SOcial Space

Perspectives
Social Innovation Labs
Innovation in Poverty Alleviation
On the Wild Side

Lien Centre for Social Innovation
Singapore Management University

Administration Building,
81 Victoria Street, Singapore 188065

+65 6828 0821
liencentre@smu.edu.sg

www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg

LienCentreSMU
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There are only two things that are almost guaranteed for the future of societies. They are rapid change and complexity. Gone are the days in which solving societal problems was a linear thought process: identifying a need or a gap, finding the right resource and then plugging it. The “wicked” problems of today and tomorrow are hugely complex issues such as, inter alia, climate change, falling birth rates, poverty, sustainability and so on. None of these lends itself to linear thinking because the knowledge required to know how to deal with them is incomplete and does not reside in any individual, group or single sector. In addition, multi-sectorial collaboration is still fraught with difficulty and all the problems themselves are interrelated causally and consequentiality to one another.

It is against the background of this realisation that interest in social innovation labs (or SI Labs) as a platform for social change is rising rapidly in both Europe and North America. Social innovation, as a term in itself, is not even well understood across the landscape where it is practised. We can think of it as a way to focus minds on solutions to targeted problems, or as a way of disrupting and radically changing structures and policy frameworks, or ideally both. What most practitioners of social innovation agree upon, however, is the need to resist proffering perspectives or solutions from unilateral viewpoints and engage a far wider spectrum of players. One key ingredient is the inclusive and active participation of the very people who are suffering the needs being addressed, as their perspectives are indispensable and their non-inclusion is merely foolish arrogance.

Who will fund social innovation? Traditional philanthropy tends to service the needy directly through providing resources at the point of delivery. This of course remains a vast range of diseases could open up with many new interventions and medicines. There are obvious risks in funding social innovation, but also much potential for paradigm change. Fortunately philanthropists are starting to come round to understanding the importance of funding social innovation for the power that this brings to our ability to solve social problems.

The Lien Centre for Social Innovation is firmly behind the concept of social innovation labs and has launched our own SI Lab, which we are calling the “SMU Change Lab.” We are developing the community of practice in this area by convening the Asian conversation on social innovation labs, with Social iCon 2014. The SMU Change Lab will pioneer primary research, backed by analysis of the unmet needs of vulnerable communities in Singapore and beyond. The Lab will engage social sector workers, community members, students, corporates and policymakers in a participatory process to design innovative approaches. The SMU Change Lab complements and supports the university’s initiative that provides opportunities for students to engage with real world problems.

Singapore is an apt venue for the investigations of the SMU Change Lab. Despite (or because of) our rapid development, there remain significant problems in society that the best efforts mostly led by a single sector cannot solve, for all the reasons explained above. This has been acknowledged by our national leaders with mounting calls for action by all corners of society. To break through, we must bring all sectors (policymakers, private and civil sectors) together to find an alignment of mutual interest, breach silos, forge mutual trust and respect, and enter into a collaboration of the kind seldom seen before.

This goes beyond the ability of large institutions such as SMU to bring about, even in collaboration amongst institutions. Individuals that form the fabric of society must engage and join the effort. Only then will we be able to build the social and emotional capital of people not only to address the social issues they care about, but also to build resilience in the people. While our SI Lab is rooted in Singapore, we are a globally-oriented entity and want to also engage the issues of our region and beyond. It is hoped that prototypes and solutions developed here, through re-entering the multi-dimensional cascade of social innovation in the diverse environments of other countries, will find application beyond Singapore.

This edition of Social Space advances the discussion started in previous issues on the nature of social innovation and the work of SI Labs. The articles cover what learned thinkers believe they are, the various models and processes being practised, the lessons learned from examples of successful SI Labs and an understanding of why and how SI Labs can make a difference in communities both developed and emerging. We hope you will enjoy and benefit from this edition, as much as we enjoy bringing it to you. My final hope is that all readers will be made more ready and be poised to actively participate with us to make the future together. ✧
INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

STEPPING INTO A COLLECTIVE FUTURE THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Following the closure of the United Nation’s peacekeeping mission in Timor-Leste, a new form of engagement involving the country, and local and international agencies has emerged. Noeleen Heyzer describes the current state of development in the young nation, and shares how active collaboration at all levels can engineer breakthroughs in helping a country unlock its potential in the region.

Dr Noeleen Heyzer is an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. She is currently the UNSC’s Special Adviser for Timor-Leste, working to support peace-building, state-building and sustainable development.

She was the first woman to serve as the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific since its founding in 1947. Under her leadership (August 2007 to January 2014), the commission focused on regional cooperation for a more resilient Asia-Pacific, founded on shared prosperity, social equity, and sustainable development. She was at the forefront of many innovations including for regional disaster preparedness, inclusive socio-economic policies, sustainable agriculture and urbanisation, energy security and regional connectivity.

As the previous Executive Director of the UN Development Fund for Women, she was widely recognised for the formulation and implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security.

She holds a BA and a MSc from Singapore University, a PhD from Cambridge University, and has received numerous awards for leadership.

Dr Heyzer, how did you come on board to become the Special Adviser to Timor-Leste?

Timor-Leste voted for independence from Indonesia in 1999 and became a fully independent state in 2002. Since 1999, the UN has supported the country’s transition with five successive missions mandated by Security Council Resolutions: UNAMET, UNTAET, UNMIS/ET, UNOTIL and UNMIT.

After the end of UNMIT’s mandate in December 2012, the country wanted a new form of engagement with the UN. When the Secretary-General visited Timor-Leste, there was discussion on what that new engagement could be. They wanted an innovative partnership, one in which the country was very much in the driver’s seat. Many names were being recommended, and in the process, the government made it clear that they wanted not so much a governance-political person, but more a development person who could link the country to the region. The Timorese government asked for me and between the country and the Secretary-General, they decided. For this role, you need to have the trust of the leadership—of the President, the Prime Minister, and many of his Cabinet Ministers. With the country feeling that they got what they wanted, it became much easier for me to do my work.

What was your previous experience with Timor-Leste prior to this appointment?

When I was the Executive Director of UNIFEM, we focused on women in conflict-affected countries. This was particularly after the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 that looked at women, peace and security, which my team and I helped to draft. There were issues of justice and support to networks of women who could engage with the rebuilding of the country. We managed to build women’s leadership and support them in Parliament. Timor-Leste today has the highest percentage of women parliamentarians in Asia.

The country gained independence in May 2002, and in January 2003, I visited Timor-Leste. That must have been my third visit to the country. This time, it was to respond to a call by a woman in the mountainous region of Mauixiga. This was also where the Prime Minister himself was hiding when he was a resistance fighter. It was a place where the brutality against women was terrible, because they were hiding the resistance fighters. This woman named Olga De Silva hitchhiked to Dili because she heard about the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation. She told my national programme officer, “At the time of the struggle, we sacrificed so much. But in times of peace, no one has come to provide us with support services. And we have not seen our leaders.” I heard her in New York and I wanted her to know that.

I went up to Mauixiga accompanied by the Deputy Minister of Health and my UNIFEM team. When we arrived, the villagers were out dancing to receive us. It was very moving. We listened to the stories of the people, and understood their sacrifices, their problems and also what was most needed. I said to the Deputy Minister, “I want to make a pledge. And I want you also to make a pledge.”

My pledge to the community was to bring a team of Singapore doctors as the community faced the problems of severe maternal mortality and stunted growth of children. I announced my pledge and the Deputy Minister of Health also promised to establish basic health services. Later, I got in touch with Dr Kanwaljit Soin and with help from Robert Chua (our current ambassador in Myanmar... I brought (zero hunger) to our region as the largest number of the poor live in Asia... I told the Prime Minister that we needed to launch this as a regional agenda because we have to end hunger and poverty. These problems are avoidable.”
who was with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Singapore at that time, she headed a team to the mountains. Today, the community is better served and have basic healthcare.

How would you compare Timor-Leste now and Singapore in its early days? Singapore did not experience the type of violence and atrocities that Timor-Leste went through. You have a country where about 100,000 out of one million people were killed. Another 100,000 had died because of starvation, hunger and diseases. So 20 percent of population was lost, perhaps even more, because many of them had already left as exiles. The base could have been like 800,000. So you can imagine the trauma of having lost 25 percent of your population, the trauma of having your whole city, or your whole country burnt down to ashes. Timor-Leste is a country that rose out of the ashes, and has made remarkable progress.

Singapore, on the other hand, did not have such a violent history. Even if the literacy rate of our adults before independence was relatively low, the level of human capacity was much higher than in Timor-Leste. I think one similarity could be the unemployment situation. Singapore was also struggling at that time with urban poverty. We had squatters in many of the areas. In fact, I can still remember the night soil carriers in my childhood and that would be hard to explain to the younger generation. But, even then, we had comparatively good infrastructure and institutions from the British upon which to build our future.

We had a good educational system too. In fact, I went through the local educational system till my master’s degree. We had the English language to contend with. Our official language and dialects were not such a big political issue: we were educated in a widely used international official language and dialects were not such a big political problem. But, even then, we had comparatively good infrastructure and institutions from the British upon which to build our future.

The two countries have different starting points and very different trajectories so far, but Singapore has also tried to reach out and help Timor. We understand there is a lot of assistance and the Timorese officials come to Singapore to train. Has that been useful? Extremely so. I think Singapore has been a very good friend to Timor-Leste. In fact, through the Singapore technical cooperation programme, about 470 government officials have been trained. Many of them are trainers of Timorese trainers in diplomacy, port management, governance systems, customs, taxation and what is needed to run the government. Singapore has done well by Timor-Leste.

Timor has a very young population—are there specific development challenges that come with such a demographic? There are huge challenges because 70 percent of their population is under 30 years old. And the birth rate is about 5.8 in urban areas and over 6 in the rural areas. So you’re going to have a very young population. That can be an opportunity because you can have a youth dividend if you know how to invest in it. Currently though, it’s a challenge. It’s not a dividend yet, until you know how to unleash the creativity and the potential of that population and channel it into real options for the future.

Currently, overall unemployment is a problem, and the youth unemployment rate is extremely high. This can lead to a rise in violence or criminality. It’s what I call a “new fragility.” Therefore, it is critical to generate employment very quickly. The problem with Timor-Leste is that it’s still an economy that is petroleum-based, and therefore it’s more capital-intensive rather than labour-intensive. The main challenge is to diversify its economy in such a way that it can generate productive employment for the young. The country can build on both its current and future economic strength to diversify its economy by investing in sustainable community tourism, agriculture and fisheries, and petroleum industries.

There is already an infrastructure and construction agenda that can generate jobs. However, because the alignment of jobs and skills is not quite there, many of the jobs have gone to migrant workers. Jobs are also being created in Special Economic Zones. It’s critical to do an analysis of what types of jobs are needed. You can develop basic skills for the young in areas like road construction, repairs of electricity, carpentry, sustainable energy and so on, then align them and get these young people into employment. Of course, in terms of construction, it has gone not just to the locals but also to foreign companies. Still, the country can develop an agreement whereby foreign companies coming in are required to train the locals—this is what Germany did—and eventually to provide them with skilled employment.

In terms of job creation, are there other opportunities? Timor-Leste is importing food and literally all other goods. Their import bill is very high. So you can actually study what can be generated locally instead. You can have import substitution of some of the basic commodities. There should also be a focus on sustainable agriculture because many of the people live up in the mountains and are subsistence farmers.

In addition, Timor-Leste is a very beautiful country. It is scenic, rugged and absolutely stunning. You can have a flourishing tourism industry, but you need to know how to build up the service sector and social infrastructure for that type of industry to flourish. It’s not going to be a five-star tourist destination, but it can be a place for adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and historical tourism. The focus need not just be on Timor-Leste alone but the region. You have both the forest and the coral belt. The Prime Minister understands this and the potential of sustainable tourism.

Simple solutions can help create new employment opportunities as well. In Dili, you see people trying to develop local markets and businesses. There are stalls selling fish for example. But the fishes are on the gala (bamboo) poles. Of course the fish rot in the hot sun. They need ice boxes and ice to preserve the fish. These solutions are simple things that can get people started. We can get youths excited about sustainable development, innovations and waste management. The potential is there and is visible. There are so many opportunities to intervene at the local level.

There is a need for shared responsibility in the whole creation of a new country and the shaping of collective futures. Can you elaborate on that in the context of Timor Leste? There are so many players—the government, the country’s leadership, the civil society and the local communities. You want your private sector to be responsible, to share the same vision of development. You want your international community, your international partners, to share the same vision of where you want to go. The government has done this by having a 20-year strategic development plan, and the five-year government programmes to implement the plan to transform Timor-Leste from a least developed country to an upper-middle income country by 2030.
The fifth government plan is already there, focusing on concrete government programmes. However, no development journey, or what I call the development drama, can be played out alone. For this shared responsibility, you need to have all the different actors working as a team. They have to be part of the same story with shared responsibility to eventually reach their destination.

The country has engaged all their development partners in their journey. They have Quarterly Development Partners Meetings. All the partners are there and there’s accountability for what they have done to implement this plan. You have civil society, donors, the private sector and the government on the same page, talking about how they have contributed. I just witnessed their budget process in January this year. The budget is to provide the resources for the implementation of these plans. In Parliament, you have five political parties to make sure there is accountability in the use of resources.

In the coming together of different sectors, what has been civil society’s key role in bringing the development agenda forward? Civil society has done several things. One is to hold the government accountable to its people. There are some very vocal and dynamic civil society actors. They’ve helped to implement programmes and projects at the local village level. They have also sent out early warning signals when things are not working out. They have alerted the international community on what they see as problems.

The women’s groups have been very active. They were the ones who brought my attention to what was happening on the ground to maternal mortality, and the stunted growth of the children. At the time of the budget discussion, I invited the Princess of Thailand, HRH Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to launch the Zero Hunger Challenge in Parliament in January under the leadership of the Prime Minister. It was historic because in Parliament you debate things. All the five political parties engaged in the debate on the Zero Hunger Challenge and it has now become a national agenda.

For me, this was a remarkable breakthrough, and it was only through a real partnership between the Timorese government and the UN that it was possible. First of all, the member states of ESCAP (when I was Executive Secretary) elected Prime Minister Gusmao to be the chair of the 69th ESCAP Commission. Zero Hunger is the Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon’s campaign, and he launched it at Rio+20 in Brazil in 2012. His campaigns are usually global, but I brought it to Asia-Pacific as the largest number of the poor live in Asia—842 million people are still hungry in the world and 543 million live in Asia. I told the Prime Minister that we needed to launch this as a regional agenda because we have to end hunger and poverty. These problems are avoidable.

The Prime Minister agreed and launched it with other Prime Ministers who were present at the commission session. I also invited my Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson together with five other Under-Secretary-Generals. It was a big event and the Prime Minister was leading the region.

The challenge now at the national level in Timor-Leste will be in the implementation. But I am very encouraged as there is the establishment of a national implementation council (KONSSANTL) consisting of eight relevant government ministries, the UN Resident Coordinator and members of the UN Country Team, co-chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Health. This council will be supported at every local district by the District Food and Nutrition Security Committee that would also include NGOs, the private sector and the church. There will be a permanent technical secretariat with representatives from development partners, donor agencies and WFP, UNICEF and WHO to help with the implementation. The Government intends to allocate 10 percent of its annual budget until 2025 for implementation. This is a huge national effort that has been put in place to achieve the goals of Zero Hunger. The whole national effort will report regularly to both the Prime Minister and me, as the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General.

According to the FAO, this work in Timor-Leste has also set a new global standard for how campaign goals can be realised and how Zero Hunger should be implemented in all regions of the world. It also shows what development partners can achieve working together as a system to support the leadership and the people of Timor-Leste. More importantly, it shows the difference that can happen when there is leadership and political will at the country level.

Timor-Leste, it sounds, has been very progressive, not just with how it spends its money, but also with how it has generated incomes through the country’s natural reserves. What is your take on its petroleum reserves as to how it relates to the day-to-day living conditions of the Timorese?

The best way of describing this petroleum wealth is what the Prime Minister said in his Budget speech. He called it “the wind in our sails.” He said it would have been impossible for Timor-Leste to be what it is today, to have stability, to focus on peace building, state building and Nutrition Security Committee that would also include goals, to focus on peace building, state building and development if they didn’t have this petroleum wealth. They have been very good with the governance of this wealth. They haven’t squandered it. They have been very good with the governance of this wealth. They haven’t squandered it.
fund the strategic development plan, and allocate for infrastructure, education and health. On the other, it has gone into the veteran social protection schemes, and this is where some of the problems exist. As far as the Prime Minister is concerned, he has brought peace because there was violence in 2006. He invested in peace. However, some people were concerned that money used for the veterans is not sustainable and inclusive. They believe the funds should be used much more for the productive sectors. Indeed, it has been. There is even allocation for the Oecusse Special Economic Zone, which is headed by the leader of the Opposition.

This is a small country. The leader of the opposition, the Prime Minister and the former president all feel a shared responsibility for the country. They’ve put away their personal differences for a more collective approach and built in checks and balances. If there’s corruption, I don’t think it’ll be at the top, but it will be because there is leakage somewhere at the lower levels. But I don’t see it as a country that is corrupt.

It sounds like they’ve done a good job in combating corruption. They’ve tried. It’s still a work in progress. There are three leaders who are seen to have a lot of power in the country—Prime Minister Gusmao; Jose Ramos-Horta, the former president; and Mari Alkatiri, the former prime minister and current leader of the opposition. Because of their shared responsibility and the caring of the country, they also provide checks and balances. Of course, they still have major development challenges, and the region should help.

We hear that Prime Minister Gusmao in 2002 said that there were a lot of international donors who had wanted to invest in the country, not in the critical areas like roads or schools but in things like latrines because that’s part of their own development plans. How have Timor-Leste’s experiences been from your perspective? How does the country relate to international aid donors? The Timorese are right in saying that the country should be in the driver’s seat, and that the donors should align their priorities with the country’s strategic development plans. But I think they’ve even gone beyond themselves by being the first chair of the g7+.

The g7+ is a group of 20 conflict-affected fragile countries that came together to have a much stronger voice. They feel the international community was not listening to their concerns. Many challenges are beyond their own control and these countries need a responsive international community interface. They identify five g7+ goals focusing on state building and peace building.

The first one is more inclusive and legitimate politics, because conflict usually starts with a group who feel they have been left out. The politics and the government structures have not involved them. In other words, they are socially and politically excluded. So they put legitimate politics as a goal which few before thought as necessary for development.

The second one looks at security to really ensure that people can live safely and securely. The third is justice. You can’t have security unless people feel that their grievances are being addressed. You have to acknowledge that injustices have been done. You need access to justice though that alone isn’t enough; you also need strong economic and social foundations that can generate decent lives and productive jobs so that people can build a future of dignity, fairness and well-being as they put their past behind them.

