DO GOOD. BETTER.
GUIDEBOOK

BALLARD CENTER
BYU MARRIOTT

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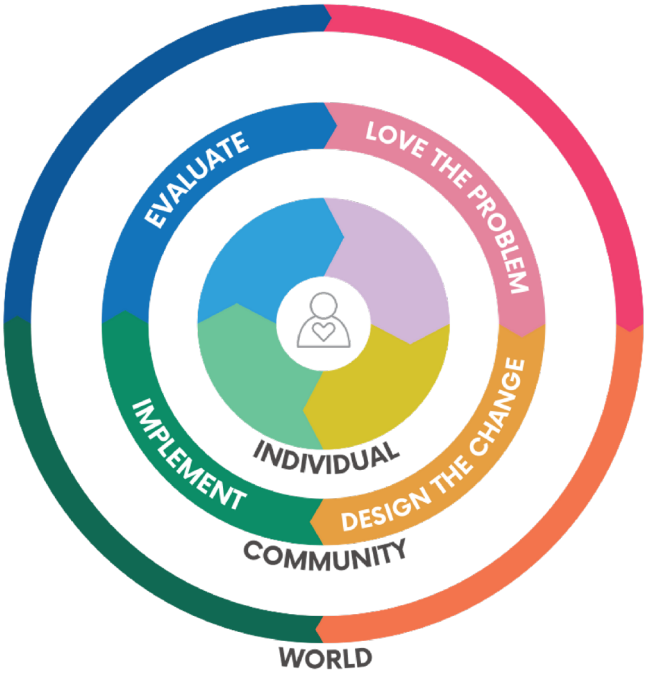
THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE



SOCIAL IMPACT SKILLS

- CALLING
- CARING FOR OTHERS
- MASTERY
- CAUSAL THINKING
- CO-CREATION
- SCALE
- FAITH

DO GOOD. BETTER. GUIDEBOOK

"Social impact refers to the improvement in the well-being of individuals and communities, and the enhancement in their ability to lead productive lives."[1]

-Sir Ronald Cohen

This Book Belongs to:

_____

Initial course concept created in 2012 by Jessamyn Shams-Lau, Lanée Jensen, and Todd Manwaring. Updated 2024 by Eva Witesman, Jill Piacitelli, Steven Fox, Aaron Miller, McKinley Harwood, Genny Cole, Anna Elmer, Grace Richards, Madison Sharp, Abby Marks, Jess Dansie Anderson, and Megan Bentley Atwood.
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DO GOOD. BETTER.

What is Social Impact?

Increase Human Flourishing

Humanitarian Work

Food Insecurity

Healthcare Access

Poverty Alleviation

Sustainability

Decrease Human Suffering

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FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL IMPACT


BALLARD CENTER
2003

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Explain the theme and purpose of the Do Good. Better. Guidebook.

2. Understand how to use the Guidebook.

3. Understand the Guidebook's overarching layout and content.

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, and especially within local communities, plenty of pressing problems demand solutions. There are individuals facing hunger, homelessness, displacement, abuse, illness, and so much more. When faced with such large and multifaceted issues, it's easy to feel powerless, like nothing a singular person does could possibly make a difference.

This Do Good. Better. Guidebook is designed to demonstrate how you, as an individual, possess the power necessary to enact real social change and contribute to a better world. Through this curriculum, you will develop the ability to approach social issues thoughtfully and analyze social ventures critically. The Guidebook supports this goal by breaking down complex concepts and enhancing learning through application-centered questions and activities.

BOOK THEME AND PURPOSE

At its center, the Do Good. Better. Guidebook reflects one core belief: social problems are solvable. By prioritizing compassion for the individual and beginning with intentional small-scale change, lasting impact can be achieved by individuals and organizations alike. Regardless of professional occupation, religious affiliation, political engagement, or social status, you can make an impact in the life of an individual using the skills taught in this book. However, this text is not intended to answer every question or teach every possible tool. There is no uniform solution for the complex problems facing the world. Meaningful progress will always require innovation, creativity, adaptability, and experimentation. Tools will evolve, new approaches will emerge, and best practices will continue to change over time.

The Do Good. Better. Guidebook strives to establish a strong foundation for effectively addressing a wide range of social problems. It outlines core principles of social impact, connects them to practical tools, and highlights their real-world applications. It teaches readers the importance of completely understanding an issue, the people experiencing it, and the players who can help build solutions.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the Guidebook not only helps readers identify root causes and design actionable responses but also equips them with the skills to analyze and assess real-world problems with depth and clarity. This new perspective shifts how readers think about social issues and encourages a focus on long-term, sustainable solutions rather than seemingly quick fixes.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For Students: The Guidebook is designed to help develop social problem-solving skills and engage

meaningfully in projects, discussions, and reflective writing. It can be used to implement learned principles into your own life and community.

For Professors: The Guidebook provides supplemental information to be used while teaching. It contains readings to prepare students prior to class instruction, case-based educational material, and class discussion tools.

For Universities: The Guidebook supports civic engagement initiatives and teaches practical social problem-solving skills. It can be adapted for general education or interdisciplinary requirements, serving as a foundation for multiple programs, projects, or organizations across campus.

For General Readers: The Guidebook can be used as a self-guided learning tool or a reference for approaching and solving social problems. The language is intended to be easily accessible for a public audience, making it a valuable resource for anyone wanting to make a difference, including active citizens, board members, business owners, community organizers, family members, nonprofit committees, and neighborhood organizations.

BOOK LAYOUT, STRUCTURE, AND SPECIAL FEATURES

The overall Guidebook structure follows the Ballard Center Social Impact Cycle and then each chapter introduces new principles in accordance with their phase of the cycle. Foundational concepts are introduced first, with more complex ideas added as the cycle advances. This progression reflects how social impact work unfolds in practice, with each stage building on the previous one rather than standing alone. An overview of each chapter is included below.

Chapter Overviews:

Chapter 1: Introduction – Provides an overview of the Guidebook's purpose, structure, and uses.

Chapter 2: Social Impact Roles – Explores the many roles within social impact work and how individuals can contribute to social change from any position.

Chapter 3: Social Impact Terms – Defines common terms used in social ventures to establish foundational vocabulary.

Chapter 4: Social Impact Cycle – Explains how solving social issues is a cyclical process that can be reiterated on different scales.

Chapter 5: Loving the One – Teaches the importance of focusing on one person and prioritizing his or her needs to ensure program effectiveness.

Chapter 6: Compassion – Defines compassion, its application, and how

it can be implemented to maximize impact.

Chapter 7: Identifying the One – Introduces affinity and proximity, issue triangles, and population and geography as tools to find an individual to center social impact work around.

Chapter 8: Scoping the Issue – Prepares changemakers to put social issues into context so they can be better understood and addressed.

Chapter 9: Secondary Research – Highlights the importance of conducting thorough research prior to developing a solution.

Chapter 10: Monolithic Thinking – Reveals the importance of breaking down complex social issues into manageable parts and avoiding thinking of social issues as monoliths.

Chapter 11: Ecosystem Mapping – Describes how to use an ecosystem map to identify effective practices already in place.

Chapter 12: Customer-Partner Orientation – Establishes those experiencing a social issue as part of the solution rather than beneficiaries in need of outside help.

Chapter 13: Interventions – Demonstrates how to analyze interventions already in place and calculate their effectiveness.

Chapter 14: Human-Centered Design – Instructs how to design solutions by focusing on the needs, experiences, and perspectives of the individuals affected.

Chapter 15: Theory of Change – Presents the "theory of change" concept and how it can be applied to create a clear plan for addressing a social issue.

Chapter 16: Funding and Legal Structures – Explores different funding and legal structures related to social problem solving.

Chapter 17: Scaling Social Impact – Guides changemakers in increasing the scale of their interventions.

Chapter 18: Outputs, Outcomes, and Impact – Distinguishes between an organization's actions, the changes that occur, and changes directly attributable to those actions.

Chapter 19: Outcome Measurement – Teaches how to track changes and measure outcomes following the implementation of an intervention.

Chapter 20: Impact Assessment – Explains how to design experiments and analyze results to determine causality and the overall impact of your efforts.

Chapter 21: Organizational Learning – Analyzes how companies and institutions can use organizational learning to continuously improve.

