized through public policy, even if not implemented by government. Government may not be the best organization to implement a program, but is the only one that can require implementation.

The nonprofit sector, even though it has the most social innovation currently taking place of any of the sectors, still has much work to do. Nonprofits – especially those focused on meeting immediate needs – need to focus on finding new ways to solve problems in the long-term. Meeting short-term needs is critical, and that work cannot stop. However, that work cannot continue to be the only thing the majority of nonprofits do. Continuing to meet the same needs every day in the same way is not a sustainable, or effective way to really solve problems. Just like the other sectors, innovation needs to be a part of the work of each nonprofit organization; nonprofits need to invest in identifying and implementing their own innovations as well as changing their work to adopt a social innovation that will help achieve their existing mission in a new, more effective way.

In short, all organizations in all sectors need to invest in their own capacity to identify, develop, implement, evaluate, and scale social innovations and need to continually be on the lookout for others’ social innovations and be willing to change strategies to adopt a social innovation that will help achieve the organization’s vision, mission, and goals. We all must continue to invest in identifying and implementing new solutions; if we do, we might finally solve social problems that have plagued us for thousands of years.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