Finally, they also looked at the use of revenues. Many conflicts have been fought over natural resource (oil, diamonds, timber, etc.) That’s why it’s called a resource curse. They have looked at revenue generation and how to convert that into the capacity of the state and institutions to deliver quality services and development for their people, with their people.

The experiences shared among these 20 countries is South-South cooperation to move countries out of fragility into greater resilience. Again, Timor-Leste is taking the lead.

Endnotes
1 The United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET, June–October 1999) was a political mission mandated to organise and conduct a popular consultations to ascertain whether the East Timorese people accepted a special autonomy within Indonesia or rejected the proposed special autonomy, leading to East Timor’s separation from Indonesia. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET, October 1999–May 2002), a peacekeeping mission, was established by the Security Council following the rejection of special autonomy by the majority of East Timorose, and assumed administrative authority over East Timor during the transition to independence. Following independence, the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET, May 2002–May 2005); also a peacekeeping mission, was mandated to provide assistance to the newly independent East Timor until all operational responsibilities were fully devolved to the East Timor authorities, and to permit the new nation, now called Timor-Leste, to attain self-sufficiency. After the withdrawal of the peacekeeping mission, a new political mission, the United Nations Office in East Timor (UNOTIL) (May 2005–August 2006), was established to support the development of critical State institutions and the police and provided training in observance of democratic governance and human rights. Finally, the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT, August 2006–December 2012) was established to support the Timorese government in consolidating stability, democratic governance and political dialogue and reconciliation among all Timorese.


8 g7+, www.g7plus.org/new-deal-document/
**CONTEXTUALISING THE NEW NATIONAL NARRATIVE**

**BUILDING ON THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CAPITAL OF SINGAPOREANS**

Singapore commemorates 50 years of nationhood in 2015. What’s next? Tong Yee discusses how understanding and building on the social and emotional capital in our people can direct us towards building a new inclusive narrative for the nation.

Tong Yee is a champion for social emotional learning and ontological coaching, and a highly sought-after speaker. In 2007, he co-founded School of Thought to promote innovation in education and civic learning in both the private and public sectors. He aims to drive social innovation through civic learning in order to nurture the next generation of thought leaders and youth change-makers. School of Thought has since evolved to become The Thought Collective consisting of four other social enterprises: Think Tank Studio, Thinkscape, Food for Thought and Common Ground.

As a social innovator, he has contributed his expertise to the Youth Corps Singapore, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Defence, the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Civil Service College, as well as several NGOs and budding social enterprises in Singapore. He also spearheaded civic initiatives such as the Stand Up for Singapore Movement, the 2065 Civic Movement, and social innovation movements in Australia and London.

He is a council member of the National Youth Council, the Singapore Memory Project, S50 Committee (Youth and Education) and Advisory Committee for Youth Corps Singapore.

Singapore as a nation celebrates 50 years in 2015. What are your hopes for the country? It’s interesting, but my hope stems from fear. In a way, the two are interlinked. Fear is always proportional to desire—the more I want something, the more I fear I won’t get it. When I think about my hope for Singapore, I think about the issues we’ll be struggling with in the next 20 to 30 years—with the ageing crisis, the development of social media, growing bread and butter issues and of course, a new political landscape. I’m concerned about these things.

The question is “When will we grow up as a people?” We have a government that doesn’t have all the solutions anymore. It’s reached a level of complexity where we simply can’t have one player to respond to the people. So if I do have one hope for Singapore, it’s that citizens will begin to see their roles and responsibilities in this nation and that they love the country enough to want to protect it.

You talk about growing up as a people. Is there some signifier that will show this country has grown up? On one level, there must be the presence of a collective voice, and in Singapore, we’re seeing a silent majority who’s learning their role. On another level, we’ll see the people starting to take ownership of the problems that are there, solving these problems their own way. We’ll also start seeing snippets of ground-up movements, though they may not be enough to bring about changes on a systemic level.

How do you find a new Singapore narrative at a point where so many points of view are equally valid? Oftentimes when I’m working with my students, we deal with this idea of conflict and resolution. Each time we talk about a new line of argument, say abortion or taking with this idea of conflict and resolution. Each time we talk about a new line of argument, say abortion or taking

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Could we drive towards “what we have in common”? Yes, but I think that’s where the narrative is missing. We don’t know what we have in common yet. Many lean towards this humanity idea, but I think if we become too humanist, we start coming across as naïve or ridiculous. I wonder if there’s a more strategic way to position this. If we don’t find that common narrative, then of course, every opinion is valid.

But being humanist is what you refer to as social and emotional capital in your set-up, The Thought Collective. How important is it, and how vital is it to this country? I think there are more layers to unpack. I’m currently doing research with youth groups. These youths are basically coming up with platforms to get Singaporeans to give more. We listed every single emotion that prompted people to give. We give out of guilt, pity, sympathy and empathy. We give out of compassion, and we give out of gratitude. After we’d isolated the top ten emotions that caused people to give, we then tracked and looked at how other platforms had tried to persuade people to give. So we looked at all the ad campaigns, the voluntary welfare organisations and non-governmental organisations, and how they got people to give, and we realised that almost every single campaign got people to give through the easiest ones—sympathy, pity and guilt—because these are the fastest triggers.

But there were two things that were completely absent in getting people to give. One was gratitude—how do we get people to give from gratitude? There’s no campaign itself that basically looked at gratitude, and yet, gratitude and love are the spaces where we are most generous.

So going back to emotional capital, I believe there should be a distinction in helping us to be aware of our emotions. With that distinction, we can start looking at something from the coaching field that says emotion is a predisposition to action. All action that we do is predisposed by emotion first—we feel it in our body, then we move.

Singaporeans, because we are human, have to experience emotion. Let’s consider the online environment, one of the environments where strong emotion is present. Many think their convictions come from the head, but they really come from the heart. How do I give them the distinctions so that they understand there’s a rigour and discipline behind their emotions? We work through this group of youths, helping them understand the emotions involved. For them, it’s an amazing eye opener—they’re saying, “I’ve never seen that before!” Suddenly, they see the strategy they can use. If they want a quick, but not easy way, they may use guilt or pity. And many realised that whereas they used to play with guilt in getting people to help the elderly, they now need to work with gratitude in solving long-term problems. If not, guilt is going to disappear very quickly from the volunteer base because you can only be guilty for so long. No one likes being guilty!

Do you think youths in Singapore have sufficient social and emotional capital to lead the country in the future? I don’t see emotional capital as something tied to generations. Instead, it has to do with your humanity as an individual and whether you believe it or not, we have it, we are given the capacity to trust and the capacity to love; we are also given the capacity to have courage. It’s nothing to do with what generation we’re born in or how old we are. The question is, “What is the context we are living in, in terms of what is preventing us from seeing that capacity?”

I think people can alter their belief systems such that they can have access to all these wonderfully powerful emotions. In our video, we talked about apathy and it’s something I’m very concerned about. Apathy indeed protects us from further disappointment and loss, but in order to do this, it also deliberately cuts off other emotions. It’s saying, “I don’t want to emotionally engage, I want to withdraw and shut off one emotion.” Brené Brown in TED talks about this. She’s one of the leaders in the US on building emotional capital. She says sometimes people turn off one emotion. So for example, we turn off fear or we turn off sadness. Now, the emotional system doesn’t work that way. Instead, when we turn off one emotion, we turn off the others at one shot. If we can’t experience fear, we can’t experience joy either. No one can experience joy, happiness, gratitude, but not experience sadness. So how do we bring discipline to managing our emotions so that we don’t get crippled by fear, or live in fear permanently? Apathy is what most youths use to deal with that.

What we learn about emotion primarily is it’s always a response. It gives information about what’s going on for us. For example, a man touches my wife and immediately, I feel anger. It’s possible that the same thing happens and I feel nothing. Now what is going on with me that I’m not feeling angry? Anger is always a reflection of what your standards are. This is what I believe I deserve and I’m not getting it.

Let’s look at this in the context of Singapore. If people are getting angry, that’s one thing. But there’s another conversation behind that anger, and the conversation concerns what we believe we deserve, and that is a far more valuable conversation. All emotions reveal a more powerful conversation we can have. Anger in itself is not wrong or right. It’s mainly a reaction to where our beliefs and values lie. And the conversation therefore is about those particular values.

In Singapore right now, this whole sense of entitlement is tied to the understanding of what we believe we deserve and the principles that will help us understand that.

Do youths have the capacity to begin having that emotional capital? My answer is because they are human, they do. But my question is what is the story we’re living that prevents us from tapping on that? So every one of us is living a story—social workers are living a story, our students are living a story. Sadly, one thing I do know that’s crippling that emotional capital in Singapore is this story about “grades.”

Grades? Can you elaborate on that? It has to do with identity. Our identity is material and it’s based on what I have, not who I am—I have to obtain this grade or this scholarship. This is very much in line with materialism. Therefore, I get very desperate when I don’t get this scholarship; my life is going to end.

There is a simple model we deal with in coaching fields. We talk about “be,” “do” and “have.” In a relationship like this, you’ll see people work in this particular way. They might say, “I have a Ferrari, therefore I am successful.” Or “I have a PhD, therefore I am complete.” So, when you take away what they have, they’re no longer what they are, and that’s deeply threatening for them.

So for the longest time, we in Singapore were focusing on what we had for our growth. Look at our airport and all the things that we have. Over the years, because of this, some missing conversations are “Who are we?” and we’ve always struggled with that. But it doesn’t matter as long as we have this and that. Unfortunately, the day will come when what we have is no longer what is valued. Things will start breaking down, we’ll get into all these insecurities and we’ll become angry with ourselves.

Ideally, people should be operating this way—because I am, therefore I do and that’s why I will have. And even if you took what I have away from me, I still am. At the moment, our narratives are tied to two things—what we do and what we have. It isn’t tied to who we are.

In the past, there was a lot of fear in our response. These days, some people, particularly those in the online community, are
responding with a lot of anger. Returning to what you had said about anger earlier, how do you see this?

There is a model used by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) to frame all human emotions. On the x-axis, you have ‘distant’ on one end and ‘close’ on the other. On the y-axis, it is ‘tense’ on one extreme, and ‘relaxed’ on the other. In the four quadrants are ‘fear,’ ‘anger,’ ‘sadness,’ and ‘tenderness.’ Fear, for example, is always born out of two main elements—tension and distance. In every horror movie, the classic scene is one with a man pulling out a knife. The audience knows it, but the characters in the scene don’t know about it. A blonde walks in and takes a shower alone. This tension plus distance creates fear. If there wasn’t a science behind fear, you couldn’t possibly get any two people in the cinema feeling fear at the same time.

In Singapore, we’ve lived in fear, but in recent times, it’s shifted to anger. What is the main difference between these?

Singapore has always been in tension primarily because of our geographical vulnerabilities, and we know that. In the early years, before social media, people were always distant from the government. When there was tension and distance, there was fear. Social media’s simply shifted us to the quadrant, ‘anger.’ Hence, the whole narrative will also begin to shift.

When we look at social and emotional capital, we are actually dealing with two axes. Ideally, we want to get people to the space where tension is reduced. So how do we release the tension and start getting people more relaxed?

Geographically, we can’t change things. Singapore is what it is. But what we learn in terms of human behaviour is that tension is 100 percent self-generated, and stress is 100 percent self-created. We can have all the stress in the world coming to us and it’s still possible to manage the tension. So in terms of self-mastery, how does one look at the population and bring tension down in this space? Now, this is where we talk about emotional capital. I believe understanding this and reducing the tension is how we’re going to survive the 21st century or the next 50 years or so.

The question is how do we increase the possibility of us considering new narratives as a country. Let’s say I’m in a marriage and it’s going very badly. My narrative about my husband is that he’s a cheat. Now, once the narrative is locked in, I can’t consider new possibilities. The question then is how do I hold a new narrative for my marriage such that I can begin to see new possibilities? Similarly, Singapore itself is tied to new narratives. The third-to-first quadrant narrative was: ‘a powerful means to bring conviction and reality to our learning. Looking at these distinctions between emotion and mood, I can speak to you with a PowerPoint slide, or I can get you to experience it yourself. So what we’re doing in Thinkscape is bringing participants on learning trails; we want them to walk into the territory where they can literally feel the mood and witness things with their own eyes. It’s experimental and it’s not in the real world. For example, you walk into Block 15, Lorong 7 in Toa Payoh and that for me is the real context. You walk in and you already feel the mood. It’s not just the dim lighting there; there’s the feel of the space. It’s an area with one-room rental flats. It’s fascinating because you can walk into all the one-room rental housing estates in Singapore and find that they all feel different. You’d think it’s all one-room demographics there, but it’s not!

Another area to look at is our emotional mastery. This is basically our capacity to increase the possibility of considering new narratives. It’s bringing us to the quadrant, “anger.” Hence, the whole narrative will also begin to shift.

With Thinkscape, The Thought Collective as an organisation is starting to get a sense of what it is that we are doing. In the past, I was the one leading all this change, but now as an organisation, we’re starting to understand. So, when we are building a trail for example, we now have more information in terms of what distinctions to show our youths and the distinctions to be presented to the adults, such that they’re able to see. What do I mean by distinctions? When I point to lilac, lavender and purple, my daughter calls all three ‘purple.’ I point a zebra to my daughter and she calls it a ‘horse.’ Human beings, regardless of age, are exactly the same: If we don’t hold distinctions, we cannot see.

The idea then is how do I deliver these distinctions? How do we create trail experiences that are not so much driven by points of interest or heritage but rather a curation of experiences that reveal the most salient issues of our society? I can put it in modules or I can bring it into your community. In all educational cases, when you really experience it in real life, it’s a far more powerful experience.

For the first four years of Thinkscape’s growth, we built a strong curriculum, a strong knowledge of experience design, but we didn’t have the ideal business model behind it. The problem with the business model is very much a demand-side issue. I believe that we have the supply side well taken care of, with compelling new trail experiences emerging every few months and a pool of well-trained facilitators that can scale learning both up or down depending on audience. But on the demand side, nobody really wakes up one morning and says, “Ooh... I am really in the mood for a trail experience today.” And although it may be desirable, nobody even wakes up and says, “I really want to gain insight and empathise with someone else today.” Unlike many of our other social ventures, Thinkscape does not offer a product that already benefits from a strong market habit. Thankfully, we have figured out that Thinkscape really isn’t a typical business-to-consumer (B2C) business like the rest of our work but rather a business-to-business (B2B) outfit. I know this seems obvious as you read it, but sometimes when we get caught in our own blind spots, we just can’t see everything.

Having said that, the very encouraging trend is that we are gaining a strong following of institutions and companies, like the Centre for Livable Cities and even Ben & Jerry’s, that wish to engage their staff or own members, and have them educated in these issues and contexts. The feedback has been great, and honestly, from what I hear, I believe this is something that Singapore should really invest in as a community, building empathy through experiential learning. The next step will be to extend this offering to the broader public in a compelling way.
The critical challenges in today’s world call for nothing short of a collective effort across business, government and civil society. Ann Florini delves into the complexities beneath tri-sector collaborations and explains why rigorous leadership training for cross-sector work is needed.

Professor Ann Florini is Professor of Public Policy at the School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU) and Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. Her research focuses on new approaches to global governance, including the roles of civil society and the private sector in addressing global issues.

Florini was Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace from 1997 to 2002, and she served as research director of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Project on World Security from 1996 to 1997. From 1987 to 1992, she was also the Senior Researcher at the Center for International and Strategic Affairs at UCLA. She worked for the United Nations Association of the USA from 1983 to 1987, and created and directed the Project on Multilateral Issues and Institutions.

She is the author of four books including the highly acclaimed The Coming Democracy: New Rules for Running a New World.

"So you tend to get collaboration, especially between businesses and NGOs (non-governmental organisations), or governments and NGOs, after something has blown up and there’s a crisis that forces people to realise that if they don’t reach out beyond their own organisations, bad stuff is going to happen."

Most people would agree that cross-sector collaboration is a great idea. Yet, very few have actually invested resources into this area. Why is this so?

The biggest reason why it’s been slow to get cross-sector collaboration moving on a large scale is simply organisational inertia. Organisations set up structures and processes that take on a life on their own. It’s never in anybody’s KPI (key performance indicator) or performance evaluation to have reached out to other organisations. So you tend to get collaboration, especially between businesses and NGOs (non-governmental organisations), or governments and NGOs, after something has blown up and there’s a crisis that forces people to realise that if they don’t reach out beyond their own organisations, bad stuff is going to happen. It’s not unheard of but it’s fairly rare for people to be more proactive, more far-seeing in thinking about things. It’s not the natural thing for an organisation to do.

Are there good examples of organisations which have looked into cross-sector collaboration in a proactive manner, and not because of a crisis?

The numbers are growing. For example, Unilever reached out to Oxfam a few years ago for help with understanding its impact on poverty. Zurich Insurance started a collaboration last year on community flood prevention measures with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

But most leaders haven’t been trained to think of big societal problems as business opportunities for potentially profitable collaboration. Corporate CEOs are not necessarily trained and socialised to think about what the responsibility of business is for its impacts beyond the financial bottom line. If you look at how business schools train people who are going into the business community, you’ll see that they train them not to look at the issues, except as risks to be managed. Yet, as for opportunities and responsibilities to be addressed, it’s fairly rare for a business school to make that part of the mentality of its graduates.

Is the training in business schools changing?

Business schools are going through an identity crisis right now. What are they for? They’re not professional accredited in the way that a medical or law school is. You can do very well in business never having gone to business school.

The standard curriculum has been built up around certain assumptions about what it is you need to know in order to work in business. It’s not clear that the curriculum completely corresponds to what actually leads to success. A curriculum that recognises that you’re going to face wicked problems that can blow up in your face would need to train students to do stakeholder management of a whole new kind. Now, you don’t see a lot of those courses in business schools. There are a few exceptions, such as one course on tri-sector collaboration at Harvard Business School, with individual faculty trying to figure out how you do this broader scope, but for the most part, it gets subsumed into the optional courses in corporate ethics, which are much more narrowly defined.

What is starting to happen is the conversation about a world in which the sectors are blurring—what business, government and civil society are individually responsible for. There is at least the beginnings of a discussion about whether this is the right curriculum. But things like curricula are very embedded. You have to get accredited according to certain criteria. The faculty has to publish in certain journals that have certain expectations about
what constitutes appropriate research areas. So there’s a lot of inertia in the system about how we train people.

Greenpeace as a civil society organisation is well known for having a strong anti-corporate advocacy angle to their work. Yet they have chosen to partner Asia Pulp & Paper, the world’s third largest paper company, to improve their environmental performance. What does this mean for cross-sector collaboration? How should non-profits in particular understand these developments?