Chapter 22: Conclusion – Gives an outro to the key concepts and lessons presented throughout the Guidebook.

The Guidebook aims to foster more intentional, informed, and proactive engagement in addressing both local and global social problems.

SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined the purposes of the Guidebook. By following the objectives in each chapter, readers will learn how to thoughtfully approach and solve social issues while building the capacity to generate real change.

Endnotes

1 Cohen, Sir Ronald. *On Impact: A Guide to the Impact Revolution* (2020).


US
Against
Hunger

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL IMPACT ROLES

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Identify and define prominent social impact roles.

2. Describe the contributions of each role in global and community impact.

3. Recognize the social impact roles you currently occupy and the roles you wish to embody in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Picture a neighborhood reeling from a devastating storm. Amid fallen trees and scattered debris, something remarkable happens: a local teacher organizes food distribution for her students and their families. A high school student goes door-to-door checking on elderly neighbors. A small business owner donates hygiene and clean-up supplies. A city employee coordinates emergency services. These individuals aren't employed as social impact professionals, yet in a moment of crisis, each person steps into a social impact role. Contributing to social impact work does not often require a job application; instead, it calls for a specific mindset guided by a set of values, knowledge, and skills. It is a commitment to action, whether sparked by crisis or sustained by long-term vision. This chapter invites you to explore the many ways individuals, like you, contribute to a better world and how you might step into or expand your personal role in the work toward social change.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL IMPACT ROLES?

Social impact roles are the various positions and responsibilities people serve in to create positive societal change. These› roles exist all around you, woven into careers, communities, and everyday choices. They extend beyond paid labor, encompassing a wide range of activities, both personal and public, aimed at addressing and solving social issues.

These unique roles can be sorted into three main groups:

Personal Roles: Volunteering, advocacy, and informed voting can directly influence local communities and raise awareness.

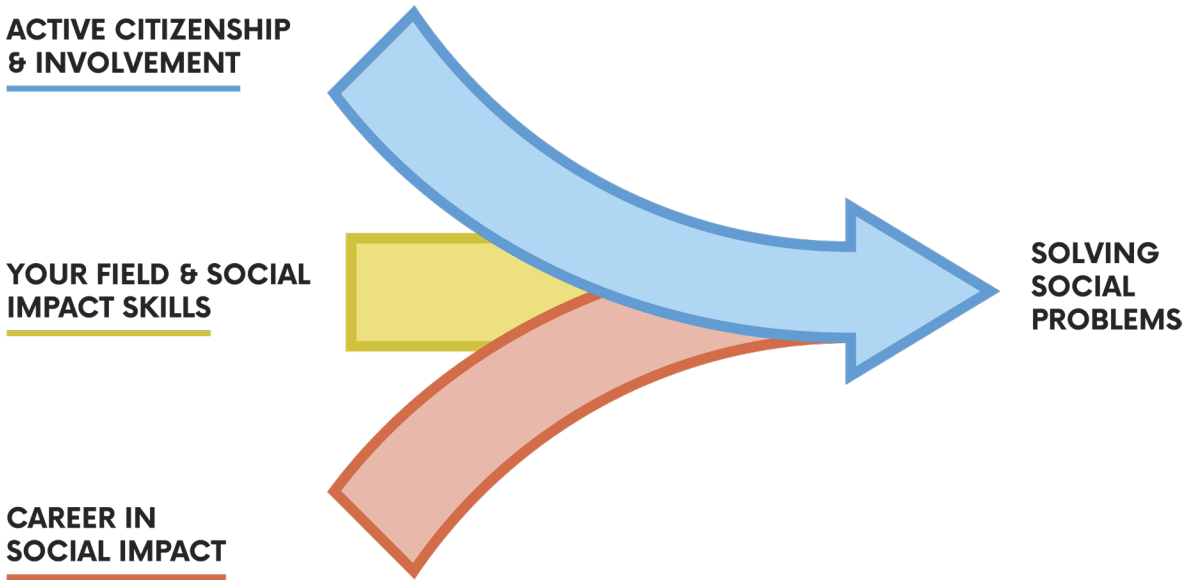
Field Integration: Applying social impact skills in other, often for-profit, professions increases reach and promotes broader societal benefits.

Professional Roles: Careers in nonprofit work, social enterprise, and policymaking drive systemic change and provide crucial support and expertise within the sector.

How do you envision yourself participating in social impact in your future roles?

WHY IS IT VALUABLE FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND DIFFERENT SOCIAL IMPACT ROLES?

Many people want to help change someone's life for the better and have different values that guide their desires and actions. [1] Each role, whether personal or professional, contributes something unique. When you identify and align with specific roles, you can



tailor your efforts to your strengths, collaborate more effectively with others, and maximize your contribution to social change.

Understanding social impact roles is crucial for several reasons:

1. **Targeted Contribution:** Knowing your role and the roles you can fill helps focus your efforts on specific areas where you can have the most impact.

2. **Flexibility:** You'll recognize that you and those around you can fulfill different roles at various times, or even multiple roles simultaneously, adapting to changing circumstances and needs.[2]

3. **Enhanced Impact:** Combining diverse skills and perspectives allows you to address complex social issues more comprehensively.[3]

WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL IMPACT ROLES?

There are countless roles you can play in the social problem-solving process as a concerned individual, a paid professional, or a person of influence. The following list highlights roles through which individuals can create positive social impact—whether they work directly for a Social Problem-Solving Organization (SPSO) or not.

1. **Active Community Members** engage in local activities, dialogue, and community-led movements driven by everyday people, to strengthen the fabric of their communities. They prioritize the well-being of their neighbors, foster open conversation around local social issues, and show up consistently in the places they call home. Their impact is rooted in relationships, presence, and a deep commitment to the people around them.

2. **Informed Voters** actively educate themselves about social and political issues, candidates, and policies. They make thoughtful decisions when voting and advocating for causes that align with their values.

3. **Involved Employees** actively participate in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and engage in volunteer activities organized by their employers. They contribute their time, skills, and expertise to support social causes while representing their organization. Through this involvement, they help companies integrate social impact into their daily activities and strengthen connections between the organization and the communities it serves..[4]

4. **Donors and Philanthropists** are individuals or organizations that provide financial contributions to support social causes and organizations. They play a vital role in funding initiatives and programs that address social issues.

5. **Impact-Investors** go beyond traditional giving and adopt an investment mindset. They provide financial support with an expectation of measurable social and financial returns, often supporting social enterprises and impact-driven ventures.[5]

6. **Volunteers and Pro Bono Providers** offer professional services or expertise without charge to individuals, nonprofits, or social enterprises. They contribute their skills, such as legal, marketing, or consulting services, to address social challenges. They provide hands-on assistance to directly address social needs.

7. **Civic Advocates** work to influence social change at a broader scale by raising awareness, shaping public opinion, and pushing for policy reform. They engage in lobbying, public speaking, and organized civic action to move institutions and systems toward greater equity and justice. Where Active Community Citizens focus on local, relational impact, Civic Advocates operate outward-facing and structurally, working to change the conditions that shape.

8. **Ministers** care for their neighbor, reach out to those in need, and act as an extension of the love of God to others.

9. **Community Organizers** bring people together to identify common concerns and mobilize collective action. They empower community members, build relationships, and coordinate efforts to address social challenges.

10. **Researchers** conduct systematic investigations to gather knowledge and insight about social problems. They collect data, analyze trends, and provide evidence-based research to inform decision-making and policy development.

11. **Evaluators** assess the effectiveness and impact of social programs or interventions. They measure outcomes, identify areas for improvement, and provide recommendations to enhance program effectiveness and maximize social impact.

12. **Educators** play a crucial role in raising awareness, fostering knowledge, and inspiring action related to social issues. They educate individuals through formal or informal settings, helping them become informed and engaged citizens.

13. **Mentors** provide guidance, support, and knowledge to individuals who are pursuing social impact initiatives or seeking personal/professional development in the social sector. They offer mentorship, coaching, and expertise to enable others through both formal and informal ways.[6]

14. **Consultants** offer specialized expertise to help organizations develop and implement social impact strategies. They provide guidance on various topics, such as program design, impact measurement, fundraising, or organizational development.

15. **SPSO Employees** work directly within a social problem-solving organization. They contribute their knowledge, skills, and time to developing and implement interventions that address specific social issues.

