

SYSTEMS CHANGE

How do we develop ecosystems
that support innovation
for transformative change?

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ECOSYSTEMS?

A solutions' ecosystem is where "all the elements together draw strength from the diversity of contributions that collectively target all aspects of a given social challenge." -The Solution Revolution (2013)

An ecological analogy, an ecosystem describes the complex relationships and dynamic interactions between different individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, networks, and the system. Human ecosystems involve interconnected systems: social, economic, political and ecological.

Thinking about ecosystems facilitates deeper systems thinking; the analogy invokes both the 'architecture and infrastructure' of a system -- the habitat and keystone roles-- as well as the nature of systemic relationships -- the operative cultural norms and conditions that shape the flow of resources, energy and power.

As a conceptual framework, envisioning an ecosystem that supports innovation provokes not only an investigation into the current state of the system, but also an opportunity to consider what roles, mindsets and action are essential to cultivating an innovation ecosystem for collective impact and transformative change.

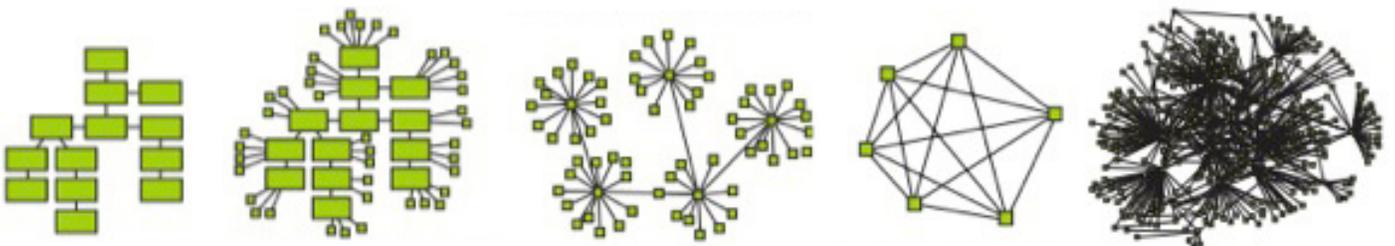
▲▲ *A good idea – whether a product, service, process or new way of thinking – does not take hold just because it happens to be a good idea. It needs to be planted in the right conditions and carefully cultivated to ensure it can take root and flourish* ▼▼

—Sherri Torjman, Caledon Institute (2013)

WHY ARE ECOSYSTEMS IMPORTANT?

1. Social innovations do not succeed simply because they are a good idea;
2. There are indispensable institutions that unlock social innovations' potential including: public policy, education, networks, funding, and an attuned financial market place;
3. The social innovation movement is enmeshed across sectors and scales, expanding globally and seeding spontaneously around the world;
4. Our greatest opportunity for tackling complex problems will be when dynamic, healthy innovation ecosystems unleash outcomes that are greater than the sum of the parts.

The powerful potential of developing a social innovation ecosystem introduces key challenges around the type of roles, infrastructure, supports and intangible conditions (culture) that will (a) foster conditions for continuous innovation and (b) cultivate the relationships that will craft the ecosystem towards transformative change.



▲▲ *Systems change looks more like a movement than like change led from either 'top down' or 'bottom up'. Successful systems changers need to understand how to orchestrate multiple points of intervention, and align diverse interests with a common goal.*

-- The Point People, "Systems Changers," systemschangers.com ▼▼

LEAPING BY LEARNING

In both the literature and early discussions on ecosystem building, several patterns around key learnings begin to emerge:

WORKING PAPER

“It is at the deeper human touch, self-catalyzing systemic change becomes a shared possibility.”

-- Joe Hsueh

PATTERN 1: COLLABORATION IS THE HUMAN FACE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

The nature of transformative relationships is collaborative. For entrepreneurs, innovators, policy makers and activists, the next peak in the journey is recognizing that our greatest strength is in our collective capacity. This is the third inflection point for the social change movement, moving from: (1) the moderate success of a good social change idea to; (2) recognizing the complexity of modern problems and the need to implement at scale for systems change to; (3) a shift in the very quality of social innovation practice toward diverse, collaborative forms, where scaling is just the beginning.

Shifting an ecosystem toward innovation for systemic social change involves moving beyond transactional collaboration and toward transformational collaboration. Reciprocity throughout the ecosystem enables risk through a sense of collective higher purpose and ambition.

Exemplary relationships will likely be those “that enable power sharing by using an asset-based approach and drawing on the tools of co-production that ‘help create collaborative and trusting relationships that give people the risk-friendly space they need to engage and behave in different ways.” -- Tim Draimin, Social Innovation Generation (SiG) National

PATTERN 2: RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE MEANS & ENDS

Transformative relationships are the source, means and outcome of social innovation. In their research on “The Network Secrets of Great Change Agents,” Julie Battilana & Tiziana Casciaro found that personal networks were critical for great change agents, determining that:

1. Change agents who were central in the organization’s informal network had a clear advantage, regardless of their position in the formal hierarchy.
2. People who bridged disconnected groups and individuals were more effective at implementing dramatic reforms, while those with cohesive networks were better at instituting minor changes.

PATTERN 3: MINDSET MATTERS

“Silicon Valley is not a place; it’s a mindset. The Valley’s ecosystem is fueled by culture, connectivity, and creativity -- Victor W. Hwang, The Rainforest Blueprint (2013)

Maturing an ecosystem that supports innovation will require nurturing an innovation mindset -- a positive culture of experimentation, challenging the status quo, working beyond short-term goals, pursuing connectivity, and empowering creativity within and across organizations.

PATTERN 4: A COMMON META-NARRATIVE IS NEEDED

“Narrative is crucial. Narratives help people understand how the systems they live in are socially constructed. They help us become aware of how we prop up failing systems, and how we can build new ones.” -- The Point People, “Systems Changers,” systemschangers.com

Fostering transformational collaboration will likely require a new meta-narrative that in turn nurtures new cultural expectations and assumptions. Narratives help make explicit the operational social contract and change it, inspiring a reorientation of what is ‘common sense.’

PATTERN 5: NEW LEADERSHIP PARADIGM

Fostering the conditions and capacities for transformative collaboration is an essential and challenging frontier. It is a challenge that has inspired several emerging frameworks for leading, facilitating, catalyzing and curating collaborative relationships, including:

1. Partnership brokering -- mediating social distance through catalytic connection and facilitation
2. Boundary spanning leadership -- gradually fostering interdependence and community to produce a nexus effect
3. Social curation -- holding the vision, managing conflict, illuminating assets and leveraging inspiration, authenticity and credibility to deepen relationships
4. Keystone individuals -- brokers of trust who integrate people into a larger contiguous system, influence others to orient towards long-term goals, and have authentic impact by making things happen

“It is not creative destruction alone that is sufficient. Far more important is creative assembly.”

-- Victor W. Hwang and Greg Horowitz, The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley (2012)

This Systems Change draft paper was produced by Social Innovation Generation (SiG).

SiG is a collaborative initiative seeking to address Canada’s social and ecological challenges by creating a culture of continuous social innovation. At SiG we define a social innovation to be an initiative, product or process that profoundly changes beliefs, basic routines, resource and authority flows of any social system in the direction of greater resilience. Successful social innovations have durability, impact and scale. The collaboration is comprised of: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, MaRS Discovery District, PLAN Institute and the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience. For more information visit www.sigeneration.ca