Many advocacy organisations are becoming more concerned with concrete problem-solving, and the Greenpeace example is a really interesting one. When Kumi Naidoo took over at Greenpeace, it was a real shift for the organisation in the type of questions it was looking at. Rather than looking at environment as though it was some kind of a stand-alone issue, it has become much more incorporated in a broader social justice, civil society activism kind of framework, recognising that the poor suffer most from environmental degradation. And rather than only engaging in public campaigns, Greenpeace and others are increasingly working with businesses to bring about the needed changes in practices. What they’re doing in Indonesia isn’t just with Asia Pulp and Paper. They started with Golden Agri-Resources, which came to the conclusion that Greenpeace was in some significant ways, right about the need for change.

There are a number of other NGOs that do the same thing. The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) in the US specialises in working closely with corporations to bring about change from the inside and they’re been wildly successful at it. And there’s a wide range of potential NGO partners for businesses. You can classify NGOs into two general categories—the service providers and the advocacy organisations. It is extremely common for service providers to shift towards advocacy over time because they begin to realise that the services to be provided are the result of systemic problems that have to be dealt with on a large scale. This then requires them to be advocates.

So it sounds like companies are now engaging non-profits rather than have them do open space protest, preferring to meet in the boardroom to pre-empt some of that dissent or malcontent. But how easy is it for companies to engage NGOs? Companies respond to NGOs on several grounds. Mostly, they have a vague sense that they are supposed to be engaging stakeholders. But figuring out which one to engage is extremely hard to do. An NGO can be one individual malcontent who’s managed to get himself legally recognised as an organisation with millions of people. It can be an organisation that is out to make trouble, or it can be one that actively wants to help businesses transform themselves. There’s no way to know without talking to them, and there’s no short cut to that process, unfortunately. So this collaboration theme we’re talking about fundamentally depends on building up trust and knowledge of each other.

And yet, we’re starting to see more of the tri-sector collaborations taking place as business organisations realise they can no longer address the issues on their own. Is this becoming a choice of last resort, or is it a new normal? I think tri-sector collaboration is a rich phenomenon, and it’s going to be here for a while. But essentially, we’re moving away from a world where you could see business, government and civil society organisations playing fundamentally different roles. The role of business was to create wealth for society, provide goods and services, and employ people and pay taxes; corporate citizenship was about a bit of charity on the side. The government’s role was to make sure it regulated business such that there were few harmful externalities from business operations and there was a just legal system that put everybody on an equal playing field. Obviously, things never operated quite that cleanly, but these were the purposes of the different types of organisations. The role of NGOs was advocacy to businesses and the government sector, plus allowing people to organise themselves and to carry on whatever they wanted to do that wasn’t business and government.

They were very clear straightforward roles, but that’s not what it is anymore. It’s all blurring together. This is having two kinds of impact. One shows up in rule-making in a globalised world where the economy consists of global interaction while regulatory structures are still almost entirely national. Standards that cross borders by definition can’t be set by a single government, and there is no world government with regulatory authority, so international rule-making often has space for a wider variety of actors on anything from product standards to principles for responsible investment to codes of conduct on labour practices in the apparel industry.

So a lot of rule-making is now happening as tri-sector collaboration, often going by other names such as multi-stakeholder initiatives or public-private partnerships. In many cases, the resulting standards are voluntary, in the sense that no government will put you in prison for failure to comply, but the pressures to abide by the standards are sufficiently strong that the regulatory effect is significant. If you have a situation where the world’s leading corporations in a given area are the ones who are making the regulatory standards globally for their businesses, and everyone is going along with them (because you have to have some sort of standards), well, you have a governmental function without governmental accountability mechanisms.

Civil society gets involved because they are trying to create some kind of accountability system, but who are they and who are they accountable to? Essentially, we’re inventing ad-hoc ways of governing problems that cross national borders. We are leaving behind a world run almost entirely by national governments and developing a messy, rich, complex set of governing systems that involve all organisations from all three sectors. No one knows where this is leading.

The other kind of collaboration you see tends to be more issue- or problem-focused. Companies are having to re-think their core business operations in terms of how they contribute to addressing larger problems than the immediate products and services they provide: Coca-Cola has to care about water stress, Nestle has to care about the living situations of cocoa farmers, etc. So you have specific projects where you have business, government and civil society actors working together. You see more of that particularly on issues related to environmental sustainability where, for reasons I don’t fully understand, there seems to be more of this than in other areas. This is where the EDF has been really active, bringing together coalitions of NGOs and businesses to work with governments on the kinds of standards to set, and the kinds of problems that need to be solved.

You mentioned how tri-sector collaboration is a bridge to something we can yet tell. What would the “unknown” be? How could it evolve?

The easy speculation will be to ask, “Is this leading to something like a world government where you go back to the normal division of the government, but with a government that corresponds on the global scale of business?” I do not think that will ever happen in any formally-constituted way because the scale is too large for a single unified government. Human institutions couldn’t function well on that large a scale.

What we’re increasingly going to see is what are currently called social enterprises or benefit corporations—a business sector that has a model that is not simply focused on financial value creation. The legal models that we currently have for businesses in many parts of the world pretty much require them to focus primarily on creating financial value. Why? There’s no need for that to be the sole focus.
So now in the U.S., more than half of the fifty states have passed legislation that allow companies to incorporate themselves as benefit corporations, which legally allows them to try to maximise other values in addition to financial profits. They still have to end up being profitable. They still have investors and they may have shareholders, but they are also able to include in their articles of incorporation that they aim to accomplish other goals beyond financial profits. This is significant in the litigious United States because benefit corporations can’t then be sued by shareholders for doing things that may detract from short-term financial profit maximisation in favour of other goals. There are similar laws in the UK and spreading elsewhere, and we are going to see more of that kind of model.

We are also seeing many organisations that started off as NGOs moving into the for-profit space on the other side. I think this side of things is much more familiar to the public than the other side. The other way transparency gets used a lot is as a regulatory mechanism. You see figures about how half of the trades on some stock markets are now hyper-speed trades. These are not investors looking for companies that have value over time. They are investors looking at making profit in the next few seconds or milliseconds. It’s nothing but gambling. Whose interest does it serve? It’s hard to see how it is in the interest of societies to have that be the model for business. I think the pressures are going to build to change the legal structures and the socially acceptable behaviour will be built into new ways of thinking about what the role of business is.

Could you elaborate on the role of transparency in tri-sector collaborations?

Transparency plays two roles that are really relevant to tri-sector collaborations. The first is this question of accountability. If you’re concerned that a business is behaving in a way that isn’t good for society, and that business is part of a collaboration, getting it to share information with government and with civil society is a way of holding it in part accountable. You can imagine structures where a business might say I’m willing to give you, my trusted NGO, this information, but I’m not willing for you to make it public. Then it becomes the question about the credibility of the NGO in the eyes of our society.

The other way transparency gets used a lot is as a regulatory tool. Here, the classic example is a regulation that China has just passed, on environmentally toxic discharges. This has become the standard way which governments regulate toxic releases—they don’t tell corporations that they can’t release the stuff, they just make them report publicly on what they’re releasing.

This is something that started in the US in the mid-1980s, in response to Union Carbide’s disastrous emissions in Bhopal, in a law called the Community Right-to-Know Act. The government created the regulatory act for business, but it was then that the civil society organisations picked up the information and ran with it. The media didn’t pick this up nearly as much as the NGOs, who put this information in a user-friendly form on the Internet.

All the OECD countries now have such disclosure-based regulations on toxics. Indonesia has a related model that consists of colour-coding factories, in terms of their environmental compliance. Mexico has a related model and China’s just passed its regulation this year on requiring the disclosure of this kind of environmental information.

Requiring disclosure is something the government does. Businesses are actually the ones who have to aggregate the information and put it out. This often forces them to think about wasteful practices they have not thought about before. They may improve their practices because they realise they’re wasting money by letting their stuff go down the drainpipe. The civil society organisations are the ones who then put the information in a form that has a public impact that puts pressure on the businesses.

Only if all parts of that cycle are operating do you actually get significant change. If they are all operating, you get transformational change in business practices, but the regulations have to be designed right.

So would you say it’s a self-reinforcing mechanism?

It can be and you don’t necessarily get a race to the top where everybody wants to be the great performer. Often, it’s just that nobody wants to be at the bottom! So you get a steady ratcheting up of compliance because nobody wants to be the one that the NGOs target as the worst performer in this area. But it often doesn’t work if you don’t have the NGOs in place, if the businesses cheat and the government doesn’t hold them accountable for it. But when it does work, it’s very powerful.

Are there prominent examples of tri-sector collaborations that you could say contribute to best practice and could be held up as examples to others?

There are certainly examples of people who are trying hard to do some really good things. But I object immediately to the term “best practice” because essentially what we’re talking about are models of both economic and political innovation that are coming together. Those are inherently context-dependent. So rather than say they are best practices, you can say there are certain principles that you want to pay attention to.

There are two reasons to do tri-sector collaboration. The first is to deal with some negative externality that is imposed by current practices. An example is pollution or human trafficking in labour forces, or nasty side effects of business operations that are not intentional by businesses, and they’d be perfectly happy to avoid these side effects if they could figure out how. Tri-sector collaboration here makes a lot of sense because you bring in the NGOs who have expertise on what the effects actually are.

The other area where you need tri-sector collaboration is in the provision of public goods, things that market forces will never provide on their own. What constitutes a public good as opposed to something the market can provide is something that is very contested. Water is a...
great example. Should water be considered a public good or a private good? It's certainly a private good in the technical sense, in that you can package it, contain it, sell it to another person and they use it up. It's a public good in that your society collapses if you don't have it and that the systems needed to provide are usually beyond the capacity of market forces to create. It also has a harsh reality: if people are too poor to afford what pure market forces provide in the absence of any other provision, they will die, and limiting demand by death is not a socially acceptable approach.

It's the same with education. At what level is it public responsibility to provide educational services, and therefore you want the government to tax people to make them contribute to the provision of that good? And to what degree is it something that people will benefit from personally and therefore they should pay for it themselves?

It's in all those areas, where it’s not clear who's responsible for what, that you have the most potential for tri-sector collaboration for doing something really significant. This is because you can essentially have what some people refer to as “different colours of money.” To some degree, it may be a pure public good, and government and charity should put some funding in. But you also have businesses doing some aspects that are profitable, and having them provide that much of the good means that governments and charities don’t have to put in as much.

Tri-sector collaboration requires some kind of framework for accountability and governance in order for some degree of trust to be built around the stakeholders. In some countries however, these may not exist or may be fractured in the way it operates. How can tri-sector collaboration operate without that bedrock of understanding?

It can't, and these efforts at collaboration frequently fail because the trust or the capacity isn't built up, or the initial clarity on whether there were complementary goals going in, was never established in the first place. But there are processes that can be used to build up the relationships and trust, such as scenario development, particularly the transformational scenarios approach of Adam Kahane. There’s a whole series of methodologies that you can use to bring people together. Business schools and consultancies do these things all the time. How do you facilitate bringing people together in a conversation? This is the stage before you can make a tri-sector collaboration happen.

Or a way of aligning their different objectives and finding common ground?

They may never have common ground; they just have to not have opposed ground. They have to be able to remind one another they are not acting in opposition to each other. I can give you one example of a two-sector, not a tri-sector one. The EDF went to McDonald’s many years ago and this was in the days when McDonald’s was using mostly styrofoam containers. EDF worked with McDonald’s to persuade them that firstly, this was a really bad thing to do for the environment, and secondly, it wasn't really necessarily in McDonald’s interest. It took a long time to develop the relationship that would make it possible for McDonald’s to make a really significant change in its business operations, but it did! You’re seeing more and more of these kinds of relationships building up.

Could you tell us more about the Master of Tri-Sector Collaboration programme launched by Singapore Management University (SMU) this year?

The reason that SMU has so enthusiastically set up the Master of Tri-Sector Collaboration programme is in part because nobody else is doing it, even though it is so clearly needed. We spent a lot of time looking around the world trying to find models of something that we could draw on, and we found very little. We’re not necessarily talking about best practices because I think the experience in Asia would be so different, but just something to start with. We found few people who have given thought to how you could bridge these different sectors and what skills people need in order to do so. We have come up with a curriculum that to us makes sense.

Although we are still very new, I have been struck by the great interest in this programme, both in Singapore and overseas. People all over the world look at our brochure and say, “Yes, this is needed, this is important.” So I’m hoping that SMU is going to be in the position of starting something that is a broader movement towards a deeper engagement about how we train people, how we educate people to successfully work across sectors. In addition, I hope that we can become the hub of a global movement that is facilitating this kind of successful collaboration that the world so badly needs.

Endnotes
1. Kumi Naidoo, a South African, fled his country as a teenager because of his involvement with the African National Congress. During his exile in England, he earned his doctorate in Political Sociology at Oxford. His earlier activist background together with his academic and intellectual credentials make him a very logical interlocutor.
ARE WE REALLY MAKING A DIFFERENCE?
LESSONS FROM NESTA’S INNOVATION LAB

Are public and social innovation labs achieving impact? Philip Colligan from Nesta’s Innovation Lab looks at how we can answer the most important question of whether labs are indeed making a difference to societies.

Philip Colligan is the Deputy Chief Executive of Nesta and an Executive Director of Nesta’s Innovation Lab, which he co-leads with Helen Gauldum. In Nesta, he has built a portfolio of high impact programmes supporting innovations across government, public service reform, healthcare, neighbourhoods, digital technologies, volunteering and philanthropy. He also serves as Government Advisor on Social Innovation.

Public and social innovation labs have become very fashionable. The idea of applying experimental methodologies to social issues may have its roots in the reformers of the 19th century, but it’s only relatively recently that we’ve seen the explosion of new institutions with the explicit goal of applying structured innovation methods to solve social problems.

A systematic review is overdue, but there is already a rapid expanding field. In June 2014, Nesta and Bloomberg Philanthropies published i-teams, the first proper global survey of public innovation labs set up by national and city governments around the world. We profiled 20 of the most established, but we spoke to dozens more city and national governments that were in the process of setting up their own i-teams.

There’s a similar story to be told for social design labs in non-governmental organisations, universities and foundations and we’re starting to see big consulting firms and corporate brands joining in with their own variants. One sign of the growing maturity of the field is the increase in volume, quality and formality of the networks that bring together lab practitioners around the world.

I’ve attended a few of these gatherings over the years and benefited from the openness with which colleagues have shared their practices, methods and insights.

Stay long enough at any of these meetings and conversations are inevitably drawn to one question: Are we really making a difference?

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

This question of whether we’re “making a difference” isn’t peculiar to public and social innovation labs. Impact is the hottest topic on the agenda of any organisation concerned with social change. While non-profits and governments don’t have the simplicity of the financial bottom line which commercial businesses use to judge success, there is at least a wealth of research and models that can help them make sense of their impact.

For those of us engaged in the practice of supporting public and social innovation, there is less to draw on. Ultimately, we will be judged on whether our work changed real outcomes that matter for real people. But that is a long-term game and most of the prototypes we develop today will take many years to reach a scale that would allow us to claim anything approaching meaningful impact.

We deal with the future, often creating or supporting very early stage innovations that evolve, iterate and pivot in unexpected directions. How do you set targets when the goals are likely to change? We also know that innovations are cumulative and combinatorial, making it all but impossible to predict now which elements of the ideas we are nurturing will go on to make the biggest difference.

One sign of the growing maturity of the field is the majority of lab practitioners might be self-aware enough to recognise we are modest actors in complex systems, but still we don’t hesitate to reach for wholesale systemic change. Disrupting established systems takes time and sustained effort from many actors. Even if you could attribute that level of change to the actions of an individual institution, it would be self-defeating to try to claim the credit.

For all these reasons and more, traditional measures of impact just don’t work all that well for public and social innovation labs. That might make it difficult for lab practitioners to set targets and demonstrate how we’re making progress against them, but acknowledging the difficulty doesn’t make the challenge go away. However our activities are funded, there will be plenty of people that rightly want to hold us to account. Asking them to wait a couple of decades or saying it’s all a bit too complicated doesn’t work.

In 2013, Nesta quietly published a paper on our website titled “Performance management and reporting.” At the time of writing this essay, it remains one of our least read or shared documents (at least externally) and yet it was in that paper we first shared our thinking about this balance between the need for accountability now and the uncertainty inherent with trying to create the future. I want to use this essay to explain how we’ve developed our thinking and practice since we published that paper, but first I should explain who we are and what we do.

ABOUT NESTA AND THE INNOVATION LAB

Nesta is the UK’s innovation foundation. We were set up 16 years ago with a simple mission: to support innovation for the public good. We pursue that mission through a combination of research, investments, networks, grant funding and practical support to innovators.

The Nesta Innovation Lab was established in 2009 with a mandate to develop and test radical new solutions to some of the most pressing social challenges. Over the past five years, we’ve run something like 70 programmes on topics from environmental sustainability to opportunities for young people, community responses to the ageing society to open data, digital arts and media to public services reform. We’ve backed over 750 innovations and we’ve worked with everyone from front-line public servants and early stage social entrepreneurs to large non-profits, government departments and commercial businesses.

We’ve evolved and developed our methods over that five-year history, learning from others’ experience as much as we have from our own successes and failures. We now organise our interventions around three distinct approaches: grant funds, challenge prizes and practical programmes, each of which has its own practices and rhythms.

Grant funds

Our grant funds are designed to support a portfolio of innovations that work towards a common goal. A good example is the Digital Makers Fund. It backs innovations that get young people involved in activities like coding. It is part of a much wider effort by Nesta and a group of partners who are committed to transforming the way that the UK prepares young people to live in a digital society and economy.

We looked for organisations that had practical ideas for getting many more young people involved in digital making, worked with a big pool of potential grantees to develop their ideas and then selected a small number of the most promising for financial and practical support. One of the initiatives we’ve backed through the Digital
Makers Fund is Code Club, a network of after-school coding clubs for children aged nine to 11, run by volunteers. With support from Nesta and our partners, Code Club is already in over 2,000 primary schools across the UK and we’re working with the team to develop a plan to reach many more young people over the next few years.

Over two years of the Digital Makers Fund, we’ve made awards to 14 organisations like Code Club totalling £20,000. Financing—whether early stage or to fuel growth—is an important part of our grant funds, but it’s never just about the money. We also work with our innovators to provide them with practical support. For Code Club, we matched the team with one of our experienced business mentors who helped them restructure the business and strengthen their governance. We also introduced them to policymakers and other funders, worked with them to improve their evidence of impact and we’re helping develop the plan for the next stage of growth.

It’s a similar story across all of our grant funds, although to be honest, it wasn’t always the case. It’s only as we’ve developed our own experience, confidence and networks that we’ve been able to offer an offer of non-financial support that we know adds value.

Challenge prizes

Through prizes, we use competition to stimulate novel solutions to social and environmental challenges.