16. **Board Members and Advisors** serve as part of the governing body of a nonprofit organization or social enterprise. They provide guidance, oversight, and strategic direction to ensure the organization fulfills its mission effectively.[7]

17. **Social Intrapreneurs** are employees within organizations who identify and implement innovative solutions to address social or environmental issues within the organization's operations or offerings.

18. **Social Entrepreneurs** establish their own business venture with a primary focus on generating positive social impact, rather than operating within an already established organization.[8]

19. **Public Office Candidates** seek elected office to drive social change through legislation,

policymaking, and governance. They campaign for public office to advocate for specific issues and represent the interests of their constituents.

20. **Policy Makers** create and implement policies that address social challenges at local, national, or international levels.

Those committed to social impact often inhabit multiple roles at once. An educator, for instance, may also serve as an informed voter, engaged citizen, or community organizer. While this list offers a meaningful snapshot, it is not exhaustive. You may encounter other social impact roles that more closely align with your strengths and interests. This Guidebook will teach you the core principles needed to maximize your positive impact in whichever roles you choose to embrace.

Do you know anyone who embodies one of these roles? If so, what do you know about what they do?

Go to https://high5test.com/ and take the strengths test.

After taking the personal strengths test, write down your top 5 results here.

How do these strengths contribute to your current social impact roles?

How can they contribute to any future social impact roles you may step into?

SUMMARY

These roles clarify responsibilities, encourage collaboration, and offer a variety of meaningful avenues for involvement. By understanding and also embracing these roles, you can deepen your contributions and foster lasting, meaningful change in your community and beyond.

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CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL IMPACT TERMS

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Define, distinguish, and accurately apply key social impact terms in discussions, activities, and intervention planning.

2. More effectively communicate, collaborate, and conduct research regarding social impact topics.

3. Better participate in class discussions and understand future class content.

INTRODUCTION

Solving social problems is not simply about good intentions. It requires clear thinking and effective action, both of which begin with a shared language of key concepts and terms. Social impact terms help precisely define a problem, measure progress accurately, and collaborate effectively. Without shared terminology, efforts can become disorganized, and meaningful change can become harder to achieve.

This chapter introduces key terms that will be referenced throughout the course. There is no need to master them yet, but having a basic understanding will increase your ability to engage in discussions, activities, and projects with greater confidence. These terms provide the necessary language to better analyze challenges, design solutions, and drive real impact.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND SOCIAL IMPACT TERMS?

Clarity in defining problems, measuring progress, and communicating solutions can determine whether social change efforts succeed or fail. The use of key terms creates a shared language across sectors and disciplines, which ensures continuity and improves the likelihood of strategic, measurable, and impactful solutions.[1] Without a mutual understanding of these terms, discussions become vague, plans lack focus, and well-intentioned initiatives may never lead to real change.
Imagine trying to build a house without agreeing on the definition of what a "foundation" or "framework" is. The building process would be chaotic, inconsistent, and ineffective. The same principle applies to social impact work. When people interpret terms like "impact" or "best practices" differently, confusion arises, leading to misaligned goals and ineffective interventions. A shared vocabulary eliminates this ambiguity and helps professionals design more strategic and sustainable solutions.

In addition to establishing a unified vocabulary, a strong grasp of key terms helps optimize the research process.[2] Utilizing subject-appropriate language while researching leads to the discovery of more relevant and accurate information. This applies both in professional settings and everyday problem-solving.

Within this class, a shared understanding of key terms will enable deeper discussions, stronger collaboration with peers, and sharper critical thinking and decision-making. When everyone speaks the same language, ideas can be exchanged more clearly, leading to more meaningful conversations and impactful solutions.

Why is a clear understanding of social impact terms essential for effective collaboration and problem-solving? How can it improve real-world outcomes?

WHAT ARE KEY TERMS AND HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY THEM?

Identifying the key terms used by others to research and describe a social issue helps you better understand its context. Key terms are words or phrases that appear repeatedly and are central to defining the problem or explaining a theory of change.

For example, key terms in CHI's Theory of Change include "helpline," which refers to its emergency telephone services; "child protection systems," which encompass the formal and informal systems that protect children—such as agencies, organizations, families, communities, laws, policies, and financial resources; and "data management," which refers to CHI's use of data on children's needs to inform and improve policy decisions.

Not all SPSOs use the same words or definitions to discuss their social problems. For example, United Way's 211 provides services similar to CHI's helplines, but the terms "helpline" or "protection systems" are used rarely, if at all. Other organizations might use the same words (such as sustainability) with a different emphasis or imply a different meaning (such as environmental, social, or economic). Identifying, clarifying, and documenting the key terms related to a specific cause, social issue, or SPSO is one of the first steps in understanding a social problem and learning about the current best practices working to solve it.

WHAT ARE THE KEY TERMS I NEED TO KNOW FOR THIS CLASS?

Affinity
A natural liking, attraction, or connection between people or things based on shared interests, values, or qualities.

Backwards Mapping
Starting with the desired outcomes in mind and working backwards to identify plausible interventions that lead to those outcomes.

Behavioral Change
The process of modifying an individual's actions, attitudes, and habits to improve the individual's performance, productivity, and overall well-being for the long term.

Best Practices
Strategies, interventions, or approaches that have thoroughly demonstrated their ability to produce desirable outcomes.[3] These evidence-based practices hold widespread acceptance among social impact practitioners, who recognize them as the current most effective approaches to address specific social problems.

Compassion
Compassion comes from the Latin roots com- ("with" or "together") and passion ("to suffer"), literally meaning "to suffer together" or "co-suffering."[4] More than an emotion, compassion is a complex response that involves recognizing another's suffering, being moved by it, and feeling a desire to alleviate it.[5]

Context
The broader framework, circumstances, and conditions that surround a particular social problem. It encompasses several factors including historical, cultural, economic, political, and environmental elements that interact and shape the problem.

Contributing Factors
The various elements that play a role in the sustained existence of a social problem. These factors, when occurring simultaneously, increase the likelihood or severity of consequences to a social issue.

Corporate Social Responsibility
The efforts of a business to align its unique purpose and values to economic, environmental, and social imperatives, while continuing to address the financial expectations of shareholders and stakeholders. This can sometimes lead to corporate-led social impact efforts.

Customer-Partners
Someone who is both a recipient of social impact efforts and a partner in the work to solve them. These are people experiencing the negative consequences of a specific social problem and are working with a SPSO to improve outcomes and co-create interventions.

Depth
An approach designed to grow or scale an intervention to address additional negative consequences. The aim is to expand on an existing, successful intervention to address other facets of the social problem within the same target population.

Due Diligence
A detailed investigation of an organization and/or practice before an investment of funds, resources, or support. Includes verifying financial, legal, and impact details.

Ecosystem Map
A strategic tool used to visualize the complex network of stakeholders, relationships, and interactions that shape a social issue.[6]

Evaluation
The ongoing process of monitoring, observing, and reporting data and programs. Evaluation is the periodic process of examining how well an intervention has done in achieving the desired impact.[7]

Funding and Legal Structures
Organizational frameworks that define how an entity is established, governed, and how it operates within the law; also determining many aspects of an organization, including how it is funded, its tax obligations, and its legal liabilities.[8]

Growth Mindset
The belief that abilities, intelligence, and skills can be developed over time through effort, learning, feedback, and persistence. A growth mindset encourages adaptability, continuous improvement, and learning from challenges and failure.

Human-Centered Design
A problem-solving approach used to create products or services that prioritize the needs, experiences, and perspectives of customer-partners.

Hybrid Organization
An organization that blends elements, values, and operational logics from different sectors and structures to achieve or support a common mission. Rather than being defined by a specific legal structure, hybridity often represents an organizational model that integrates social, environmental, or public interest goals with commercial revenue generation to ensure long-term sustainability.[9]

Impact
The portion of measured outcomes caused by a specific intervention.[10] For example: A 5% decline in poverty was observed in a community served by multiple programs, but only 2% of that reduction can be attributed to a specific organization's activities (the organization's impact).

Impact Investing
A form of investing that aims to generate positive social or environmental impact alongside financial returns. Unlike traditional investment approaches that primarily focus on maximizing profits, impact investing seeks to address various social and environmental challenges while still achieving a competitive rate of return on investment.[11]

Implementation
The process by which an intervention is enacted and made tangible. Implementation involves carrying out planned activities, deploying resources, coordinating stakeholders, and executing strategies to achieve specific objectives.