Nesta has a long history with challenge prizes. In 2008 (before we even had an Innovation Lab) we launched the Centre for Challenge Prizes as part of the Innovation Lab. A current example is the Open Data Challenge series, a partnership with the UK’s Open Data Institute that aims to mobilise entrepreneurs to address specific problems in fields like crime, education and affordable housing by using public data to create services that are useful for citizens.

Challenges start with intensive research and engagement to ensure that the problem is clearly articulated and responds to a real need. Once the challenge opens, teams respond with their ideas and the most promising are invited to a “creation weekend” where the three best are selected for a small grant, incubation support and the chance to compete for a £40,000 prize. The winner of the education challenge in the Open Data challenge series was Skills Route, an online tool that uses open data on the post-16 performance of schools and colleges in different subjects to give young people their personalised expected grades at different higher education institutions.

What we’ve tried to do with our approach to challenge prizes is adapt the most proven practices for open innovation to tackle social problems. It’s a work in progress, but last year we published a practitioners’ guide to challenge prizes to share what we’ve learnt.

Innovation programmes

The third approach is innovation programmes, where we bring together cohorts of similar organisations and support them through a structured process to develop and implement new products or services.

People Powered Health was a programme that focused on developing new approaches to helping people manage long-term health conditions. Over 18 months, we worked with teams of doctors, hospitals, community organisations and patients in six locations to design and implement new approaches that actively engaged patients, communities and social networks in managing conditions like diabetes.

The solutions ranged from social prescribing to group consultations and peer support networks, all simple methods for mobilising people’s networks and wider community resources to support better health. Not a replacement for drugs and clinical interventions, but an important complement to them. Our research showed that if these interventions were adopted at scale, it would save the health economy in England £4.4 billion each year.

In programmes like People Powered Health, we work directly with front-line public services or non-profits, using methods like ethnography and prototyping at the early stages of innovation and supporting them to develop business models and scaling strategies in the later stages. A big part of that is developing innovation skills, and for the participants (and the Innovation Lab team), it’s a process of learning by doing.

Systemic change and combinations of method

Much of the Innovation Lab’s earlier work suffered from being too narrowly drawn and failing to engage with the wider systems in which we were trying to bring about change. That’s not to say it was bad work, but we’ve learnt that we can achieve much more when we think about the wider system, combining a range of methods and mobilising coalitions towards a bigger goal.

The People Powered Health programme always had the goal of trying to get beyond a series of interesting prototypes to influence wider systems change. Alongside the work with front line health practitioners and patients, we analysed the systemic challenges—like finance, technology, evidence and workforce development—and engaged key policymakers in those efforts. We also worked with partners to create the Coalition for Collaborative Care, which brings together mainstream health organisations to maintain momentum and advocate for policy changes.

The Digital Makers Fund is another example where we have used combinations of interventions to achieve a wider change. It started the Next Gen Skills Review, which made the case for a change to the national curriculum to include computer science. The argument was that kids should learn how to “create” the digital world, not just “consume” what was on offer. Initially an economic argument, the UK creative industries faced a huge skills gap in a massively competitive global market, it quickly evolved into an argument that was as much about personal agency. Young people need to understand the basics of computer science in order to successfully navigate a world that is increasingly shaped by it.

The Next Gen Skills campaign quickly gained momentum and it wasn’t long before the Secretary of State announced the change in the school curriculum that we and others had campaigned for. Getting policy changed was a big achievement, but we knew that it wasn’t sufficient. In order to realise our vision, we knew we would need a wave of innovators to create the products and services that would get kids involved and a wave of helping teachers, parents and children to make sense of what was on offer. That’s why we launched the Digital Makers Fund and the Make Things Do Stuff campaign and website.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING OUR IMPACT

At the heart of all of our practice at Nesta is a simple model of innovation. The stages of innovation model, or spiral, describes seven distinct phases of innovation from the opportunities and challenges that provide the prompts for innovation, through the generation and testing of ideas, to making the case, implementation and scaling and ultimately changing systems. (See Figure 1).

Of course, innovation doesn’t follow a linear process and the purpose of the model isn’t to suggest that it should. What it does is help us think about what stage of innovation we’re currently in and provide a prompt for checking that we’re using the right approaches and methods. Ultimately we want to see progression of innovations through the stages, but more often than not, that journey involves loops back to earlier stages as ideas evolve and iterate.

Nesta’s model of the stages of innovation also provides the framework against which we now think about the impact we want to have and whether we’re on track.

Two years ago, we introduced the concept of Theory of Change into the Innovation Lab and since then all of our interventions use that as a way of articulating their logic and assumptions clearly. Although it seems obvious now, it was a significant moment in the development of our craft. Just the process of articulating what you’re doing and why within a structure that forces you to confront your assumptions and the gaps in your logic is a powerful thing.
Like all public and social innovation labs, the Nesta• which we monitor progress. What we’ve developed is a• about how we want to achieve impact and the goals• difference to our practice, we still needed more clarity• debating and challenging the logic behind their work. It’s always a collaborative effort and it’s not unusual• theories of change to check whether they still stand up. It’s not a one-off exercise and we regularly revisit our• labs apart from traditional policy teams and think tanks who work through the medium of words, not actions. The downside is that often we’re so focused on getting things done that we neglect the value of the knowledge we generate in the course of our work. We’ve had to work pretty hard to counter that tendency. At the start of any intervention, we undertake a scan of what innovation is happening in the UK and internationally that we can learn from. In the past, we kept that information in house—a big mistake and a huge loss of value. Now we always publish it. Sometimes that takes the form of reports,8 more often we create what we call “living maps” that catalogue hundreds of examples of innovations we’ve been inspired by. In the past year, we’ve launched “living maps” for innovations in ageing,9 jobs10 and parks.11 We also publish any background research that we use in designing our interventions.12 Once we’re into the practical phase of our work we are constantly generating insights and lessons that we know are useful to others. We publish feedback of open calls for proposals and selection processes, which is how we find ideas and decide which ones to support13 and members of the team use Nesta’s blog pages to share what they’re learning in real time. That practice of sharing real time learning is a really important part of the craft of all lab practitioners, but we also need to formalise learning and make it accessible and useful to innovators. For People Powered Health for example, we published a suite of documents including practitioners’ guides, a business case and plan for systemic change, all of which had input from practitioners and policymakers to ensure they would be genuinely useful. We also used videos and animations to make output more engaging.

Our experience of commissioning external evaluations is mixed, but where we do have a formal evaluation we will always publish it. The truth is that we have found it more useful, cost-effective and quicker to publish our own honest accounts of what we’re learning.14 And finally and perhaps most important of all, we are increasingly supporting innovations to build their evidence of impact through trials and we are committed to publishing the results of those so that others can learn from their practice. That’s a lot of activity, but how do we measure the impact? The answer is “with some difficulty.”15 We monitor numbers like readership, downloads and so on, but that is just reach and doesn’t tell us anything about impact. We try to measure how our knowledge has influenced others’ practice and one example of that is the annual Digital Culture survey of a thousand cultural and arts organisations that we use to assess the impact of knowledge generated through our Digital Arts R&D Fund.16

Less formal tracking matters too. We were delighted that when the People Powered Health and Well-being coalition was launched in Scotland, they told us that they were inspired by our work and were drawing on the lessons from it. Creating novel ideas A lot of our practical work is about generating and testing new solutions. The challenge is how to assess how well we’re doing when most new ideas take a very long time to show whether they’re successful. We wouldn’t claim we’ve got this right yet, but we’re using measures like the diversity and volume of solutions generated, novelty and adaptation of previous innovations, plausibility of theories of change and results from initial prototyping. There’s no getting away from the fact that selecting which ideas to back and which ones not to back involves a lot of judgement. Challenge prizes are all about creating new solutions to clearly-defined problems and while the best challenges are those that have clear objective measurement criteria, the reality is that assessing the most promising innovation from a batch of great ideas often involves complicated judgements about multiple criteria.

Promising innovations reaching and benefiting more people Another category of impact is where we are supporting promising innovations to grow or scale. In many ways this is the easiest to translate into clear metrics, but it still requires a nuanced understanding of how innovations grow. One way to understand impact is simply to extend the reach of a promising innovation, helping a new product or service get from X number of people to X + Y number of people. Setting those kinds of goals requires an appreciation of the addressable market, and in our experience, social innovators often set their sights too low.17 For the Digital Makers Fund and Make Things Do Stuff campaign, we’ve been tracking the impact in terms of the numbers of young people taking up opportunities to experience digital making. So far, we’ve helped to create over 100,000 such opportunities. The goal for the next few years is to make that millions. Reach is important, but not sufficient. We also need to help innovations increase the evidence that they are having the desired impact. Too often in social policy, services are allowed to grow without any real confidence that they work or even that they aren’t causing harm.18 Nesta developed the Standards of Evidence (Figure 2) as a framework to help us assess the degree of confidence about whether a product or service achieves its intended outcome. The Innovation Lab invests heavily in supporting innovators to generate the evidence they need to move up the levels and one of the ways we monitor our own impact is through the number of innovations that improve their level on the Standards of Evidence.
The third component is financial sustainability. Whenever we are supporting an innovation to grow, we include metrics designed to track whether we are helping them achieve financial sustainability or not. That can include shifting the balance of revenue from grants to earned income, increasing sales or reducing demand and generating savings in other services.

**Policy and systems change**

One of the lessons of the past five years for the Innovation Lab is that we can achieve much more when we focus on influencing wider system change alongside supporting specific innovations to be developed, tested and grown.

Sometimes we are able to set ourselves very clear and specific policy goals, like getting the curriculum for schools changed to include computer science. On other occasions, we set ourselves broader goals for systemic change as we work with our own partners. These could include influencing the way that professionals are trained.

Crucially, we know that we can't achieve systems change by acting alone and that puts a sharper focus on building enabling technologies and influencing the world. Supporting public and social innovation is a field dominated by craft knowledge and, wherever we can, we're trying to testify that knowledge and make it available and useful to organisations and individuals engaged in innovation efforts.

One way we do this is through practice guides, toolkits and instructional videos. We also work directly with innovators in workshops or one to one, and we pioneered an approach to innovation or ideas “camps” that is now being replicated and adapted by others. We’ve become pretty good at counting the number of people reached, using surveys and getting qualitative feedback on whether they find it interesting and helpful. Where we want to get to is a more sophisticated approach to assessing capability and application of learning.

We don’t expect all of our interventions to have goals in every one of those five categories; in fact we’re working pretty hard to battle the tendency to chase too many goals and focus on the ones which matter most for each of the fields we’re working on. What it does provide is a framework within which we can understand our impact in a more structured way and start to answer the question of whether we’re making a difference.

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**Nesta’s Standards of Evidence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>You can describe what you do and why it matters, logically, coherently and convincingly.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>You capture data that shows positive change but you cannot confirm you caused this.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>You can demonstrate causally using a control or comparison group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>You have one or more independent replication evaluations that confirm these conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>You have manuals, systems and procedures to ensure consistent replication.</td>
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**Endnotes**


3. Lisa Torjian, Lab: designing the future, (Mars Discovery District, February 2012) or http://nyc.pubollab.org/files/Gov_Innovation_Labs constellation_1.0.pdf

4. Ruth Puttick, Peter Baeck and Philip Colligan, i-toms: the teams and funds making innovations happen around the world, (June 2014).


6. See e.g., MaRS, _systems-change/ mars-solutions-lab/labs-for-systems-change/about_ or Social Innovation Exchange, _www.socialinnovationschange.org_


11. For more information about Nesta see www.nesta.org.uk/about-us/our-history

12. See www.nesta.org.uk/project/digital-makers, the Digital Makers Fund is a partnership between Nesta, the Nominet Trust, Autodesk and the Mozilla Foundation.


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31. See e.g., “Five Hours a Day,” Nesta, www.nesta.org.uk/publications/five-hours-day or www.nesta.org.uk/ publications/making-it-work


36. For an engaging account of the perils of scaling initiatives that don’t work, see Timothy D Wilson _B�lange: A Theory of Change_, Nesta, www.nesta.org.uk/publications/beyondchangeukhyperlocal mediatoday


Social innovation labs are witnessing a new entrant in an unexpected form: civic initiatives reflecting the rigour of social sciences, the analytical power of data, the innovation frameworks from design, and the agility of social services landscape (be they stand-alone entities or programmes within larger agencies serving similar demographic groups) specifically set up to understand the system dynamics and root causes of the complex issues within the neighbourhood.

What was implicit in Sati’s words was that there were negative forces from which she wished to protect her kids. This was a low-income neighbourhood struggling with various challenges including substance abuse, loan sharks, primary school dropouts, and suicides.

To further complicate things, Sati’s immediate financial constraints made it nearly impossible to access childcare, which prevented her from taking up most forms of employment. This further impacted her financial empowerment, which placed additional stress on Sati for day-to-day decision-making, and limited her capacity for longer-term planning, such as around issues of, say, asset accumulation or her children’s tertiary education (and the steps leading hitherto). This series of correlated events is not exhaustive.

It is also noteworthy that there has been a structural change within the public assistance system in Singapore. There is now an additional network of local government agencies, known as Social Service Offices (SSOs). The SSOs often work in partnership with the front lines of public assistance, known as Family Service Centres (FSCs). The Kreta Ayer SSO in particular has undertaken an effort within their service boundary to map existing services for residents, including significantly those serving low-income residents.²

From the maps, it is clear that a dominant majority of the existing social service entities are operations of service delivery. We have not found programmes in the current social services landscape (be they stand-alone entities or programmes within larger agencies serving similar demographic groups) specifically set up to understand the system dynamics and root causes of the complex issues within the neighbourhood.

From an ecosystem standpoint, we have found a gap and opportunity in the space of research and analysis of complexity relating to the situation of low-income families, their social mobility, and issues such as and relating to inter-generational poverty. This is the opportunity and space in which Zeroth Labs² has begun its innovation work.

THE ROLE OF ZEROTH LABS
Following a discussion which included representatives from Bukit Ho Swee Family Service Centre (BHS FSC, now known as South Central Family Service Centre), The Thought Collective, and the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), our team was invited to play a role akin to “innovator-in-residence” in an effort to re-imagine the future of public assistance in Singapore, with BHS FSC as a pilot.

We had licence to dream up various kinds of experiments. With that latitude, it was imperative to set out the premise that would form the foundation of our engagement:³

Participatory. Principally this was important for the legitimacy of any outcome. However, it was also philosophically important for the team that the process of arriving at any solution was itself participatory.

Analysis-based. Part of the value of bringing our team in was that we were not just executing a programme to address needs, but also providing an understanding of the root issues from which those needs arise.

Resident-centred. The most important premise of our work was that any resulting solutions address real issues faced by those we intend to serve. We applied a mindset prevalent in start-up culture: to solve a real “pain point” (a problem or unmet need) for your customer in order for your solution to gain traction.
METHOD DECONSTRUCTION: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In this section, I outline how the team constructed an approach based on first principles. We essentially reverse-engineered a process by asking ourselves research questions as to what each step or element would require for a minimum level of rigour to be met. I highlight the insights we uncovered to subsequent process innovation and the design principles that led us to reverse-engineer a part of the process.

The Hackathon

Examining the hackathon model was the first in a series of deconstruction of methods for problem-solving and innovating. The hackathon format is characterised by high energy, relatively unstructured participation (“just come along and bring your ideas”) and a short time frame for conception through to prototype. These hackathons typically feature a theme (e.g., save our climate) and the rest of the event is a function of the energy and creativity from the participants.

Insights and Opportunities

In some previous events, a number of participants spent significant time unsure about what they should work on and in some cases, what apps they should build. As participants, they were essentially involved in a voluntary capacity as generalists, their energy and enthusiasm were not channelled effectively in the absence of a useful level of familiarity with the problem presented. This suggests the lack of opportunity or window of time for participants to think about the problem or develop familiarity and context around it.

It also appeared that providing a theme alone was not sufficient. There was a need for stronger problem definition. This would better direct participants’ energy and ideas for a task that was essentially problem-solving in nature. This is particularly critical in the context of social issues, which are inherently more complex than typical hackathon outputs would suggest. Take for example the taxi apps. The simplistic use of themes such as saving the

A creative brainstorm followed the human library session, allowing the stories participants just heard and realities on the ground to anchor their idea generation. An “inner workings” workshop on the operational dimensions of the FSC was organised. This was conducted by the Programme Director of the FSC, who shared the daily organisational challenges and realities faced by social workers working with the neighbourhood’s struggling families.

A panel discussion, “Urban Poverty 101,” was organised featuring Donald Low from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Gerard Ee of Beyond Social Services. Low spoke from the macro-economic structural perspective, and Ee shared extremely real stories of the low-income and homeless Singaporeans from his personal interaction with them.

A hackathon followed. This involved participants generating concepts, developing hypotheses around their solutions and the problems they sought to tackle, and testing them with potential users from the neighbourhood. Participants created “prototypes” or physical representations of their concepts, which they presented at the end of the hackathon.

The hackathon had more participants who were residents of the neighbourhood than from the wider public. This is noteworthy in Singapore's context as such initiatives typically do not actually involve the beneficiaries or end-users in problem-solving or idea generation.

However, no amount of participatory action could lead to successfully tackling actual problems if the brief was not clear. Problem-solving required the rigour of research possibly developed through understanding the field extremely well, and by virtue of that, the complex issues that made up the system dynamics of the neighbourhood. The question was, “How do we analyse complexity?”

A human library session was conducted. Here, one “borrowed” people instead of books to tap on their knowledge and life experiences. This enabled low-income residents from the neighbourhood to participate by sharing their stories with young professionals and others from the wider community.
The study of complex systems investigates how relationships between parts give rise to the collective behaviour of a system and how the system interacts and forms relationships with its environment. It is the study of dynamics and processes of change found in a range of physical and biological phenomena.

**Application**
We were guided by systems science and complex systems theory in developing a model of the inter-related elements, with a goal of identifying the “root” causes of inter-generational poverty in the neighbourhood. More generally, we sought to map the relationships among these elements, in terms of “systems hierarchy,” ranging from items such as primary school truancy to employment opportunities for those in challenging circumstances. The information used for the development of this map was the raw qualitative data from our ethnographic research.

**Insight**
In contrast to most HCD projects which employ a single design challenge for the entire project, we developed five design challenges, corresponding to the five key factors identified. We realised that this was due to the complexity of the issue we were tackling—inner-city poverty, and as a result of the significance of the various dimensions involved, developing more design challenges would allow each dimension to be specifically tackled.

**Method Deconstruction: Analysing Complexity**

**The Design Challenge**
We believe that effective idea generation requires a foundation of deep insights that form the basis of strong problem definition. This takes the form of a “design challenge,” which sets the scope for participants to respond to. This term is borrowed from IDEO’s approach termed as Human-Centred Design (HCD). An effective design challenge has the following characteristics:

(1) It provides sufficient space and openness for exploratory ideas, hence encouraging creativity.

(2) It is sufficiently defined in scope so that there is meaningful direction, and ideas are relevant to the challenge.

Thus, the crux of a successful project is premised on obtaining deep insights. We embarked on a research process with a blended approach of methods to understand the dynamics of the neighbourhood, and included one approach to test early hypotheses guiding potential solutions. With each method described, we provide an example of an insight uncovered or research process decision made, through the analysis. The methods are as follows:

- Ethnography, from anthropology
- Systems science and complexity
- HCD/User-Centred Design (UCD), from design fields, particularly product and industrial design
- Data analysis
- Lean start-up method

**Ethnography**
Ethnography is the systematic study of people and cultures, designed to explore cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society. It is a means to represent graphically and in writing the culture of a group.

**Application**
The “society” or “culture” being studied belonged to that of low-income families in the subject neighbourhood. Data collection methods included participant observation, interviews and field notes. Two methods, surveys and focus group discussions, were not used in this study. Although both methods are commonly used in community needs assessment, the team had significant experience with these methods and found them to be ineffective in delivering more nuanced behavioural insights in complex system dynamics.

**Insight**
The protection of Sati’s children from the influences of the neighbourhood was more significant than the importance of increasing financial buffers through employment, even at nutritional cost for her children. This was counter-intuitive for what one might expect of mothers, single or otherwise, in view of children’s health.

**Systems Science & Complexity**

**Human-Centred Design thinking (HCD)**
HCD (also known as User-Centred Design and design thinking) is a process not restricted to interfaces or technologies. In HCD, the needs, wants and limitations of the end users of a product, service or process are given attention at each stage of the design process. The chief difference from other product design philosophies is that HCD tries to optimise the product around how users can, want, or need to use the product, rather than forcing the users to change their behaviour to accommodate the product.

**Application**
Based on the five key factors elucidated from the systems mapping above, we used part of the HCD approach to develop design challenges (as earlier described) to anchor the remaining design and research process.

**Insight**
In the broadest terms:

1) Education
2) Employment
3) Financial Empowerment
4) Social Connectedness
5) Self-Belief

"We realised that this was due to the complexity of the issue we were tackling—inner-city poverty, and as a result of the significance of the various dimensions involved, developing more design challenges would allow each dimension to be specifically tackled."
"Through adapting the principles of the Lean Start-up Method to our innovation, they discovered that the need was not in simply getting these women jobs, but in also granting these women greater job flexibility."

Data analysis is a technique of data science, which is the methodical study of the generalisable and scalable extraction of knowledge from data. It incorporates varying elements and builds on techniques and theories from many fields, including mathematics, probability models, machine learning, statistical learning, data engineering, pattern recognition and learning, and visualisation, among others with the goal of extracting meaning from data and creating data products.13

**Application**

We obtained data from BHS FSC. We did not access the actual case files, which were bound by confidentiality. Instead we worked with aggregate data on FSC’s clients including age, location, number of children, income, education level, employment status and others. We ran analyses on this data set to uncover relationships that may be of interest. These relationships may not have been found through our earlier qualitative research.

**Insight**

We found that there was an inverse relationship between full-time employment and domestic violence. In the data set, we had four different employment variables: full-time, part-time, contract, and unemployed. This finding was interesting in the context of interviews with subject matter experts (specifically social workers in that neighbourhood). They shared a view that the key to "solving the issues of struggling families" was in the consistency of income, and that the actual level of income (be it high or low) had less effect on the thriving functioning of families. Following this logic, "part-time employment" should have also yielded a statistically significant correlation in addition to "full-time employment", yet this was not the case. This suggests possibly further lines of inquiry surrounding the relationship between domestic violence and employment (and other factors).

The Lean Start-up Method is a scientific approach to creating and managing start-ups, and to develop a product that better meets customers' needs, thereby increasing market demand for the product. It teaches the founder how to drive a start-up—how to steer its direction, when to change course, and when to persevere and develop a solution with maximum acceleration. It is a principled approach to new product development.14 In the case of social solutions, we interpret "maximum acceleration" to mean maximum reach/impact, and "product development" to refer to the process of creating a solution (be it in the form of a product or a service).

**Application**

Through this method, we formulated a condensed approach to conducting customer-oriented product development. This scaffolding guided the project participants through the entire process of the hackathon. It offered help in:

- articulating assumptions to be validated or invalidated;
- developing hypotheses around the problems they were seeking to solve; and
- testing those hypotheses.

One hackathon team originally attempted to create a job-matching platform for middle-aged to elderly women to find jobs with cleaning agencies. Through adapting the principles of the Lean Start-up Method to their innovation, they discovered that the need was not in simply getting these women jobs, but in also granting these women greater job flexibility. This was where the idea of an "Uber" for cleaning aunts came about, where job seekers in this network do not have to go through cleaning agencies to find jobs, but are connected directly to potential customers. The model, if proven valid, will allow shorter and more flexible working hours and better wages per hour for these women.

**Insight**

The resulting community brief included the following components:

- Map of neighbourhood showing location of rental and non-rental flats
- Neighbourhood statistics including apartment types, household income levels, marriage, family types, and others
- The five key factors and corresponding design challenges
- Stories accompanying each design challenge, based on composites constructed from actual residents we had interviewed or come across
- Existing community programmes to provide a reference to the current social services landscape
- An overall framework of tackling complex social challenges, a methodology we developed based on this project. Figure 2 shows this framework.

Figure 2: Zeroth Labs model for neighbourhood transformation. Source: Zeroth Labs
"WE UNDERSTAND THAT SUCH A BLENDED APPROACH TO TACKLING COMPLEX PROBLEMS IS RELATIVELY NOVEL IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. A TRUE BLEND OF METHODS REQUIRES A DEXTERITY THAT ENABLES THE MOST USEFUL PARTS OF THESE DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES TO BE EXTRACTED, COMBINED, AND DESIGNED IN CONTEXT AND SEQUENCE SO AS TO BRING ABOUT A POWERFUL FRAMEWORK."

INNOVATION IN THREE DIMENSIONS

Through this experiment, we have innovated on methods to tackle complex social issues. This can be seen along three axes:

Closed + Open

We brought together two types of processes that do not typically come together: the closed process being research/consulting and the open process being human library + crowdsourcing + hackathon.

Sequence matters: We designed for the participatory phase to follow the closed research. In this way, the research findings and the design challenges to which the public can respond form the basis of idea generation from the wider community, increasing the likelihood of its rigour and relevance.

Chaotic + Systematic

The framework we developed had deliberate chaos in specific elements (e.g., Creative Jam, online crowdsourcing, interaction between residents and participants during the hackathon). It also had one key element that was systematic: the use of the Lean Start-up Method was an anchor for participant teams during the two days. For this, we got them to think in terms of articulating assumptions and hypotheses to be validated or otherwise, and these were tested over the course of the hackathon.

CONCLUSION

We understand that such a blended approach to tackling complex problems is relatively novel in the context of international development. A true blend of methods requires a dexterity that enables the most useful parts of these different techniques to be extracted, combined, and designed in context and sequence so as to bring about a powerful framework.

This was essentially a combination of ethnography together with data analysis. We emulated the methods of cultural anthropologists as well as analytical techniques of data scientists. However, rather than just listing different findings one on top of the other, we used the qualitative insights to set the context for statistically significant quantitative findings to further inform our systems analysis.

We believe this framework is a starting point for more thought and rigour in future practice. We posit that the combinatorial approach of our framework, bringing together behavioural and systems analysis, lends itself well to the analysis, development and running of cities. The ability to situate the social, health, legal, educational, infrastructural and technological dimensions of a city will be increasingly critical in the management and governance of urban zones. The methods for doing so need to reflect complexity and rate-of-change.

It is our hope that this framework will continue to be built upon, not just by Zeroth Labs but also by others, to contribute towards a much more robust and adaptive approach to development practice in the long term.

Endnotes

1 Asset accumulation is an approach to social mobility which focuses directly on creating opportunities for the poor to acquire, keep, and pass on wealth to the next generation. This approach complements other poverty-focused strategies developed over the past decade, particularly sustainable livelihoods and social protection. Moser, Pickett & Sparrow, Cutting-Edge Development Issues for INGOs: Applications of an Asset Accumulation Approach, Brookings Institute, 2007.
2 See Kreta Ayer Social Service Office map on page 35.
3 Zeroth Labs, www.zeroth.co
5 Stephanie Hornung, “Aligning your team through design principles”, https://medium.com/trial-and-error-l/aligning-your-team-through-design-principles-a1d39b41f55e
6 “Qualitative research methodologies: ethnography” RMJ Publishing Group, www.rmj.com/content/317/bmj.a1020
12 Uber, www.uber.com
13 Creative Jam was the name we gave to the element “creative brainstorm” in our discussion on “Design Principles” on page 37.
Social innovation labs are currently lauded as the vehicle for transforming cities and social systems. For the practitioner though, the question remains: how do we move beyond the hype to deeper discussions on lab practice? Chee Soo Lian from Social Space sums up the ideas in the original paper by Marlieke Kieboom (Kennisland), and highlights the issues behind “labbing” social challenges for systemic change.

This summary has been reviewed and edited by Marlieke Kieboom.

The paper, “Lab Matters” is the direct result of the exchange at Lab2: A Lab about Labs—an event jointly organised by Kennisland and Hivos. In April 2013, 40 practitioners from 20 social change labs gathered in Amsterdam in a convention aimed at promoting critical engagement of social innovation lab practitioners for moving their practices forward? The article seeks to understand the unique practice and principles of labs; identify the dynamics frequently ignored; and offer suggestions by considering the future of labs.

Labs: Practice and Principles

The presence of labs can be seen in the growing number of social innovation (SI) labs, SI journals, SI networks, guidebooks and toolkits and funders made up of corporations, philanthropists and government (particularly in the US, the UK and Canada).

Implicit in the question are two processes taking place in tandem: “underestimating complex system dynamics” and “overestimating the impact of lab practices.” Together, they can bring about negative effects on the quality of impact that labs can bring. On the one hand, there is a serious underestimate of the complexities in four areas of lab practice:

1) Outcomes, where too much emphasis is put on solutionism.
2) Focus, where the place and power of politics is overlooked.
3) Goals, where scaling solutions override ideas, values and ethics.
4) Representation, with miscalculation as regards the messiness of human nature.

On the other hand, the expectations of the direct impact of labs on transformative change tend to be overestimated and could be more measured.

How then can we support social innovation labs in moving their practices forward? The article seeks to understand the unique practice and principles of labs; identify the dynamics frequently ignored; and offer suggestions by considering the future of labs.

Labs have been aptly defined as a “container for experimentation.” Its process begins with taking on a problem, working on it outside the context of an ailing system, approaching end-users for collaboration, then prototyping through design and systems thinking together with end-users and stakeholders, testing prototypes in various appropriate situations, and finally scaling to bring about systemic change to the existing structure.

There are several reasons behind the appeal of labs:

- Problematic situations such as exclusive decision-making, inequality in the socio-economic sphere and the depletion of natural resources globally need to be addressed.
- There is the call for discontinuous change, for the purpose of reinstating a new structural order.
- A viable alternative to minimal disruption is needed when the opportunity for change arises.
- Labs exist as spaces for experimentation and innovation.
- Creating new methodologies to bring about the change process;
- Gathering a team from different disciplines comprising both experts, end-users and stakeholders; and
- Scaling solutions for transformative change.

In practice, different combinations of these principles are seen in different labs. As Vanessa Timmer, a Lab2 participant, succinctly puts it, “No two labs are the same and no two participants entirely agree on what a lab is.”

In Lab2, it was not possible to arrive at a general framework for labs achieving systemic change. In fact, there was even difficulty trying to define systemic impact of labs. Simply “labbing” challenges does not change a system that may itself be the root cause of the problem. There appears to be no single example to illustrate the impact of labs at the institutional level. To quote practitioner Sarah Schulman, “For all of their activity and intent, it still remains unclear whether labs are altering the dominant systems, and are actually enabling a different set of outcomes on the ground.”

Some believe the uncertainty about the effect of labs lies in the fact that labs are new in the field of social change while systemic change in established structures are only evident after decades. While this explanation is valid, certain dynamics should be considered as they could be holding back systemic change.
OVERSIGHTS: FOUR OMISSIONS IN “LABBED LANDS”

The argument put forward is that there is a “misjudgement or misinterpretation of the dynamics of complex adaptive systems,” reflected in outcomes, focus, goals and representation in lab practices. This inaccurate understanding is shaped by implicit assumptions behind systemic change. There are four assumptions that should be highlighted.

Assumption 1 Technocratic solutions lead to systemic change

SI labs work on some key principles. The first is the general assumption that direct solutions are accessible and issues can be resolved. This is best done by targeting a problem at its root cause, generating a to-do list, then entering the process of design which would involve assembling a diverse group for the task, designing processes that can be repeated to improve on the prototype solution, and finally, creating systemic solutions. Systems should be broken down to “individual static entities” for tweaking.

This solutionism rhetoric in SI labs reduces complex systems to static entities, yet it appears to be the standard response to social issues. What is generally overlooked is the context upon which transformative change may or may not occur, as well as “the dynamic of interdependent and interconnected patterns” created in our search for solutions.

In looking for possible root causes of complex systemic challenges, one often lists the more tangible causes, like inequality, malfunctioning institutions and poverty. In reality, one better perceives a complex challenge as an interdependent root system of ideas, beliefs, and values that are non-singular, entangled, and contested (e.g., beliefs about family values, interpretation and meaning of history, gendered identities). In understanding system dynamics this way, inequality, malfunctioning institutions and poverty are in fact intermediate outcomes and also intermediate causes of other multiple, interdependent root causes. It is then not immediately clear what is influencing what, or who is influencing who in these relationships. Furthermore, root causes can be found in disconnects of the system or what Alan Fowler has called “wrong couplings.”

Apart from oversimplifying, solutionism can be “a dangerous intellectual tendency” as it prevents discontinuous change. As writer and researcher Evgeny Morozov puts it, the focus on solutions can disrupt the momentum for transformative change.

Solutions in an ineffectual system are only “incremental improvements,” and they cause us to lose momentum for institutional change. This can lead practitioners to settle for a less valuable alternative, which is “the path of least resistance.” The result is foregoing an opportunity to bring about more radical change.

Assumption 2 Labs are neutral spaces

The second assumption is that social innovation practices are apolitical and labs have the ability to broker for change between parties—to replace bad systems with good ones. Yet, lab practices are closely tied to their contextual environment. “What works for whom?” An ideology may be the cause of why the system works for one group and does not do likewise for another. Labs make the decision on which group to generate solutions for. That itself is not a neutral but a political act. There are two areas we can think through as we recognise this.

Firstly, through a dichotomy between those who need help and those who don’t (the latter being the policymakers and the service providers involved in getting the system functioning), the lab worker is seen as playing the role of the “saviour,” detaching himself/herself from the system in which he or she operates. Bruce Nussbaum asks, “Are designers the new anthropologists or missionaries, who come to poke into village life, ‘understand’ it and make it better—their ‘modern way’?”

Secondly, labs are often the recipients of research funding, and the implicit agenda that accompanies the financial backing has the potential to present constraints to the labs capable of discontinuous change.

To effect discontinuous change, labs cannot afford to be apolitical. Practitioners need to be conscious of their own political role, realise they are operating in a political field, consider the contexts in which change takes place and keep an eye on the different groups who may benefit or be disadvantaged by a particular system. This reality is often not reflected in labs.

Assumption 3 Scaling solutions is the key to achieving systemic change

Scaling is seen to be essential in attaining the optimum value of good innovations socially and economically. Through scaling, social innovations reach more people and cover a broader geographical area. Yet, scaling links us back to the problems solutionism can create.

The fact that systemic challenges are contextual is also obscured when scaling solutions. The fact remains that a blend of contexts and people’s values is necessary for solutions to work. Scaling is often seen through the lens of “solutionism,” and when organisations scale, they tend to steer away from the end-users they began with. Practitioners need to be better at scaling ideas and principles on the one hand, and paying attention to local subtleties and preferences on the other hand.

Finally, scaling solutions may not be in alignment with the principles of social innovation. Scaling can only be carried out in the framework of the existing system and this implies that the status quo has to be maintained. This is contradictory to the concepts behind social innovation, which calls for diversity and transformative change.

Assumption 4 Humans are happy “labbed” creatures

SI labs look like happy, inspiring places, buzzing with creativity. Practitioners work with attractive visuals, participants are immersed in workshops and “the jargon radiates a sense of co-creation and endless possibilities.”

This way of representing social challenges is far from the social reality of the world outside labs. Reality, as it is understood, lacks orderliness and it is irrational and unpredictable. So sessions on lab practices reflect situations in actual practice? Truly, there could be more preparation for a variety of behavioural responses that could be encountered in real practice, like hard-line politics, messy fights, fractured cooperation and decreasing motivation over lengths of time.
NEW SCENARIOS FOR LAB PRACTICE

"If labs stand too much inside the system they risk losing their radical edge, if they stand too far outside they risk having little impact." – Geoff Mulgan, Nesti’s Chief Executive

In view of our understanding of the practice and our oversights (discussed in the preceding section), how can we better engage stakeholders and work towards discontinuous change? How do we envisage labs practices for the future? The following 10 scenarios are created from the ideas of participants in Lab2, literature available, conversations and thinking at Kennisland. Lab stakeholders could use them in considering the oversights in practice.

What if labs… design and scale processes instead of solutions?

Attention on “solutions” can be pulled towards changing processes. Mulgan writes about benefitting from innovations through reshaping the design and structure of the existing system. This includes the way funds are channelled, knowledge and information is disseminated, and how education, healthcare, social security, criminal justice and employment, environment and business are managed. There is more leverage for systemic change in altering processes than simply gunning for solutions.

What if labs… spread ethics and ideas instead of solutions?

We better invest in scaling principles and knowledge, instead of investing in replicating models and methodologies. – Lab2 participant, Juan Casanueva (Social TIC lab)

As behaviour and actions are influenced by beliefs, which is first determined by values, we could be more explicit about our values and ethics of what a good life means, and to whom. If the core principles can be seen to bring about positive effects in practice, labs can share these values and principles and record new ways of thinking. Further, labs may play a more powerful role if they become more effective in presenting issues and building awareness.

What if labs… connected with like-minded movements?

Rather than working in isolation, labs would do better connecting with movements that share similar values, themes and goals. Working together with alliances will establish social and political networks, which would be much needed in challenging times. Alliances particularly give support when innovating to bring about a paradigm shift.

What if labs… become more politically aware?

“The challenge for labs does not lie in acting like saviours to the poor and vulnerable, but lies in developing political gravitas outside the lab to detect where and when outcomes of actions in the system stop or start to flow (of finances, of people physically moving from A to B, of knowledge and ideas).”