Intervention
A deliberate action designed to address a social problem and create meaningful change. An intervention is the how of social impact work: the specific solution developed from intimately understanding a problem and the people affected. Interventions typically take the form of products, programs, or policies implemented by a SPSO.

Issue Map
A visual tool used to understand and communicate the structure and flow of a social problem. An issue map typically lays out contributing factors on the left, the scoped issue at the center, and negative consequences on the right. These illustrate causal relationships and help identify leverage points where interventions can address root causes rather than symptoms.

Issue Triangle
An issue triangle includes three components: (1) the specific issue (what), (2) the population (who), and (3)

the geography (where). Practitioners use issue triangles to appropriately gauge and address social problems. Without all three components, a social issue remains too vague for effective intervention.

Logic Model
A visual representation that outlines the relationships between available resources, planned action, and expected results.[12] A logic model centers on a goal or problem and is created to document inputs, as well as how those inputs connect to future activities, what outputs can be measured, what outcomes are expected to result from those activities, and how these factors contribute to overall impact.

Monolithic Thinking
A mindset that treats a complicated issue as a single, indivisible problem with a one-size-fits-all solution.

Negative Consequences
The adverse conditions that affect an individual, family, or community because of a social problem.

Organizational Learning
The intentional practice of enhancing organizational performance through the collection, evaluation, and distribution of valuable knowledge and insights. It encompasses the collective learning of individuals, teams, and the entire organization, playing a crucial role in sustaining long-term success and fostering growth.[13]

Outcomes
The measured changes in the negative consequences of a social problem. For example: A 5% reduction in infant mortality occurred after the organization's first decade of operation.

Outcome Goal
The desired measured change that an organization seeks in relation to specific aspects of its chosen social issue. This goal is often identified in their theory of change.

Outputs
The measure of direct activities, products, and services an organization delivers. Outputs are typically quantitative and easy to measure. For example: An organization works in Africa, employs 55 people, and serves a population of 5,000.

Peer-Reviewed Sources
Research articles that are evaluated by experts in a particular field before publication.

Prototype
A limited, lower-stakes representation of an intervention used to test ideas in a tangible way. Prototypes are faster and cheaper to implement than the final solution and allow stakeholders to experience, evaluate, and refine the design through feedback before full-scale development.

Proximity
Nearness in space, time, relationships, and/or experience.

Primary Research
Any type of data and insights that an individual collects directly from

a population. Examples include surveys, interviews, observations, and ethnographic research.

Replication
A scaling strategy focused on reproducing a proven intervention in new locations or populations. Replication involves transferring a successful model to new contexts while adapting to local conditions and preserving the core elements that drive impact.[14]

Reach
A scaling approach that focuses on expanding an intervention to serve a larger number of people within the same community, population, or geographic area where it's already proven successful.

Scale
The size of the area/population receiving an intervention. There are three levels of scale in the Social Impact Cycle: the individual level, the community level, and the world level.

Scope
The process of narrowing and defining a social problem to make the focused subject matter specific, relevant, and manageable. The issue triangle is one tactic for scoping an issue. It includes identifying a specific issue, the population affected, and the geographic area.

Secondary Research
The summary, collation, and/or synthesis of existing research.[15]

Social Impact Cycle
A framework for solving social problems that, if followed, guides social impact practitioners to create, improve, and measure effective and sustainable change.[16]

Social Issue
A condition that adversely affects individuals, communities, or societies. It is widely recognized by the public as a problem that requires collective attention and action to address and resolve.

Social Impact
Significant, positive social change that addresses a pressing social challenge and improves the well-being of individuals or communities. Social impact efforts strive for sustained impact and longevity.

Social Problem-Solving Organization (SPSO)
A formally established group or entity with an objective to improve human quality of life and well-being. These organizations can be found in public, private, nonprofit, and civil society sectors.

Theory of Change
A logical framework explaining how an intervention is expected to create change, showing the causal pathway connecting activities, intermediate outcomes, and ultimate impact. A theory of change makes explicit the "if-then" causal relationship: If we provide job training, then participants gain skills, leading to employment, then reducing poverty in our community.[17]

Vetting
The systematic process of carefully reviewing and evaluating SPSOs using a specific set of criteria. Vetting involves examining an organization's mission, financials, and program effectiveness to assess credibility, impact, and alignment with stated goals.

Which terms are new to you? Which ones are the most interesting?

WHICH TERMS ARE ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND FROM THE START?

Each of the referenced key terms is valuable and will be explored further throughout this text. However, as you move through the Guidebook, some terms will appear more frequently than others. The following section is intended to clarify and expand upon foundational key terms that are particularly important as you begin engaging in conversations about social impact work.

Social Issue
Social issues are challenges existing in the world that affect specific populations or communities. They vary in scope, complexity, and negative impact. Some can be understood and addressed using well-established methods, especially when their root causes are clear and stable over time. Others are harder to define and confront.

An important distinction to note is that while all social issues are problems, not all problems qualify as social issues. A problem is defined as "a situation, person, or thing that needs attention and needs to be dealt with or solved."[18] Under this definition, problems can range from temporary inconveniences—such as stubbing a toe, a child briefly losing their parents at a store, or a relative who sparks political debate at family gatherings. While these situations may require attention, they are typically temporary, individual in scope, or both.

Social issues, by contrast, are problems with deeper and broader impact. They affect multiple individuals and often entire groups within society. Unlike simple problems that may resolve on their own with time, social issues persist if there are no actionable plans to solve them. They require deliberate planning and collaborative action to address them. Some examples of problems that are correctly classified as social issues include political division, financial illiteracy, childhood malnutrition, homelessness, substance abuse, domestic violence, home foreclosure, discrimination, and child labor.

Contributing Factors
Contributing factors are conditions or influences that lead to the existence of a social issue, worsen its effects, or facilitate its continuation. In other words, they cause, exacerbate, and

perpetuate social issues. In theory, if all contributing factors were removed or solved, the associated social issue would cease to exist. However, if contributing factors remain, the issue will persist. These factors can be compared to the roots of a weed: if the above-ground portion of the weed is cut off, but the roots remain intact, then the weed will eventually grow back.

A contributing factor feeds into the issue, but it is not the same as the issue itself. Simply restating or reframing the issue does not constitute a contributing factor. For example, if the issue is alcohol and substance abuse among youth, adolescent alcohol consumption would only qualify as a restatement of the problem, not a contributing factor. Appropriate contributing factors might include peer pressure, ease of access to alcohol, inadequate government regulation, or insufficient early education about substance abuse.

Negative Consequences

Similar to contributing factors, negative consequences are distinct from social issues themselves. However, unlike contributing factors, negative consequences cannot exist independently. They arise from the social issue. Negative consequences are the undesirable outcomes that result from the existence of a social issue. Continuing the weed analogy, if the social issue is the weed, negative consequences can be understood as the thorns or leaves that grow from it. In theory, if the social issue were fully addressed and eliminated, the negative consequences associated with it would also cease to exist—that is, assuming there is only one social issue leading to that consequence. However, as long as the underlying issue remains, these consequences will persist.

Returning to the previous example, listing "increased drug use" as a negative consequence would simply be a reframing of the issue. The actual negative consequences that stem from alcohol and substance abuse among youth might include incarceration, violent behavior, or high school dropout rates.

Social Problem-Solving Organization (SPSO)

Social Problem-Solving Organization (SPSO) is a term employed by the Ballard Center for Social Impact at BYU specifically for educational purposes. While the term is used throughout this Guidebook for clarity and consistency, it is not widely recognized or used in the broader social impact field. Therefore, the use of this term in outside discussions, internships, or professional settings will require an explanation of its definition. The terms "nonprofit," "social enterprise," "NGO," or "impact organization" are more commonly used in public social impact discussions.

For the purposes of this Guidebook, the SPSO classification helps emphasize purpose over structure. It reinforces a critical principle: what matters most is not how an organization is classified legally or what sector it belongs to. Rather, the focus is centered on whether its work meaningfully

contributes to solving social problems and improving lives. This inclusive framework can help you understand that effective social impact work can happen within many organizational forms. Your legal structure should be chosen in accordance with your mission, strategy, and funding needs rather than assumptions about which type of organization is "better" at creating change.