Labs should develop methodologies that will lead them to recognise and respond to the dominant power relations and hierarchies existing in the context of their work. Without the ability to do this, labs could appear to be endorsing an existing status quo.

What if labs… were better networked, especially geographically?

Establishing an infrastructure connecting labs and related organisations will help facilitate instructional knowledge that helps practitioners assess lab practices as well as challenges in order to provide support to future implementation. There is a need to connect globally as it might give us access to environments not “burdened with success and institutions to safeguard success.”

What if labs… were more politically aware?

Studies in political and behavioural science can provide better understanding of tolerance of risks and decision-making. The two fields can provide further insight into creating a working culture that is more open to experimentation and risks. From them, lab practitioners can build on skills to engage, manage and resolve conflict.

What if labs… invested more in building innovation capacity within local communities?

Research has shown that in order to achieve structural change, design processes need to be part of organisational cultures from the start. In working to influence institutions, innovation skills are needed in negotiating design thinking with policymaking. On the other end, labs could also provide support for groups in the local communities in order to build resilience to failures in the system, and hence seek ways to function more independently.

What if labs… developed their own evaluation methodologies to support their practices?

Is the present trend to use rigid metrics for assessing the impact of innovation effective? Is it possible to capture standard experiences and human interactions in datasets? Labs could look into designing methodologies more suited for innovative research rather than keeping to the tools used by traditional institutions.

What if labs… prototyped new organisational models?

To achieve the targeted impact and deepen their practice, labs might have to go “outside the lab” or “not even have a lab at all.” Time could be spent on the subjects, procedures and institutions they are working towards changing. This might call for organisational changes from within lab practice.
CONCLUSION
The paper has identified four areas that may obscure the positive outcomes with regard to the impact and engagement generated by lab practice. However, if labs wish to reach further in offering innovative changes to values at a systemic level, more has to be done in “designing smart structures.” This means moving into alternative spaces where existing interests are challenged. What are the implications then on the functions and nature of labs? Could there be more balance in practice within the lab, and developments outside—in the real world? Or is there a need to create additional mediums? Are raising such questions the best way to move towards a critical engagement on the subject? Is there a better framework of knowledge that can be used?

Kennisland with Hivos, Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) and other interested partners look towards strengthening future dialogue with lab practitioners through learning and exchanging critical reflection. Their latest collaboration has resulted in a new publication, Labcraft. This is an invitation for change practitioners to join the debate and mutually support their efforts. 

Endnotes
4. Ibid., 9, 10.
5. Ibid., 13.
6. Ibid., 16.
7. Ibid., 19 (Sarah Schulman).
8. Ibid., 21.
9. Ibid., 21, 22.
10. Ibid., 24.
11. Ibid., 24.
12. Ibid., 24 (Evgeny Morozov).
13. Ibid., 25.
15. Ibid., 31.
16. Ibid., 34 (Geoff Mulgan).
17. Ibid., 34 (Geoff Mulgan).
18. Ibid., 35.
19. Ibid., 36.
20. Ibid., 37.
21. Ibid., 42.
What distinguishes “social innovation” from other efforts to address social problems? And why should the answer matter to anyone genuinely interested in social change? John Donaldson, Victoria Gerrard and Sanushka Mudaliar offer an in-depth discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls of pursuing social innovation in the context of international development.

**Social Innovation in Historical Context**

Social innovation is currently all the rage—providing a tantalising hope for new and better ways to solve problems faced by the world’s people. Despite its increasing popularity however, social innovation remains an elusive and confusing concept—occasionally working within the scope of the traditional international development or aid sector, and sometimes seemingly more at home in the business world.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in our joint work to use qualitative primary research to design new or improved needs-based social services in Singapore, we have observed little interaction between the subset of practitioners who characterise their work as “social innovation” and others operating in the broad development arena.

We found this quite curious—after all, “finding new and better ways” to respond to social, humanitarian and economic needs is, on the face of it, nothing new. Spontaneous groups of ordinary people, governments, charities, non-government organisations, industry and international organisations have been coming up with ideas to reduce poverty, address social problems and increase livelihoods for centuries.

So what exactly distinguishes “social innovation” from other efforts to address social problems? And what are the potential benefits of greater interaction between the mainstream and the innovators?

Answering these questions involves high stakes. For if there’s nothing new in social innovation, then we risk wasting effort, missing key insights, replicating the mistakes of others, and diverting attention and resources away from what might already be working. On the other hand, if truly novel approaches are being missed by other development practitioners, then there is much to be gained from focusing on the unique aspects of social innovation.

In order to answer these questions, we decided to convene a “brain trust” of key people in Singapore with the right experience to help us hash through the issues. The resulting group included practitioners from both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, academics from Singapore Management University, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore University of Technology and Design, and civil servants who focus on supporting social service organisations. The following points were sparked by our conversations with this group.

**What are the fundamental similarities and differences between “social innovation” and other efforts to address development concerns? And how can we harness these to achieve social change?**

**Tools and Methods**

In response to the complexities of overcoming unmet social needs, all development practitioners now seem well equipped with a range of tools and methods adopted from various sectors—including business, design, communications, anthropology, geography and more. Some segments of the social innovation community actively promote specific toolkits or methodologies. These are often designed to empower people from a range of backgrounds to participate in development initiatives or to support the community at large to generate ideas in response to social problems. This responds to the historical critique that development initiatives suffer from a so-called “tyranny of experts” and could represent useful disruptions to standard practices and viewpoints.

**Possibilities and Pitfalls:**

I. Taking action vs oversimplification.

There is no doubt that there is huge benefit in re-thinking approaches, and finding and implementing solutions that solve problems to the benefit of society. There is also great potential for development actors to be shaken out of old practices and patterns. However, our brain trust identified a related danger. A focus on specific tools and methods might lead to oversimplification of complex social problems, or to a focus on only one aspect of an interlinked problem. Real-world social problems are usually multifaceted and interrelated. The uncritical application of tools from different disciplines together with the simplification needed to balance choices and make decisions for a narrowly-focused intervention often obscures the complicated and intricate nature of society’s most pressing issues.

A related side effect is that particular tools can overlook the systemic and structural factors at play in major and recurring social needs. Focusing on the micro factors can lead to responses directed at symptoms rather than the root cause. This does not detract from the value of such responses, so long as their limited ability to deal with these macro factors is recognised. Attempts to scale local development “pilots” to the national or international level have met significant failure for these reasons, leading many practitioners to reassess how initiatives are focused and scaled.

II. Unintended Consequences

Creating large scale and sustainable social change is
extremely difficult and requires long term commitment and a readiness to fail. Sometimes failure is merely the result of an oversight—issues of implementation are complex and need to be considered at all stages of a project—from conception to planning to testing and scaling. The failure to pay attention to implementation can sometimes make stakeholders appear to be doing something substantial, when they are not. As has occurred multiple times in the history of development, the fanfare and attention focused on innovations usually occur at the point of launch rather than when implementation has taken place and the results are in. Any initiative seeking to create social change should not be allowed off the hook for novel ideas that don’t work in practice.

iii. Culture and Context

Another related issue is the amount of attention paid to the cultural context in which solutions are applied. The tools of social innovation and development are developed within specific professional and geographical value systems. The unreflective application of these tools might cause practitioners to overlook potential conflicts with the norms and practices associated with creating change in another context.

The boundaries of culture and context are increasingly blurred and arguably, many social needs now reflect universal social values that transcend culture. For instance, cell phones might be used differently in different cultures, but in the right hands, they can help empower nearly everyone. However, it is clear that most problems are still profoundly influenced by context, and by ignoring this, practitioners can risk designing unimplementable solutions and wasting time and money in attempting to scale. Even worse, underestimating the impact of culture can exacerbate problems, with solutions doing more harm than good.

POWER AND PARTICIPATION

Many large-scale development interventions have been criticised for promulgating technocratic solutions and/or promoting ideologically-driven agendas at the expense of participation by the communities involved. The solutions-oriented approach of many social innovators, and their focus on experimentation at a very local level before attempting to scale, provide impetus to development initiatives that seek to involve community members with multiple views and domains of local knowledge.

Possibilities and Pitfalls:

i. Depth of participation

Many processes regardless of their origin continue to engage with people actually affected by the development intervention at a very superficial level, staying within the confines of consultation rather than truly collaborating with people to create change.

Lacking the involvement of sufficiently diverse members of the targeted group can lead to an inadequate brief that does not reflect the complex realities affecting people with unmet needs. These in turn lead to a mismatch in solutions. Many development solutions have been and continue to be discarded because they were designed based on an incomplete understanding of a nuanced situation.

ii. Magnifying rather than managing problems

In poorly managed participatory processes, the powerful individuals or groups that cause the problem in the process are often also invited to address the problem. This is based on an assumption that if all the involved groups were in the same room, focusing intensely on the same problem, they would together recognise the obstacles and design an effective solution.

The sobering reality is that many social problems are caused by the powerful pursuing their own interests—and ignoring the needs of the powerless. Inviting these powerful stakeholders could amount to letting the fox work out how to keep the chickens safe. It is sometimes not in the interests of the powerful to meet unmet needs. Inviting them into the conversation might just reinforce their power.

iii. Property rights and profit

As practitioners move towards alternative models of sustaining their own activities, they have begun to face new challenges. In the current knowledge economy, it is natural for organisations and consultants to keep a handle on their own intellectual property, the bread and butter of their trade. In the case of some development practitioners, this is presented in the form of collections of methods, tools and techniques structured into project “recipes.” The need for control over a proprietary tool can affect transparency and empowerment—and either keep the analytical tools in the hands of a select few, or perpetuate a belief that the tools require expert assistance to implement. Equally, the profit motive associated with certain tools encourages overstatement of the impact and importance of these tools.

DEFINING SUCCESS AND EVALUATING RESULTS

Much of the energy in recent development initiatives associated with social innovation has been focused on finding ways to be economically sustainable through the use of social business models. These initiatives have generally attempted to either create businesses which meet social needs in a financially sustainable way or provide resources for fledgling social enterprises such as microcredit schemes.

Proponents of the market system argue that one of its strengths is that businesses typically act more efficiently and productively than most other organisational forms. By this analysis, the profit motive encourages businesses to measure their successes and failures constantly and critically, and to cut whatever doesn’t work in order to release resources to support more successful ideas.

By adopting the models and measures of business, some development initiatives such as social businesses are attempting to harness this efficiency and productivity.
Possibilities and Pitfalls: I. Differences of intent and outcome

1. We must reject the idea—well-intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become “more like a business.” Most businesses—like most of anything else in life—fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great. When you compare great companies with good ones, many widely practiced business norms turn out to correlate with mediocrity, not greatness. So, then, why would we want to import the practices of mediocrity into the social sectors?

2. By having an easily measurable object—profit, businesses have at least one bottom-line against which to measure success. And measuring business efficiency and productivity has a straightforward formula: output over input. The challenge in this context is how to earn high productivity. The government, the social enterprise, “society,” or the people experiencing disadvantage or need?

3. Just as businesses ensure that their owners and investors are satisfied, those in the social sector must think of the needs of their funders. When these needs and interests are aligned with the needs of the community, this can work well. Where there are conflicts, the interests of the funders often come first because they are easily quantifiable and have clear consequences.

This problem is not appreciably different with social enterprises that focus on a double bottom line. Such organisations are justifiably lauded for moving past the often hand-to-mouth existence of traditional charities, and are compelled by market pressures to make themselves more effective and sustainable. The danger is that the more easily measurable revenue generating outcome trumps the often ill-defined social outcome.

3. The need for development practitioners to show results from any action also leads to an interest in the lowest-hanging fruit. Designing metrics and indicators of success is the complicated challenge that needs to be overcome if this problem is to be avoided.

4. The same challenges exist that have always been there, namely that there are no quick fixes to the complex challenges of poverty; these challenges will certainly not be solved by following a recipe; development is inherently political with multiple agendas and layers of power that need to be explicitly recognised and carefully navigated…

Eco-tourism lodge in Gujarat, India, developed by UNDP. Source: Jared Tham.

Ways forward

So, what are the fundamental differences between “traditional” development practices on the one hand and “social innovation” on the other? Unsurprisingly: not as much as it appears on the surface. The same challenges exist that have always been there, namely that there are no quick fixes to the complex challenges of poverty; these challenges will certainly not be solved by following a recipe; development is inherently political with multiple agendas and layers of power that need to be explicitly recognised and carefully navigated; and finally, the goals and outcomes of development are defined by the value system of the evaluator which may not meet the needs or desires of those requiring most support.

But in this regard, development practitioners face a major problem—how to define the bottom line(s) and measure success? If productivity is “output over input,” how do we measure the numerator? The answer is not obvious. Improvement, or lack thereof, is not always obvious or easily measured. Improvements in terms of some social outcomes can trade off with others.

Much time and ink has been spent by development practitioners designing and testing hundreds of monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment tools—many of which have fallen into fashion before becoming quickly outdated. Most evaluation tools attempt to answer the question: Who measures success? The government, the social enterprise, “society,” or the people experiencing disadvantage or need?

Some caution must be exercised in applying general “business practices” to social change. As Jim Collins, a business sustainability and company performance guru, argues:

“I would argue,” he suggests, “it is very difficult to transfer the fundamental practices and strategies of business to the social sector. The dynamics are different. The means by which social change is to be achieved, and the targets of that change, are different.”

He also argues, however, that just as businesses ensure that their owners and investors are satisfied, so the social sector must think of the needs of its funders. When these needs and interests are aligned with the needs of the community, this can work well. Where there are conflicts, the interests of the funders often come first because they are easily quantifiable and have clear consequences.

This problem of focusing on output metrics can lead to another problem: the temptation of aiming for lower-hanging fruit. Different kinds of people have different kinds of unmet needs, and some are more amenable to change than others. A profit-driven output-based mindset can divert attention to the least bad of social problems. Focusing on the social problems that are easily solved is one way to show results, but is often less effective at solving society’s most difficult problems.

Similarly, the need for development practitioners to show results from any action also leads to an interest in the lowest-hanging fruit. Designing metrics and indicators of success is the complicated challenge that needs to be overcome if this problem is to be avoided.

Payment attention to those who can pay

On a related note, social enterprises or businesses face an additional challenge: in the case of organisations that focus on a double bottom line, such enterprises often pay more attention to the relatively better off. As the late professor of business C.K. Prahalad famously observed, there are billions at the bottom of the pyramid, and enterprises can help serve the needs of the poor. Many have argued that Prahalad overestimates the disposable wealth among the poor, yet the overall argument remains: people living in poverty may still be able to harness some resources. Yet, the fact remains that the most severe of the poor have no disposable income of any kind. Enterprises that focus on the double bottom line can be tempted to exclude those less able to pay.

Some true believers argue that most or all socially-beneficial activities can be linked to a sustainable revenue stream. However, this view is subject to increasing scrutiny and doubt. Those who question this market-oriented view raise the concern that development players solely focused on revenue-generating activities may effectively siphon away resources that might otherwise be used to cross-subsidise vital activities that can never be self-sustaining.

Although fail-safe ways to share and navigate these experiences are elusive, it is, to some extent, possible to avoid repeating the same mistakes. The successes and battle scars of past development initiatives—with decades of experience and engagement—can provide essential insights. Likewise, the agile and risk-averse approaches of social innovation—with its creative and generative decision-making processes—can push development thinking in important new directions. For this reason, improved communication between practitioners of different approaches is vital. Joint dialogue and reflection can only help deepen our collective thinking and help practitioners to build on each other’s victories and avoid some of the pitfalls that await anyone who aspires to respond to social needs.
In April 2014, the United Nations Committee of the Rights of the Child made an agreement to form the General Comment on Children in Street Situations. What led to this groundbreaking move? Kerri-Ann O’Neill and David Schofield chart the chronological development from 2009 to 2014 and show how the effective steering of collaborative efforts can achieve far-reaching impact.

Kerri-Ann O’Neill is the regional Head of Corporate Responsibility, Communications and Engagement at Aviva, working across its Asian businesses. She has a broad and integrated change portfolio within Aviva and is charged with developing and executing the strategy for sustainable business practices, diversity and inclusion, business ethics, environment and climate change, and community development and impact assessment in Asia. Kerri-Ann co-leads the global human rights centre of expertise within Aviva. This is alongside a focus on developing Aviva’s culture and values, employee engagement and corporate communications. She also sits on the committees of several sustainability, leadership, and diversity and inclusion networks in Asia.

David Schofield is Group Head of Corporate Responsibility for Aviva, a leading UK & international provider of life and general insurance with 34 million customers worldwide. He leads Aviva’s group Corporate Responsibility team in their work on Trust & Transparency, Environment and Community development including their global ‘Street to School’ programme—A five-year commitment recognising every child’s right to education because education is insurance for a better life. Previously David held leadership roles in HR and has experience in the charity, retail, banking and e-commerce sectors.

Brought about in a new spirit of inclusive collaboration, this development is a huge step forward for children’s rights in general. For street-connected children, one of the defining features of their lives is uncertainty and the unknowns include: How will their governments treat them? How will society and the local community treat them? How will they get jobs and be made to feel safe? Who will fund everything that is needed for this minority group to fulfil their potential? Who even knows or cares they are there? These challenges have now been officially recognised and will start to be systematically addressed.

The General Comment was not only a long-term advocacy goal, but also one of the three big goals to emerge from the research completed to date. It was the first time that Aviva had looked at one issue globally. David Schofield explained: ‘In 2009, we were looking to extend the reach of our positive impact in society. Our purpose as a global insurance company is to free people from fear of uncertainty, and perhaps no one in our communities faces this more than a child on the street. Helping the most vulnerable in our community has been part of our heritage for over 300 years and we realised that education is insurance for these children. We had found a cause that really resonated with our people and stakeholders. This is something that our whole organisation could get behind with everything that we bring, including our influence and marketing expertise that our partners told us could be vital in shining a big yellow spotlight on an issue that’s so often invisible.’

For the CSC, the plight of street children has been top of mind ever since the 1993 Candelaria Massacre in Brazil.
DEFINITIONS

Street-connected Children

Street-connected children are hard to define. Experience has shown that each nation faces the phenomenon in different ways and the perceptions of street-connected children vary widely. That said, there are commonalities that can be learnt from and shared through wider research and networks. Children may rely on the streets for a place to sleep, work, eat and avoid stressful family life or events, but generally, the experience is characterised by the need to survive. Some street children live on the streets with their families and may even be born there. The process to ‘leave the streets’ behind is another concern for policymakers and NGOs. Discussions of social reintegration, jobs, birth registration and education become significant. The complexity of the phenomenon and solutions can often overwhelm those who try to help, especially those from the business sector.

An Inclusive Collaboration

Inclusive collaboration is a term that has been used explain our particular brand of collaboration for street-connected children’s rights. The characteristics or principles of inclusive collaboration are about coming to the table as equals and playing to strengths, working together, holding open the need for convergent and divergent voices, and staying true to the people at the centre of it all — street-connected children. Kerri-Ann O’Neill, explained, “The traditional multi-stakeholder engagement term did not quite fit what we felt we were doing — it suggested that organisations get together quite rigidly ‘as business’, ‘as a development organisation,’ as ‘the UN’ to achieve something, whereas we were all prepared to come as equals knowing we needed to be humble about our weaknesses, play to our strengths and keep the street child firmly at the core of the discussions. That’s why we called our partnership an inclusive collaboration.”

The positive impact of this early research effort to fuel debate on policy changes was of consequence to Aviva during our first programme review to make advocacy one of the key work streams of the programme, alongside employee engagement and development. This formal update to the goals of the Street to School programme led to the development of further exciting research and collaborations that have helped to bring together a community of people and organisations round the world to help advance street-connected children’s rights. For example, Aviva has NGO partnerships in more than 17 countries helping more than 800,000 street children. Many of these partnerships have also been supported by CSC to develop participatory research techniques. Together, Aviva and CSC also created the advocacy day International Day of the Street Child on April 12th each year.

Extending the partnership beyond the two organisations, especially to the OHCHR, has been a marked achievement. This move started when CSC and Aviva got an unprecedented opportunity to work with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and OHCHR on a ground-breaking report “Protection and Promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the streets” for a 2011 UN Human Rights Council Session. Schofield recalled: “We were in Geneva on invitation from CSC and I was listening to the appetite of the governments to do more for street-connected children but we also heard them say they did not know what to do. That’s when the OHCHR, CSC, Aviva and UNICEF sat down to do something different and co-sponsor a report which would help move from goodwill to action and explain what was needed to move forwards. I’ll never forget walking away from that meeting thinking this was now our number one priority to create a legacy for street children. My colleagues at Aviva agreed and we added advocating for better rights for street-connected children to our goals for the programme.”

It was the 2011 report that really helped to change the conversation among the government missions on this issue. The Human Rights Council Resolution 16/12 on the protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the streets was a direct consequence of the report (which attracted more co-sponsors than almost any other resolution since the creation of the Human Rights Council in 2006). The success of the report at the Council highlighted to OHCHR, Aviva and CSC that multiple voices were the key to this topic in order to break through the crowded policy agenda and this is where much of the focus has been since 2011. Latterly, for example, Aviva galvanised the business community by asking CSR Asia to produce a report, “Joining the Dialogue: Vulnerable Children and Business” with the Adidas group, The Body Shop, HSBC, Microsoft and Kuoni as one way of expanding the voices.

Interestingly, Singapore itself does not have the same experience of the phenomenon of street children in the same way as its neighbours but the nation understands this is a key concern for the ASEAN member states. The idea of the roundtable was to bring together a variety of voices from across the region. This included the governments of Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Singapore; NGOs large and small who are based in the region; business, academia; international organisations such as the UN, International Labour Organisation and UNICEF; and from street-connected children themselves through a series of hard-hitting film footage. The participants also benefited from the presence of the global United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Bernard Gastaud.

THE JOURNEY TO THE SINGAPORE ROUNDTABLE — PROMOTING AND PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN WORKING AND/OR LIVING ON THE STREET

The inclusive roundtable discussion in Singapore in 2013 was born out of a recommendation in the 2011 report to hold multi-actor regional consultations on street-connected children’s rights. Southeast Asia was chosen as a pilot region because the issue of street children is a key one for the area. Singapore is a natural hub to convene and was selected as the site of the discussion.
The objectives of the roundtable were published in advance of the event to enable the participants to prepare. The goals were to:

- discuss the critical issues relating to street-children;
- examine and discuss the obligations of the private sector, within the context of the children’s rights and business principles;
- reflect on examples of how different stakeholders have been working in partnerships to promote and protect the rights of street-connected children;
- identify common success factors, barriers and therefore priority areas for further attention and collaboration;
- reflect on how the learning and outcomes from this process of cross-sector engagement can be shared;
- support international, national and local level follow-up aimed at accelerating the collaboration to implement the recommendations of the UN OHCHR 2011 report; and
- ensure that the views of street and other vulnerable children are fully considered.

The roundtable resulted in some breakthroughs that led to shifts in consensus. By bringing together such a variety of views, the two days of discussions were at times enlightening, frustrating, overwhelming and exciting.

Firstly, the long-held concept of removing “the street” from the lives of children who rely on it for survival was questioned. After 30 years of relatively concerted action on taking children off the streets and seeing no real game-changing solutions, it was time to adopt a different approach—to see how the streets can be safe for them. Children and young people should not be encouraged to the streets, yet what are ways to minimise the harm they suffer there and strengthen their ability to help children fund a future beyond? How does one turn sceptics to friends especially when the perceived sceptics are often the very people who should be street children champions such as police officers, community figures, welfare agencies, NGOs and a sensitised society? How can it be ensured that violators of street children’s rights are reported and punished? How can the cycle of helplessness of families who have spent generations on the streets be brought to an end?

Secondly, it was acknowledged that vulnerable children need an ecosystem of support. The people who have degrees of direct and indirect influence on an individual child who uses the street as a focal point of his/her life were mapped out. For example, family members have a direct influence on street-connected children, and big business and international donors have an indirect influence. How do these influencers become better sensitised to their role and how can what “good” looks like be demonstrated? How do street-connected children help in shaping this role support with the ecosystem.

Finally, the roundtable recognised that this ecosystem needs greater avenues to work together more broadly around the issue of street-connected children, to share insights, research, interesting practices and stories of what’s working. What were simpler ways to communicate and share, for instance, via social media, to keep the agenda of this group of children alive for wider stakeholders and the wider public year-round? Street children are one of the most vulnerable groups that still do not have a recognised UN day, which would give the issue global recognition and permanence, and act to hold states to account.

For street-connected children, the agenda waxes and wanes in the public imagination—we are in danger of needing a tragedy like the tragic shooting in Brazil in the early 1990s to move this issue forward. We agreed to stay connected as an expert group and to nurture a much wider global audience who we hope will become a global community of advocates for street-connected children’s rights.

Three big goals that emerged from our approach, inspired by participatory research, are listed below.

1. Social contract and Mapping: Structuring inclusive collaboration for children living and/or working on the street in practice – a collaborative pilot

At the roundtable discussion, it was strongly felt that due to the challenge of working with street-connected children, there were lost opportunities for structuring collaboration to help change things on the ground. Examples of good collaboration did exist but it was patchy and in pockets. Street-connected children, like other vulnerable children, need a reliable child-rights-based ecosystem that is moving in one direction to identify, prioritise and address situations on the ground.

In this action the plan was to co-create a way forward by illustrating what a child-rights-based ecosystem on the ground is by identifying a case study location in Southeast Asia. This is different about these goals is there is not simply a single leader. Instead, it is up to the community to find the way through and to put these goals into their thinking as they move forward. This means that leadership will keep emerging from different stakeholders and the effort will become sustainable.

2. Advocacy and Social Media

Throughout the roundtable, it was felt that the creation of an online hub, specific to Southeast Asia, would empower the participants to better share information and good practices, to avoid duplication and establish partnerships of trust that can help further advocacy and social media efforts. Such a hub would focus on the insights and research surrounding street-connected children in Southeast Asia and be an enabler for other key action points from the roundtable, including a collaborative pilot in Indonesia.

Furthermore, during the roundtable discussion, the importance of engaging a wider audience through social media and international platforms was emphasised. This is indeed a specific area where more sharing is required.

3. Practical Tools and Guidance: Encourage and support the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to develop a General Comment on Children in Street Situations

Throughout the discussions, it was apparent that there was a need for substantial, authoritative and independent guidance to governments and other stakeholders around the issue of street children. This will act as a “protocol” providing practical guidance that all countries would be able to implement and refer back to when ensuring that street children’s rights are realised.

This guidance can help establish institutional collaboration at regional levels, which can then be replicated at national levels.

It was recognised that these were not necessarily the easy things to do but they were the right things to be done to change the current status for street children’s rights. Indeed, the subsequent announcement of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to produce a General Comment has been one of the significant successes the talks helped to bring about.
THE ROUNDTABLE’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND POWERFUL IMAGERY TO SUPPORT ITS INCLUSIVE COLLABORATION PRINCIPLES

Given the principles of inclusive collaboration that underpinned the talks, what was needed was to make sure the issue was accessible to a broader audience, given that everyone had something to contribute. It was important to ensure the roundtable talks and the work on street children’s rights did not become the exclusive domain of the experts.

This thinking led to the social media campaign which used the hashtag “#togetherforstreetkids.” A powerful animation was put together to share the basis of the discussion in a simple and engaging way. Social media users were invited to join the discussion through a series of questions including: “How do we together take responsibility for street children?” In a short space of time and as the roundtable discussion was happening, over one million impressions of the campaign were recorded and the active contributions from members of society was flagged live to the roundtable participants spurring them into action. O’Neill elaborated, “Because being inclusive was our goal, the social media was in an early part of the discussions with OHCHR and CSC, but we recognised we had not worked with this medium before in this way. As the roundtable got closer, we encouraged the social media campaign to be used the hashtag “#togetherforstreetkids.” A powerful animation was put together to share the basis of the campaign’s thinking which led to the social media campaign which underpinned the talks, what was needed was to make sure the issue was accessible to a broader audience, given that everyone had something to contribute. It was important to ensure the roundtable talks and the work on street children’s rights did not become the exclusive domain of the experts.

After the roundtable, another animation was produced to summarise the findings and the three big action areas (see Figure 1 to 6). The animation complements the long reports and ensures everyone can understand what needs doing and what might take us to a new future.

THE POWER AND FUTURE OF INCLUSIVE COLLABORATION

The meaningful experience of inclusive collaboration is one that Aviva could not have predicted at the start of our journey with street children. Yet, it has become the organisation’s brand of multi-stakeholder engagement to create powerful permanent change in our community. Admittedly, Aviva, like nearly all business actors, had not considered advocacy a specific goal within our community programme at the beginning. It has been a major lesson for how we as a business engage with communities. O’Neill remarked, “If a business provides staff volunteers for something like packing food parcels for underprivileged members of the community as part of its community engagement, you can be curious and ask: Why do these poverty alleviation programmes exist? Why do members of the community need this support? Can I find out a bit more and potentially get my company to help create a more permanent change?”

With CSC and OHCHR’s patient guidance, Aviva dared to wonder what it could do for street children and what legacy its work could provide. As a result, it is imperative that the work with other businesses consider how business supports vulnerable children’s rights, and utilise discussions and interactions with governments directly, such as in Indonesia on street children’s birth registration rights or with government-run schools in India to better integrate street children into education. Looking ahead, Schofield added, “This kind of change cannot be achieved by anyone in isolation. Each of us has part to play by listening and learning from one another, can we find the kind of breakthrough opportunities for children’s rights that we all dream of. Being one of the catalysts for this kind of ‘inclusive collaboration’ is now part of our strategy; it guides our approach to partnership, calls us to embrace the dialogue available on social media and offers the biggest hope of turning goodwill into focused and innovative action.”

There is still a lot more to do to promote and protect street-connected children’s rights and people could begin to consider how they might participate to make a difference. As an African proverb goes, “If you want to go far, go alone; if you want to go further, go together.”

Endnotes
3 Summarised in the report, “Discussion and action points from the inclusive roundtable discussion in South East Asia on ‘Promoting and Protecting the rights of children working and/or living on the street’,” www.aviva.com/corporate-responsibility/community-development/case-study-getting-together-for-street-kids/
4 Aviva’s Street to School Project, www.aviva-street-to-school.com
6 Ibid.
7 For more information on participatory research techniques with street-connected children please see www.aviva.com/media/upload/PASSPORT_EXEC_SUMM_Low_Res.pdf
8 Street Children’s Day, www.streetchildrenday.org
12 “Promoting and protecting the rights of children working and/or living on the street,” www.aviva.com/media/upload/together-for-street-kids.pdf

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figures 1 to 6 summarise findings and three action areas. Source: Aviva.
Why do some communities mobilise and respond to a crisis while others collapse? This question of resilience is increasingly important in the face of complex global challenges today. Building on his research findings, James Arvanitakis discusses the question, confirming that resilience is both specific to culture and context.

Images of “natural” disasters are common across all forms of media. These images flow from both high- and low-income nations, from the global north and south. From drought in Australia to floods in Bangladesh, nations are confronted with increasingly urgent challenges driven by diverse forces such as climate change, ‘poor urban planning’ and high population concentrations.

The images are powerful ones and are often presented in such a way as to produce potent emotions, particularly if there is an attempt to fundraise for the affected communities. While increased funding is always welcome to assist impacted communities, images that portray the local population as lacking any agency or sense of power can be highly misleading.

In a 2012 study, international aid agency Oxfam International highlighted how negative portrayals of Africans as vulnerable, war-torn, and failing to manage their own affairs continue to create obstacles to African development. Oxfam’s findings captured the concerns of Binyavanga Wainaina in his 2005 essay “How To Write About Africa,” a cutting satire of wealthy world media representations of this massive and complex continent as apparently inept, corrupt and even as a single homogenous country. This feeds into what has been described as the “White Saviour Industrial Complex”—an update on the “white man’s burden” found at the core of colonial projects.

The truth, however, as reported by Aldrich and Green among others, is that communities affected by disasters are frequently the best placed to respond. Again, this is not to deny that outside assistance is not important or that many communities are not vulnerable. But the reproduction of “thoughtless third world” imagery perpetuates centuries of colonialism wrapped in the “white man’s burden.” The message is that the inability of the indigenous population to manage themselves requires intervention by external western forces.

This paper brings together the findings of two projects, one on citizenship and the other looking at community responses to climate change-driven disaster. Citizenship and community resilience are central to each project. The findings are neither surprising nor unexpected: strong communities with citizens that experience a sense of agency and social capital establish “cultures of resilience” that respond quickly and competently when confronted with disaster. Such communities also have strong links between local populations and governance systems, a sense of accountability, and a thick, two-way flow of information between expert knowledge systems and localised knowledge. Yet despite some exceptional research, discussed in greater detail below, this area is often under-investigated in resilience literature.

Much has been written about resilience—specifically in terms of climate change. Over the last decade, various Australian government agencies at local, state and federal levels have presented strategies on resilience. These strategies tend to focus on specific aspects of resilience: communications, processes and policies, and engineering strategies of resilience. Such literature provides important insights into how to prepare for and deal with natural disasters.

In contrast, the focus here is on “cultures of resilience,” and to this end, the following question is asked: Why do some communities mobilise and respond to a crisis, and why do others collapse? Building on the work of Wilson and others, I am specifically investigating cultural practices and social capital that allow communities to be prepared for a crisis and respond appropriately. This question of resilience is increasingly important in our contemporary world as climate change, rural and urban migration patterns, population, competing demands for land and water, globalisation and integration of economies create complex challenges for communities across the world. Importantly, I am not seeking “magic ingredients,” but rather to build on our findings, which confirm that resilience is both cultural and context-specific.

ON RESILIENCE...

A working definition of resilience is necessary before further elucidating its content. According to the Strategic National Framework on Community Resilience by the UK Cabinet Office, resilience is:

...the capacity of an individual, community or system to adapt in order to sustain an acceptable level of function, structure and identity, and the ability of a system or organisation to withstand and recover from adversity.

While such a definition touches on cultural aspects, the focus is on systems and structures. The UK Cabinet then highlights the relationship between “communities and individuals” and emergency services as:

|Communities and individuals harnessing local resources and expertise to help themselves in an emergency, in a way that complements the response of the emergency services.

This definition falls short: it begins to look at community expertise and its relationship to state agencies, but not at a more complex understanding of local culture. It is this more multi-dimensional understanding of resilience that I turn to next. This section relies on a recent collaboration where we found that there remained a general lack of understanding of and research on resilience from a socio-cultural perspective. In this approach to “cultures of resilience,” the focus is on everyday interactions and lived experiences. It is context-specific.

Today, the concept of resilience is often referred to in terms of responding to the environmental challenges listed above. In the “cultures of resilience” project, we first set out to understand historical context. That is, historically, resilience is presented and generally understood as a set of behaviours that sit with the individual. This approach, which Wilson argues is relevant within the broad discipline of psychology, lacks the socio-cultural dimensions required for the wider pursuit of identifying and understanding community resilience. As Lahire has pointed out, individual resilience fails to account for “the acquisition of knowledge” that connects the individual to the broader social world—or at least the person’s social context.
“...RESILIENCE IS MORE THAN AN ABILITY TO SIMPLY SURVIVE. WE MUST UNDERSTAND RESILIENCE AS BEING ‘ACUMULATED’ AND AS AN ‘ACUMULATING SET OF RESOURCES’ THAT ALLOWS INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES TO MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD AROUND THEM, AND TO ADOPT, TO ADAPT AND EVEN THRIVE.”

While we draw this distinction, it is also important to resist a simple binary: “individual vs. social.” This is because resilience flows between an individual and the social body, or communities. Resilience may be collected and built, conserved and dispersed, weaving the fabric of social capital.

Consequently, resilience is not considered here to be “inanimate,” but as something that is learnt, developed, shared and understood—within a specific context. Resilience must be understood, as Luthar et al. argue, as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.”

Drawing this together, we can understand “resilience” as not only dynamic but also as something that builds up cumulatively, through various kinds of knowledge and experiences, skills and capabilities, and positive effects such as hope. In contrast to Luthar et al.’s findings on individual children—of a “positive adaptation” in relation to a significant adversity—what I want to consider here are the ongoing and daily challenges confronted by communities and the way that these assist in the possible ‘formation’ of resilience.

It is important to avoid simple linear and causal links between risk, crisis and a response that leads to and promotes resilience. Linear approaches fail to understand more diverse and context-specific challenges and responses. A more refined frame is offered by Bottrell, who argues that “cultural practices, social processes, social change and the nature of individual-social relations are all significant aspects of the context for analysing resilience.” Resilience can be obtained by “engagement in processes.” This indicates a kind of agency of citizenship, although it does not have to be in formal civic processes.

To reiterate: resilience is more than an ability to simply survive. We must understand resilience as being “accumulated” and as an “accumulating set of resources” that allows individuals and communities to make sense of the world around them, and to adopt, to adapt and even thrive. In this way, resilience fits with Aldrich’s use of “social capital,” it is immersed in the practices and capacities of the “everyday” and expanded by the complex social networks that we build and with which we engage.

Resilience must also be linked to varied dimensions of citizenship. In a major work sponsored by Oxfam, Duncan Green argues that effective social relationships need a combination of active citizens and effective states. Action to “change the world” and confront challenges, including disaster, hinges on the agency at the core of citizenship.