Outputs

When evaluating a social intervention, outputs represent the most immediate and observable level of measurement. Outputs are the *direct products, services, or activities generated by an intervention.* They describe what was delivered or what actions were taken as part of the work. Outputs are typically quantitative and focus on volume or completion rather than change.

By being explicitly measurable, outputs help determine whether an intervention is being carried out as planned and whether resources are being used as intended. However, outputs do not indicate whether a social issue is improving or whether people's lives are changing. They measure activity, not effectiveness, or change. For example, in a literacy program, outputs might include the number of classes held, books distributed, or participants enrolled. While these outputs demonstrate effort and capacity, they do not show whether literacy levels actually improved.

Outcomes

Outcomes measure the changes in a social issue after the implementation of an intervention. Unlike outputs, which focus on what an organization does, outcomes represent the *changes that have been observed in the social issue.* It's important to note that not all outcomes are good; there are negative outcomes as well. When an intervention is implemented, it's critical to identify all relevant outcomes to determine what positive and negative changes have occurred.

Outcomes can be short-term or long-term. Short-term outcomes often appear during or shortly after an intervention and may include increased knowledge, improved skills, or changes in behavior. Conversely, long-term outcomes are broader, more sustained changes that persist over time and often represent deeper progress toward solving a social issue. For example, in a job training program, a short-term outcome might be participants gaining employable skills, while long-term outcomes could be sustained employment or increased income over several years. Outcomes demonstrate progress, but they may still be influenced by factors beyond the intervention itself.

Impact

Impact refers to the portion of *observed outcomes that can be directly attributed to an intervention.* It answers the questions: What change occurred because of this intervention? And what would things look like without this intervention? While outcomes show that change occurred, impact isolates the intervention's unique contribution to that change.

This distinction is critical because outcomes can result from many external influences, such as economic conditions, policy changes, or individual circumstances. Measuring impact requires comparing what happened with the intervention to what would have happened without it, often through comparison groups or other evaluation methods. For example, if participants in a job training program gain employment, that outcome alone does not demonstrate impact. Impact is shown when evidence indicates that participants were more likely to gain employment because of the program than they would have been otherwise.

Impact measurement provides the strongest evidence of effectiveness and is essential for accountability, learning, and demonstrating value to stakeholders.

Best Practices

A best practice is defined as "a procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results and that is established or proposed as a standard suitable for widespread adoption."[19] In the context of social impact, best practices are validated, evidence-based methods, strategies, and approaches that maximize positive social change while minimizing unintended harm. They are recognized as reliable standards that can be widely adopted because of their demonstrated success in achieving desired goals across various accounts.

Not every successful intervention rises to the level of a best practice. An approach that proves effective in one context does not necessarily yield comparable outcomes across different settings or cultural environments. Unless the reason for the initial success is identified, it is unclear which factors led to that success, and whether it came by the merits of the intervention alone.

A true best practice is an intervention that has been tested repeatedly in different contexts or populations, analyzed thoroughly to understand the mechanisms behind its success, and refined over time as new data and experiences provide further insights. As more evidence is collected through ongoing testing and evaluation, an intervention gains credibility and may be formally recognized as a best practice. This process ensures best practices aren't based on isolated success stories, but on reliable, replicable results that can guide effective social impact work.

What key terms from today's reading do you find confusing? Which terms would you like to understand better?

OPTIONAL PRACTICE: MATCHING KEY CONCEPTS

Match each of the following terms with its respective definition. The answer key can be found after the summary section of this chapter.

1: Best Practices
2: Hybrid Organization
3: Issue Map
4: Replication
5: Intervention
6: Human-Centered Design
7: Backwards Mapping
8: Outputs
9: Negative Consequences
10: Due Diligence
11: Theory of Change
12: Vetting
13: Impact
14: Implementation
15: Customer-Partners
16: Primary Research
17: Secondary Research
18: Social Impact Cycle
19: Organizational Learning
20: Depth
21: Reach
22: Contributing Factors
23: Outcomes
24: Evaluation
25: Ecosystem Map
26: Growth Mindset

A. Visual representation of a problem and its key factors.
B. The process of carrying out planned activities and strategies.
C. Proven methods that effectively solve social problems.
D. Duplicating a successful intervention in a new setting.
E. Expanding an intervention to serve more people within the same group or geographic area.
F. Contribute to the existence or severity of a social problem.
G. Measurable actions taken by an organization.
H. Collecting firsthand data through your own efforts.
I. A structured approach to solving social issues effectively.
J. Systematic process of evaluating an organization's credibility, effectiveness, and alignment.
K. A plan that explains how an intervention will create a measurable impact.
L. A careful review of an organization before investing.
M. Ongoing assessment of how well an intervention is achieving its intended outcomes.
N. An organization that combines nonprofit and for-profit activities under a shared mission.
O. Individuals experiencing a social problem who collaborate in creating solutions.
P. Planning by starting with goals first and actions later.
Q. The synthesis or analysis of existing research and data.
R. The harmful effects of a social problem.
S. Expanding impact by addressing additional negative consequences within the same population.
T. Improving organizational effectiveness through shared knowledge and continuous learning.
U. Purposeful action or strategy designed to create change.
V. Solution design based on people's needs and feedback.
W. Measured changes in negative consequences.
X. Portion of change directly caused by an intervention.
Y. Maps relationships, systems, and actors around a social issue.
Z. The belief that abilities and skills can be developed through effort, learning, and persistence.

SUMMARY

Clear language drives clear thinking. This chapter introduced foundational terms that are used throughout the Guidebook to better define problems, plan interventions, measure results, and communicate effectively. With a shared vocabulary, collaboration becomes smoother, ideas flow more clearly, and social change becomes more strategic and sustainable. While there is no need to master every term yet, understanding them will improve your ability to ask better questions, contribute meaningfully in social impact spaces, and solve social issues more effectively. As you move forward, work to deepen your understanding of these terms and their definitions.

ANSWER KEY

1. C
2. N
3. A
4. D
5. U
6. V
7. H
8. P
9. R
10. L
11. K
12. J
13. X
14. B
15. O
16. G
17. Q
18. I
19. T
20. S
21. E^{20}
22. F
23. W
24. M
25. Y
26. Z

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CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Explain the purpose and structure of the Social Impact Cycle, including its four phases.

2. Describe what it means to love the one and why it is essential to social impact work.

3. Describe how the Social Impact Cycle is iterative rather than linear.

4. Explain the three rings of scale and what role they play in the Social Impact Cycle.

INTRODUCTION

Creating meaningful social change doesn't happen by accident. It requires purposeful strategy and a deep understanding of the people experiencing the problem. Across sectors and disciplines, practitioners have developed frameworks and methodologies to help individuals and organizations better understand complex social problems and design effective solutions.

These frameworks provide structure for navigating uncertainty, coordinating action, and learning from both success and failure. Many social impact models exist today, and while they may differ in language, emphasis, and application, they share a common goal: to help changemakers act more intentionally, ethically, and effectively in their social impact efforts.

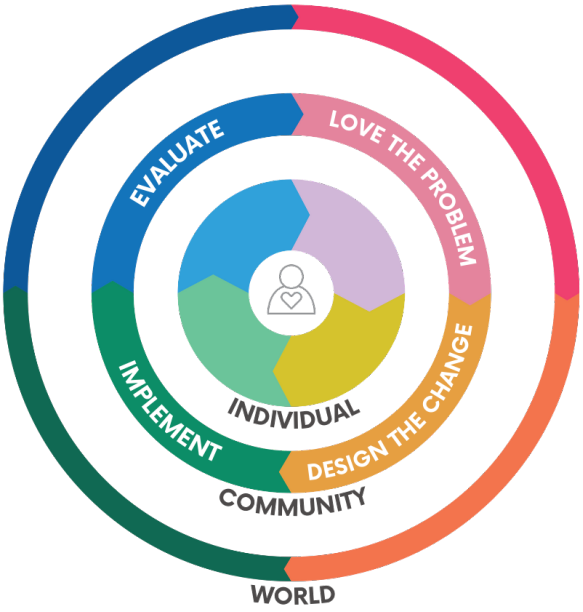
This chapter introduces one such model, the Social Impact Cycle, as a guiding framework for understanding and addressing social problems. The cycle provides a shared language and structure for social impact work while remaining flexible enough to adapt across sectors, cultures, and contexts. Whether you are working in a nonprofit, business, government, or personal capacity, the Social Impact Cycle offers a practical format to move from good intentions to valuable action.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE?