Related to this agency is the ability to envisage the future that citizens desire: what Ghassan Hage calls the “capacity for hope.” Hope is a vision for a better world, in whatever way the community defines this. Hage’s is an active and productive hope—achieved through actions—expanding on his earlier work exploring the links between societal and personal hope. The hope that drives resilience, then, moves beyond the individual into a societal sphere. This is something Bauman also emphasises: “the pursuit of happiness is a collective affair.”

The final point to highlight here is that resilience is not fixed or irreversible. Resilience, like the social capital that feeds it, is an ongoing project. It requires continuous efforts, negotiations and re-negotiations.

With this background outlined, I now turn to discuss a selection of the sites of resilience. The sites of resilience are the focus of the two projects reported here.

SITES OF RESILIENCE

As mentioned, this article reports on findings from two broad research projects. The first project is “Promoting Young People’s Citizenship in a Complex World,” based at the University of Western Sydney. The focus is very much on how contemporary political processes and many civic education programmes act to disengage and disempower young people. This occurs as everyday politics and the formal political sphere become increasingly disconnected.

The second project, “Waterways,” ranges across locations as diverse as Botany Bay in Australia, Songkhla Lake in southern Thailand, rural Bangladesh, the Ganges in India and Chesapeake Bay in the United States. The commonality of these communities is that they are living and relying on waterways where fresh water and the ocean meet, and have been identified as being on the front line of climate change.

The sites host communities that displayed both resilience and collapse. In Songkhla Lake, Southern Thailand, there is a cross-section of communities rich with stories of resilience and hope: the rice farmers who reinstated ceremonies to celebrate successful harvests and share indigenous rice seeds resistant to changing climatic patterns; the small-scale savings club that donated a percentage of income to Songkhla Lake regeneration and conservation.

These communities are dealing with and resolving resource conflict at the most grassroots levels, with different types of exchange. While financial transactions often link even the smallest of communities to the global economy, there is also exchange of cultural practices. Here it is possible to find evidence of the exchange of what I have described elsewhere as “the cultural commons”: visions of hope, trust, shared intellect and a sense of safety.

This is not to romanticise these communities. Travelling around the lake, there are also communities engulfed in despair. Some are overwhelmed with the challenges, and lack the cultural and social capital to respond. Having moved from abundance to scarcity, the future looks bleak.

In contrasting the communities that have shown resilience and those that have been overwhelmed, there is no single magic ingredient. Rather, what exists are constituted factors, from community agency and citizenship, to government involvement, lines of accountability and social capital. A positive combination of such elements potentially builds cultures of resilience.

As this research continues, our understandings and insights will solidify. The sharing of this knowledge will be an invaluable element in confronting the changing
climate, which these communities are experiencing first hand. By building an international network to share knowledge that assists people in building resilience, this research has an important purpose.

BEYOND SYSTEMS TO CULTURES OF RESILIENCE

Before presenting the findings of this research in more detail, I want to recap that there is no single secret ingredient to identifying or building the dimensions of cultures of resilience; and that the research confirms that any discussion about resilience must be context-specific. This does not mean that it is not possible to learn from other jurisdictions or experiences, but rather that research relating to resilience must be alive to the specific circumstances faced.

Some of the challenges that are common to the Waterways communities are depicted in Figure 1. While most of these are self-explanatory, it is worth noting a number of specifics that add levels of complexity to the possible responses. There is a need for more nuanced understandings of the responses to the challenges confronted.

With respect to characteristcs, there are large populations spread across broad geographic areas at these research sites. Some regions have high population density while others are sparse. Consequently, there are highly variable land uses that make some populations more vulnerable than others. This is one reason why local and national authorities should not take a one-size-fits-all approach to problem-solving. Similarly, the populations are not, and should not be seen as, homogeneous. Some citizens are highly active and engaged, others are disenfranchised, displaced and disempowered. In addition there exist internally vulnerable groups such as the aged and those who are difficult to reach in remote areas.

Figure 1: Context-specific challenges

Dimension 1: Governance and Trust

As mentioned above, Green's thesis on active citizenship and effective states demonstrates that resilient communities tend to have the ability to establish and take advantage of formal and informal governance structures. These range from government agencies and legal instruments to the less formal networks that are fundamental to building social capital and responding to crisis. These interactions are not forged suddenly but accumulated as part of everyday cultural practices. Further, Putnam's analysis emphasises the establishment of trust between local community and government. When trust is built and maintained between different sections of community and the state, communities can both prepare for and respond to ongoing change and moments of crisis.

Dimension 2: Lines of Responsibility

Related to the above points are clear “lines of responsibility.” That is, in cultures of resilience, there is a clear understanding of where responsibility lies in the response to change—be it gradual or at a crisis point. Crucially, the community does not wait for authorities to respond; but nor does authority recuse itself from responsibility. This is a negotiated process that can lead to what Wilson describes as accumulated resilience, fundamental to building of trust and social capital. If built on trust, the process harnesses the dynamic nature of resilience, as lines of responsibility can be renegotiated and communicated, with gaps identified and overlaps harmonised.

Dimension 3: Expert and Localised Knowledge

A third dimension is what Alan Irwin has called “citizen science,” a combination of expert and local knowledge. A combination of knowledge allows expert systems to be both reflective and aptly applied to context-specific challenges, building a culture of resilience. Expert knowledge must respond to the local context, but not be uni-directional. The flow of knowledge goes both ways: expert knowledge learns from local experiences and vice versa. In our fieldwork, there were many circumstances when the knowledge sourced from the local community could feed into expert knowledge development. Once again, mutual trust is fundamental for this to occur.

Dimension 4: Communication Process and Technologies

The final dimension is the role of communication channels and access to working technologies. Governance structures, flow of information across knowledge systems and community members, and relevant information and preparation depend on information and communication technology suitable to the terrain, economy, and other conditions. This means knowing and up-skilling use of available technologies: from social media to radios, newspapers and television.

These four dimensions are essential to the accumulation and maintenance of cultures of resilience. They are lessons that can cross contexts. They are inherently necessary within communities; yet rely on the ongoing building of trust between communities and different expert systems. Instead of a secret ingredient, there are well-defined dimensions.
Bangladesh and Arsenic: A case study

I would like to present a case study which highlights several features of resilience in arsenic-affected communities in Bangladesh. The history of arsenic in Bangladesh has been well documented. It has created one of the biggest mass poisonings in history, with an estimated 77 million people in Bangladesh now suffering from arsenic poisoning.17

While Bangladesh has confronted many natural disasters including the 2007 tsunami, the arsenic poisoning is specifically associated with the fact that much of its water is unfit for consumption. This is because significant portions of the surface water are heavily polluted by agricultural, domestic and industrial sources and a large proportion of the accessible ground water is arsenic-affected. Nevertheless, much of the population has been reliant on, and consumed arsenic-affected groundwater over the last 40 years.18

The poisoning came about through human folly, with a geological twist. The freshwater from the Bengal delta where Bangladesh is now situated is mainly filled by flows from the Himalayas. Through rain, melting ice caps and erosion, the water that flowed down the mountains collected many different types of sediment, and one of these sediments contained arsenic. As water and sediments flowed down the major river systems and tributaries, arsenic eventually got deposited in the delta. There it stayed. For many years the population drew surface-level water in ways that avoided the arsenic that had been deposited at the base of the delta.

This all changed in the 1960s. There were two reasons why. The first was that the ‘green revolution’ saw the farming community encouraged by the World Bank and United Nations to enter the global economy and start commercial-level agriculture. The commercial demand for water led farmers in these areas to start accessing the ground water that, unbeknownst to them, was arsenic-affected. Eventually this arsenic entered the food system. As a result of interventions by the World Bank and others, international agencies led by UNICEF in the 1970s started building 50-metre deep wells to give people access to what they thought would be safe drinking water. This resulted in the building of millions of shallow tube wells for drinking purposes. This process continued until the 1990s, causing a slow poisoning of much of the population.

The international agencies and their impacts then went from bad to worse. When it was eventually discovered that many of the tube wells were poisoning the population, the international agents started a testing process. They painted the tube wells that were found to be arsenic-affected, red. The wells that were given the all-clear were painted green. There were two significant problems with this non-local solution. The first was the local population had no cultural reference to these colours. Secondly, water moves. What may be a clean tube well today may not be so in a month or two.

One organisation working with local communities to respond to this disaster is the Arsenic Mitigation and Research Foundation (AMRF).19 The AMRF seeks to bring together various elements that establish and build the cultures of resilience discussed above. It is based in Bangladesh while working with individuals and organisations from the Netherlands and Australia. By analysing the way that AMRF has worked with local communities to respond to the arsenic poisoning, we see how each of the four dimensions outlined above are manifested.

To begin with, the AMRF in association with the local community has established various health clinics, particularly in areas affected by arsenic poisoning. The AMRF also works with individuals and organisations from the Netherlands and Australia to establish these clinics. To assist those who are showing signs of arsenic poisoning, the agency simultaneously trains local community members to become paramedics, addressing other health issues including maternal health. Working in this way builds levels of trust while combining external and local knowledge (see Dimension 1). Furthermore, both the arsenic health and broader medical programmes combine localised and expert knowledge. By working with local community members and relying on their localised knowledge, the aim is not to simply import outside expertise but to train for the success of the health program (Dimension 3).

The AMRF also coordinates the building of 250-metre deep tube wells that draw water from far below the arsenic affected groundwater. While the AMRF runs an external organisation to build the wells, the local community identifies sites to ensure the wells are accessible to all. Part of this process includes establishing a management committee to administer the well. This creates the strong governance structures (Dimension 1) and very clear lines of responsibility (Dimension 2), outlined as so crucial above. Together, the management committee members and health workers build channels for clear communication on the issue of arsenic and broader health issues (Dimension 4). According to the AMRF, these lines of communication and governance structures have spread across the community as other challenges arise.

Finally, it is noted that the wells are designed and built in such a way that the local community can maintain them. Rather than employing some kind of inappropriate technology that continually requires external expertise, the design of these site-specific deep-water wells means that they can be maintained locally. This reflects the element of utilising appropriate technology (Dimension 4).

While each of these dimensions exists individually, it is the way that they combine to create the sense of agency and social capital that are fundamental in thriving cultures of resilience.
Conclusion: The way forward

In his work, Hage draws heavily on Pierre Bourdieu to argue that “capitals are specific to the field in which they are valued—the more you accumulate the more you become capable of operating efficiently in that field.”1 Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.”1 This accumulation of social capital is fundamental in building cultures of resilience, as emphasised across the literature, as across the globe. Bottrell argues that “social capital may function in dialectical relationship with resilience,”2 but this is conditional on an active, empowered and engaged citizenry.3 Together, these dimensions present us with communities that have some control over their lives: as circumstances change, so do they. This is the essence of cultures of resilience.

Endnotes
1 I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council for the Discovery Grant DP120104607 funding Promoting Young People’s Citizenship in a Complex World and the project team: Professor Bob Hodge, Ingrid Matthews, Anna Powell and Mitra Gusheh.
5 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
16 Wilson, Accumulating Resilience.
17 Ibid.
18 Aldrich, Building Resilience.
19 Wilson and Arvanitakis, “The Resilience Complex.”
21 Ibid.
22 Dorothy Bottrell, “Understanding ‘marginal’ perspectives: Towards a social theory of resilience,” Qualitative Social Work, 8, 3 (2009), 322.
23 Ibid.
26 Green, “How active citizens and effective states can change the world.”
31 Arvanitakis and Marren, “Putting the politics back.”
32 Members of The Waterways International Research Programme include: Paul Brown, Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales; Dr Crois Rammelt at People and Water; N. C. Narayanan, professor at the IIT Bombay; G. Gopakumar, former Head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Kerala; Jwanta Toom of the Prince of Songkhla University, Thailand; K.G. Padmakumar, associate director of research at the Kerala Agricultural University, Kumarakom; and Professor Deb Narayan Bandopadhyay of the Burdwan University, West Bengal.
34 Arvanitakis, The Cultural Commons of Hope.
35 Green, “How active citizens and effective states can change the world.”
37 Ibid.
38 Wilson, Accumulating Resilience.
Equity crowdfunding is already a reality in the for-profit sector, having been in Europe since 2010, and soon after, in the US. This new movement allows retail investors to participate not just in terms of shareholding, but also at times with voting rights in start-up companies.

Using intermediary organisations, sophisticated investors are able to become direct shareholders in early-stage businesses. Such investments are considered high-risk, given that most start-ups do fail, and that payout of dividends is rare. Investors therefore depend on the company being bought out in order to liquidate their investments, in which case the returns may be several-fold. However, the crowdfunding approach means that this risk is spread over many more people.

As one such intermediary, Crowdcube is Britain’s largest and the world’s first equity crowdfunding platform, targeted exclusively at investors who are sufficiently sophisticated to understand risks and make their own investment decisions. More than £37 million has been successfully invested in 143 companies through Crowdcube so far, with the average investment being £2,500, and 52 percent of investors being keen on some role in the business, either as an adviser or in a non-executive role.

And in the US, the CrowdFund Intermediary Regulatory Advocates and Return on Change have been working together to help create new legislation that will permit organisations to engage in equity crowdfunding.

These developments are worth following for what they might foretell for the non-profit sector. What if equity crowdfunding could be applied to non-government organisations (NGOs) as well? What if the regular donor base of an NGO could not only (partially) own the non-profit organisation to which they give money, but also be selectively involved in executive decision-making processes? Donors might have a say in which staff an NGO hires, in its strategic planning process, as well as in deciding on the tactics used to achieve its mission.

Such a radical approach would breathe new life into the concept of the “people sector,” by letting people actively engage with organisations that purport to exist for their benefit. The idea would be a conceptually novel one for NGOs, were there not already examples from other sectors that exhibit some characteristics of equity crowdfunding.

In the public sector, we now have the example of the Seoul city government, where citizens who form the taxpayer base are now being engaged in the radical redesign of public services, as part of the vision of Mayor Park Won-Soon (who was elected with the campaign slogan, “Citizens are the Mayor”) to turn Seoul into an innovation-led Sharing City.

To achieve this vision, the Seoul Innovation Bureau was created as a cross-departmental innovation unit. The overriding principle of the bureau is that citizens are the main catalysts and sources of innovation, whether that be in identifying problems, clarifying issues or generating solutions. The bureau team captures and orchestrates this knowledge and insight.

The egalitarian roots of equity crowdfunding can be traced back to the beginnings of the cooperative movement, which started in Europe in the 19th century, and has since grown to become a collective which represents close to one billion individual members, according to the International Co-operative Alliance. Co-operatives are businesses owned and run by and for their members. Whether the members are the customers, employees or residents, they have an equal say in what the business does and a share in the profits.

Not to be left behind, even the world of football is getting into the game. Equity crowdfunding has already kicked off, with clubs such as AFC Wimbledon and Ebbsfleet United being amongst the prominent players using this approach to sustain themselves, albeit with mixed results. Issues on which team supporters can vote include electing the team’s directors, which players to sign, and how much a season ticket costs.

Given the increasing adoption of this approach, it would seem plausible that it could apply to NGOs as well. Yet many non-profit professionals would baulk at the idea of losing control over the management of certain aspects of their organisations. The general public, while well meaning, are generally seen as less knowledgeable and experienced, and therefore less capable of being involved in the day-to-day operations of a non-profit organisation. It also diminishes the professional judgement of staff who have invested decades of their lives in honing their craft.
Yet, the idea should not be dismissed too easily. While such an approach will not fit the vast majority of existing NGOs, there are certain conditions under which it may work:

a) When the mission is clearly spelt out, so that it is easily understood by all.

b) When the interventions by the community have a clear start and end point, where people can identify issues about which they have clear opinions and wish to have a say.

c) When outreach and community engagement is the raison d’être for the organisation, and getting ground support (in the form of volunteer support or widespread adoption of an idea) is crucial to the success of the mission.

Most of these factors can be found in current political campaigns (not to be confused with the longer process of governing) where the candidate’s main goal is to win the election through receiving the greatest number of votes.

How NGO equity crowdfunding furthers the idea of crowdfunding (as is practised in political campaigns), is that it truly democratizes the process by which change comes about. While voters in a political campaign really only have a brief period to vote once every few years, that process in NGO equity crowdfunding can be a continual one, as long as it is beneficial for the organisation.

Similarly in the non-profit sector, advocacy organisations which seek specific legislative changes may do well to employ an equity crowdfunding approach. As an illustrative example, if Greenpeace were to advocate for the consumption of only dolphin-safe tuna, on a global basis, it could launch a massive viral campaign that attacks corporates where it matters—their brand image. Such efforts have proved successful, typically with the acquiescence of major multinational corporations which would start providing only certified dolphin-friendly tuna, which is then followed by its competitors.

But such solutions, while creating significant change in the ethical shopping sector, would realistically only address the supply side of the problem. To effectively create mindset change on the demand side, to influence consumers who are not on Greenpeace’s mailing list to sit up and adjust their behaviour, requires a different set of tools.

With an equity crowdfunding approach, Greenpeace could possibly “de-risk” their community advocacy budget for dolphin-safe tuna by providing collaterals at a level which is proportional to the level of funding which is crowdsourced. While there are certain collaterals which would be specific to every campaign, such as soft copy banners and petition letters, as more people participate in the campaign, their collective voice could vote on (and fund) the creation of even more elaborate advocacy materials, such as the printing of a sustainable fishing guide and even inflatable dolphins with the Greenpeace logo.

Such materials could then be used in a way which is most effective to a community. The sustainable fishing guides may work best in Norway, but in other countries, perhaps what would get the message across is really a giant inflatable dolphin.

Not only will equity crowdfunding enable NGOs to multiply their often lean budgets, community decision-making will enable them to use the appropriate approach within each geographic area. This “social franchising” approach can ensure that while the overall message and branding are consistent, it can also be contextualised to the specific psychographic characteristics of each target group.

Equity crowdfunding in NPOs would not only boost involvement of those who give, but also ensure that the outcomes are aligned with the interests of those who are stakeholders in some way, especially those who are end beneficiaries. However, it is not a panacea, and those who seek to employ this novel strategy should find situations where it is most beneficial, that is where there is a clear mission, when community has clear start and end points, and when community engagement is almost as important as the mission itself.

Endnotes

1 Companies which provide what is known as “A shares” provide pre-emption rights and voting rights for shareholders, depending on the company’s Articles of Association. A small proportion of companies provide creative rewards for their shareholders voting rights on executive decisions within the company.


3 Crowdcube Infographic, www.crowdcube.com/infographic


6 These statistics are calculated from the subscription formula on International Co-operative Alliance’s 272 members from 94 countries (as of 20 October 2013). See also http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-facts-figures


8 “Buy this team: Fans don’t like clubs being run as businesses. The alternatives may be worse”, The Economist, 28 April 2012, www.economist.com/node/21553493

9 Ibid.
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