The Social Impact Cycle is a practical framework developed by the Melvin J. Ballard Center for Social Impact, located within the Marriott School of Business at Brigham Young University, to help individuals and organizations create lasting, positive change. Its strategy has been continuously refined and improved through years of application and applied feedback from practitioners in the field. As a result, this cycle constitutes a robust, evidence-based approach to social innovation that has proven effective across diverse contexts and scales, with further iterations to come.

The framework breaks social impact work into four essential phases: ***love the problem, design the change, implement the intervention, and evaluate the outcomes.*** Underlying each phase is the principle of love the one, a commitment to center the people most affected by the issue at every stage of the process. These four areas of focus help changemakers as they build and maintain their understanding of the problem and guide their work toward sustainable solutions. By nature, the cycle creates a continuous journey where each phase is revisited with new knowledge and experience rather than acting as a one-time linear process. This cycle supports the scaling of social impact interventions, beginning with the individual, then expanding to the community, and the world.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE & SKILLS



- CALLING
- CARING FOR OTHERS
- MASTERY
- CAUSAL THINKING
- CO-CREATION
- SCALE
- FAITH

WHAT IS THE CENTER OF THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE?

At the heart of the Social Impact Cycle is the concept of loving the one, a constant reminder that, even as you seek broader systemic change, your work must remain grounded in caring for the individual. Loving the one emphasizes the importance of focusing on real people and lived experiences, rather than reducing complex realities to abstract problems. Individuals are the experts of their own circumstances, and honoring their expertise requires humility. Their voices, experiences, and insights should guide the work at every stage. Because this mindset is essential to creating lasting change, it serves as a guiding principle for every phase of the Social Impact Cycle.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE THE PROBLEM?

The Social Impact Cycle begins with learning to love the problem. This foundational phase strongly emphasizes the importance of really thoroughly understanding the social issue you want to address rather than jumping straight to potential solutions. It encourages you to invest time in researching the problem, along with who or what it affects, the contributing factors, and its negative consequences. Loving the problem (and the one) includes learning how a specific social issue affects people on a personal level and then utilizing those insights to better approach the problem. If the various pieces of a social issue are not well understood, and a quick, lower-

effort solution is implemented, the result is often ineffective or short-term outcomes. Because the goal is to create enduring change, loving the problem is the best place to start.

The idea of "loving" a problem rather than a solution was popularized by Uri Levine, co-founder of Waze, in his book *Fall in Love with the Problem, Not the Solution*, where he emphasizes that innovation stems from deeply understanding a problem faced by people, not by getting attached to a specific solution or product.[1] It has further been adopted and embraced by many individuals and organizations within the social impact sphere.[2] The Ballard Center has implemented this mindset as part of its effort to advance research-backed solutions and foster mindfulness in social impact work.

Objective: Thoroughly research a chosen social issue using primary and secondary research methods. Learn about the previous and current efforts to solve the problem, speak with those experiencing the issue, and find the root causes.

Key Activities to Love the Problem:

1. **Interview stakeholders** and those experiencing the problem to learn from their first-hand accounts.

2. **Connect with organizations** already working on the issue. Study their successes, failures, and what lessons they've learned.

3. **Scope the issue** by defining precisely what problem you want to address and why. This includes determining the issue itself, who is affected by it, and where it is occurring.

4. **Map the issue** by identifying the negative consequences and contributing factors connected to your scoped issue. Determine which factors are the most prominent and visually map out their connection to the issue.

5. **Understand context** by researching how cultural settings, historical influences, and other relevant factors might affect the environment you will be working in.

6. **Cultivate compassion and gather insight** from those you hope to help, to ensure any solution you design is grounded in real needs and perspectives.

Move on to the next phase in the cycle when you have a solid understanding of the problem, validated by those experiencing it. This means you can clearly articulate the contributing factors and negative consequences of the social issue, describe the ecosystem of organizations and resources already addressing the issue, and identify gaps in current solutions. Throughout the research process, building relationships with individuals affected by the problem and participating in primary research can play a pivotal role in identifying potential solution gaps and expanding your understanding of the problem.

The proper execution of this phase lays the groundwork for success later in the cycle and increases your ability to prevent costly mistakes.

Example Organization: Partners In Health (PIH)

Partners In Health, with their approach to healthcare in Haiti, is a great example of loving the problem. Before implementing healthcare interventions, Dr. Paul Farmer and his colleagues spent years living in rural Haitian communities, learning about the interconnected challenges of poverty, lack of infrastructure, and disease. They listened to community members regarding barriers to care and discovered two concealed problems contributing to the social issue. Patients in Haiti often couldn't afford the bus fare to reach clinics and sometimes lacked the necessary food to take medications safely. This new insight led PIH to develop a comprehensive model that addresses not just medical treatment but also transportation, nutrition, and social support. Their philosophy reflects a commitment to understanding problems from the perspective of those experiencing them and offering aid by walking alongside the patient, rather than behind or in front of them.[3]

Read more about **Partners In Health** at: https://www.pih.org/

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DESIGN THE CHANGE?

After loving the problem, the next step in the Social Impact Cycle is to design the change. This phase includes a wide range of activities, including brainstorming potential solutions, co-creating interventions, drafting and revising strategy, and building, testing, and refining prototypes. These various steps are all part of developing interventions that are effective, practical, and human-centered. The goal is to create an intervention with the highest likelihood of success based on the research conducted in the first phase. It discourages moving forward with a solution simply because of convenience or a desire to act.

Designing the change, like the other phases in the social impact cycle, begins with loving the one. Based on the experiences of your co-creators, you can work together to design a realistic solution. The interventions discussed may be a product of existing best practices and research, or stem from new insights gained in the first phase of the Social Impact Cycle. Designing the change consists of small-scale, iterative tests paired with evaluation to determine the effectiveness of a potential solution. It starts with a detailed plan of how to test the prototype and collect, measure, and analyze data. Once the groundwork is laid, a small-scale solution is tested. This testing is distinct from large-scale implementation, which is addressed in the next phase of the cycle. After

the testing period, an evaluation plan is carried out to process the data collected. This phase is revisited throughout the development of a social impact plan. **Objective:** Based on previously gathered information, design a possible solution grounded in real needs and real people. Plan and set goals for success and how success will be measured.

Key Activities to Design the Change:

1. **Co-create interventions** by partnering with affected communities to develop programs, products, or policies that genuinely address their needs.

2. **Set outcome goals** to help define what success looks like with clear, measurable targets.

3. **Map your logic model** by charting the connections between your activities, outputs, outcomes, and ultimate impact.

4. **Design for people** by centering your solution around how people actually think, behave, and live.

5. **Incorporate behavior change principles** by identifying which behaviors must shift and designing interventions that realistically facilitate those changes.

6. **Test through prototypes** because low-stakes versions of your solution will help you gather real feedback before committing significant resources.

7. **Plan for evaluation** and determine early what data you'll need and how you'll collect it. Don't wait until implementation to think about measurement.

Move on to the next phase in the cycle when prototyping and testing have validated your solution, stakeholders have confirmed its feasibility and relevance, and a clear theory of change explains how your intervention will create the desired impact.

Example Organization: IDEO.org

IDEO.org demonstrates exceptional design thinking in their work on financial inclusion. When addressing the challenge of savings among low-income communities in Kenya, they didn't begin with preconceived banking solutions. Instead, they conducted extensive research revealing that many people were already saving through informal methods—hiding money in mattresses or with trusted shopkeepers. Using this insight, IDEO.org co-designed with M-PESA to create mobile savings features that felt familiar and trustworthy while adding security and accessibility. Their human-centered design process included rapid prototyping, user testing, and continuous iteration with community members. The result was an accessible solution rooted in existing behaviors rather than one imposed from the outside.

Learn more at
IDEO.org

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO IMPLEMENT?

Implementing the intervention is the third stage of the Social Impact Cycle and includes the necessary steps to put a previously designed intervention into practice. Implementation transforms ideas into reality through an appropriately scaled iteration of your planned intervention. This phase is about executing your solution in the real world while building the organizational capacity and infrastructure needed for success.

Effective implementation requires project management skills, clear communication, and the wisdom to know when to stick to your pre-determined intervention plan and when to pivot. Knowing when to adjust and when to continue starts with utilizing a staged implementation plan and monitoring the immediate effects of your efforts. If your activities are not leading to the outputs and immediate outcomes you expected, that is a signal to pause and determine why before continuing.

Objective: Implement and test an appropriately scaled iteration of the planned solution or intervention. Start with a scope that allows you to learn effectively without overextending resources or risking harm.

Key Activities to Implementing:

1. **Build capacity** by training staff and volunteers in the skills necessary for implementation. This should occur both within your team and your partner organizations.

2. **Secure funding and establish a legal structure** by obtaining the necessary financial resources and formalizing your organizational status (nonprofit registration, partnership agreements, etc.)

3. **Determine management and operations** to ensure effective coordination of logistics, communications, finances, and people.

4. **Build an infrastructure** by establishing the systems, processes, and physical resources needed to deliver your intervention.

5. **Develop partnerships** by collaborating with organizations, government agencies, and community groups that can strengthen your implementation.

6. **Adapt in real time** by remaining flexible and adjusting your approach based on what you learn during execution.

Move on to the next phase in the cycle when your intervention has been operating long enough to generate measurable results, in other words, when outcomes emerge that can be analyzed.

Example Organization: Last Mile Health

Last Mile Health excels at implementation, particularly in training and deploying community health workers in remote areas of Liberia and other countries. After designing their community health worker model, they developed comprehensive capacity-building programs, secured funding from multiple sources, and established partnerships with the Liberian Ministry of Health. They created management systems for supervision, built supply chain infrastructure for medication delivery, and developed legal frameworks for their operations.

During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, their implementation capacity allowed them to rapidly mobilize trained community health workers. They established clear protocols, ensured workers had the necessary supplies and protective equipment, and maintained communication channels even in isolated communities. Their implementation was largely successful because of their attention to operational details—ranging from curriculum development to medication delivery schedules—along with the flexibility to adapt when challenges arose. Once they observed positive health outcomes in their communities, they moved to rigorous evaluation to measure impact and inform scaling decisions.

Read more about **Last Mile Health** at https://lastmilehealth.org/

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO EVALUATE?

After implementation, the fourth phase of the Social Impact Cycle invites you to evaluate your outcomes. In this phase, evaluation shifts away from anecdotal success stories and pursues clear, measurable outputs (what and how much you do), outcomes (changes in your social issue), and impact (the portion of the outcomes directly brought by your intervention). These targeted measurements provide a systematic tool for analyzing where the implementation is succeeding and where it is falling short. This data should inform your decisions to adjust, scale, continue, or conclude your intervention. Without intentional and rigorous evaluation, you risk continuing ineffective programs or missing valuable opportunities to scale successful ones. The evaluation process, while an effective means to improve your intervention, also ensures accountability to those you serve and those funding or supporting your efforts.

Though evaluation is represented as the "final phase" of the Social Impact Cycle, measurements, analysis, and adjustments should occur throughout all stages of the cycle whenever appropriate. However, a formalized evaluation should always follow the implementation or improvement of an intervention to verify that intended outcomes are achieved and meaningful improvements are being made. The insights gained in the evaluation phase function as a catalyst for the next rotation of the Social Impact Cycle.

Objective: Evaluate the solution according to the targeted outcomes to determine the level of success. This means assessing whether your intervention achieved the intended goal and understanding the reasons why it did or did not.

Key Activities:

1. **Collect and analyze data** by systematically gathering quantitative and qualitative data related to your intervention's performance.

2. **Assess results** by measuring and reviewing outputs, outcomes, and impact.

3. **Learn and iterate** by using findings to refine your approach, scale up successful solutions, or pivot if needed.

4. **Share insights** with stakeholders and the broader field to contribute to collective learning.

Move on to scaling your impact when you have definitive results. This occurs when you have sufficient data and analysis to make informed decisions about continuing, adjusting, scaling, or concluding your intervention.

Example Organization: BRAC

BRAC (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), one of the world's largest NGOs, has built evaluation into its organizational DNA. Its Independent Evaluation and Research Cell (IERC) rigorously studies the effectiveness of BRAC programs across its diverse interventions. This includes BRAC's graduation program, designed to help individuals in extreme poverty build sustainable livelihoods. To evaluate the graduation program's effectiveness, it moved beyond anecdotal success stories and conducted randomized controlled trials across multiple countries. These trials established a clear measurement of outputs (number of participants trained), outcomes (income increases, asset acquisition), and impact (long-term poverty reduction). When evaluation revealed certain program components were less effective, BRAC adjusted its model. When results showed strong outcomes, it used the evidence to scale up its program to new regions and influence policy. BRAC's commitment to evaluation and continuous improvement has expanded its ability to generate positive change.

Learn more about **BRAC** at https://www.bracusa.org/

HOW CAN I SCALE MY IMPACT?

The Social Impact Cycle graphic not only features the four phases of the cycle but also the three scales of impact. The concentric rings illustrate how social impact work can deepen, expand, and multiply over time. Each ring represents both a level of scale and a distinct approach to scaling social impact.

- **Individual Level — Scaling by Depth:** The center ring focuses on small-scale change in the lives of individuals: one person, one family, one school. This is where meaningful relationships are built, and interventions are proved successful. At this level, scaling happens through depth—improving the quality or variety of services available for the people you are already serving—with the intent to increase overall impact. Rather than reaching more people, you focus on the needs of the individual, addressing additional contributing factors or negative consequences of the issue. Every

large-scale movement starts here, by improving the life of an individual.

- **Community Level — Scaling by Reach:** Once an intervention has proven impactful at the individual level, it can move to the second ring and expand to serve a broader group within the same population or context. This might look like increasing outreach from one person to 100 people, from a family to a neighborhood, or from one school to an entire school district. At this level, scaling occurs through reach—extending a proven model to more people who face the same problem in the same area. While personal connection becomes less individualized, the applied intervention is still rooted in a love for the one, and relationships, patterns, and community dynamics remain visible. This allows you to maintain quality while increasing the number of people benefiting from your work.
- **World Level — Scaling by Replication:** After successful implementation at both the individual and community levels, you can scale your intervention to further global or systemic change. This is where proven solutions are customized and implemented in new locations and among new demographics, be that regional, national, or global. This scale may involve influencing policy, inspiring other organizations, or becoming a model others adopt. However, replication does not mean copying a solution without adjustment. Thoughtful adaptation must still take place as you implement your intervention into new cultural, economic, and institutional contexts. It is also important to note that not every intervention needs to be scaled at this level. The outer ring is meant to highlight the potential for proven solutions to contribute to systemic and global change.

These rings are not meant to act as strict boundaries, but rather as a visual reminder to consider how you might scale your solution as you move through the Social Impact Cycle. Consider asking questions like: "If this solution works, how could we help ten more people? A hundred? A thousand?" The goal is to design and implement solutions that remain true to the needs of the individual and can grow while maintaining their efficacy.

HOW IS THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE USEFUL?

Following the Social Impact Cycle offers several critical advantages for changemakers. The cycle:

- **Prevents common mistakes.** By starting with a deep understanding of the issue, you can avoid rushing into solutions that don't fit the problem or meet real needs.

- **Promotes compassion and co-creation.** The cycle encourages working with, not just for, those affected. This co-creation helps build more effective and dignified solutions.

- **Supports continuous improvement.** The recurring cycle and iterative evaluation facilitate learning and encourage frequent adjustments to make interventions more effective over time.

- **Provides a shared language.** The framework offers common terminology and processes for teams, organizations, and ecosystems working on social change.

- **Encourages strategic scaling.** The graphic's concentric rings act as a reminder of how proven solutions can grow from individual to community to global impact.

The framework acknowledges that social change is complex and rarely linear. Real-world social impact work is messy. You might discover during implementation that you need to do more research on the problem's contributing factors, or evaluation might reveal that your theory of change was flawed. This isn't failure; it's learning. The cycle embraces this reality, providing structure while allowing flexibility.

The simplicity and adaptability of the Social Impact Cycle make it useful across sectors, cultures, and settings. It could be applied by a nonprofit addressing childhood malnutrition, a politician trying to craft an effective campaign, a business looking to improve daily operations, or an individual working on a personal project. The Social Impact Cycle is a valuable asset in any context where change is the end goal.

WHAT DOES THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

These benefits are not theoretical, but rather grounded in real-world practice. Many prominent organizations naturally apply the principles of the Social Impact Cycle in their work because the framework is built on widely accepted best practices in the social impact field. The following example illustrates how a real-world SPSO has effectively applied the Social Impact Cycle to address a social problem.

The Cycle in Practice: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

The Gates Foundation's evolution in its global health efforts is a prime example of how organizations cycle through the four phases of the Social Impact Cycle repeatedly. Early on in their work to eradicate malaria, they invested heavily in understanding the problem—funding research on disease transmission, mosquito behavior, and community practices. This informed their design of multi-pronged interventions combining bed nets, new treatments, and indoor spraying. During implementation, they

partnered with governments and local organizations to distribute millions of bed nets and increase treatment access. Crucially, they evaluated outcomes by tracking malaria incidence and mortality rates. When data showed certain strategies were more cost-effective than others, they adjusted their funding priorities. They returned to the start of the cycle with new research questions focused on drug resistance and vaccine development. Thereby beginning the cycle anew, but this time with greater insight and experience.

SUMMARY

The Social Impact Cycle is a powerful tool to Do Good. Better. By moving thoughtfully through its four phases—love the problem, design the change, implement the intervention, and evaluate the outcomes—you can create social change that is human-centric, effective, and sustainable. The cycle's underlying invitation to love the one serves as a reminder that change starts one person at a time. Though the cycle won't make social impact work easy, it will make your efforts more intentional and increase your likelihood of success. Remember, the cycle is not a one-time process to complete and check off your list. It's a continuous journey of learning and adjusting. Each iteration builds on the insights of the previous one. When assessed as a whole, the cycle's core principle, four phases, and three rings of impact, combine to address the questions: who, how, and at what scale. Whether you're launching your first social venture or leading an established organization, the Social Impact Cycle can guide you toward greater impact.

As you begin your own social impact work, commit to embracing each phase of the cycle fully. Take time to love the problem deeply before rushing to design solutions. Design thoughtfully and collaboratively before moving to implementation. Implement with both excellence and flexibility, as you build your capacity and nurture the partnerships needed for success. Evaluate rigorously, shifting from anecdotes to clear evidence, and learn from the data collected. Then return to the beginning of the cycle, armed with new knowledge, refined understanding, and a renewed commitment to creating meaningful, sustainable change.

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LOVE THE ONE

Chapter 5: Loving the One

Chapter 6: Compassion

At the heart of the social impact cycle lies the principle of loving the one. As you work to address social problems, your efforts must stay grounded in genuine care for individuals. Social impact is not only about scale or efficiency—it's about recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of each person affected by the problem you're working to solve.

When you love the one, you resist the temptation to view people as statistics, beneficiaries, or target populations. Instead, you see them as real people with unique stories, needs, and strengths. Their voices, experiences, and insights should guide you through each stage of the social impact cycle, from understanding the problem to designing and implementing solutions.

This principle is carried out through both personal connection and deep compassion. Personal connection enables you to better understand others, their stories, struggles, and future hopes. Compassion helps you meet those same people where they are and provide them with effective and empathetic aid.

The next two chapters aim to strengthen your ability to center individuals in your work by helping you act with compassion and individually connect with those you are serving.


US
Against
Hunger

CHAPTER 5: LOVING THE ONE

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Define the concept of loving the one and its role in social impact work.

2. Understand how to grow your love for the one through personal connection, active listening, and increasing empathy.

3. Explain how loving the one improves your ability to develop effective solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Loving the one is the center of the Social Impact Cycle and drives the rest of the social problem-solving process. This core principle supports the belief that when genuine care for an individual guides the decision-making process, better solutions are built. Focusing on loving the one creates opportunities to build relationships, nurture understanding, and improve social impact strategies.

Loving the one also means striving to understand the one. They are the experts on the issue they're living with. Their knowledge, perspectives, and suggestions are valuable. By grounding social impact work in the lived experiences of those affected by the social issue, you can clarify need, gain greater insight into how an intervention might affect the local population, and facilitate co-creation.

This chapter addresses how you can learn to love the one within your own work and how embodying this principle plays an important role in laying the foundation for lasting social impact.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "LOVE THE ONE"?

Loving the one means your mission is not a distant institutional endeavor but a deeply human one, grounded in genuine care and compassion for each person individually.[1] It keeps you tethered to those you serve: listening to their personal narratives, empathizing with their experiences, and hoping alongside them as you work toward meaningful change.[2] Loving the one is at the heart of this work, and is the core principle you must return to in each phase of the Social Impact Cycle.

The act of loving the one cultivates connection and helps you gain insight into the effectiveness of your efforts on an individual scale. It not only shapes the way you approach your work but also sets the standard by which you judge it. Nurturing relationships with those affected by a social problem can give you honest insight into whether your efforts are actually making a difference. This consistent connection helps to build trust, facilitate valuable feedback, and encourage co-creation. Ultimately, the principle of loving the one is powerful because it centers social impact efforts around the needs of real people.

LOVE THE ONE

HOW CAN YOU GROW YOUR LOVE FOR THE ONE?

Outlined below are three ways you can deepen your love for the one. These methods work together to help you better understand and address the unique needs of the individuals you serve, while also cultivating a heartfelt commitment to their well-being.

Loving the One Through Personal Connection

Central to any comprehensive social impact approach is recognizing the indispensable power of personal connections.[3] These connections are vital in gaining a holistic understanding of complex social issues and in discovering meaningful interventions. One way to strengthen your personal connection to individuals and the issue is through personal narratives.

Personal narratives are the life stories of individuals who have been negatively affected by a social issue.[4] These narratives fuel empathy by expanding your ability to consider the reality of these circumstances. How might you feel if you were dealing with the same problem? How would you act as a result? By listening to the detailed experiences of individuals impacted by the social issue, you're able to connect abstract problems to genuine human experiences. Immersing yourselves in these narratives can help reaffirm your commitment to the cause and strengthen your desire for change.

Personal narratives can be shared and gathered through organic human conversations or formal methods like interviews and focus groups.[5] Though these qualitative research methods emphasize observation rather than tangible data, they play a critical role in your social impact efforts. Your work should be founded on these human stories. Being intentional in seeking out personal narratives allows you to participate in active engagement (deliberate, and with nonjudgmental interactions) with people and their experiences.[6] This active engagement can provide profound insight into the struggles, aspirations, and unique perspectives of the individuals experiencing the problem, allowing you to reframe your understanding of the issue and root your solutions firmly in the reality of human experience.

Loving the One Through Active Listening

Active listening is an essential tool in loving the one. However, because active listening is a skill, it often requires practice. Those involved in social impact work must learn how to suspend judgment, dismiss preconceived notions, and offer their undivided attention to those they are speaking with, particularly those of the affected population. This kind of dedicated attention creates a secure and receptive space where individuals feel empowered to express themselves authentically, being secure in the knowledge that they are genuinely heard.[7]

Active listening builds connection and trust between the listener and the speaker. It also serves as a gateway to discovering unspoken needs and concealed challenges that an individual may be facing.[8] These needs are often obscured by the large-scale consequences of a social issue. However, the environment created by active listening gives affected individuals the opportunity to discuss concerns and shed light on crucial areas that warrant additional attention and support.[9] As a result, this emotionally safe space fosters greater love and understanding between both parties.

Loving the One by Increasing Empathy

Empathy–the ability to understand another person's emotions or experiences from their perspective–functions as a guiding force in your journey through the domain of social impact. It equips you to not only recognize an issue but also delve into its underlying causes and anticipate its broader implications. [10]

Empathy is not a static sentiment; it is a catalyst for meaningful action.[11] Developing empathy for the one often happens naturally as you actively listen to the personal narratives of the affected population. However, empathy can also be increased through acts of intentional service. Service is a conduit for increasing love. As you actively serve the affected population, your love for them grows, you develop a deeper understanding of the problem, and you learn how to build solutions that will benefit individual people. When solutions are grounded in love and empathy, social impact work becomes heartfelt service for the one.

SUMMARY

As you navigate the intricate terrain of social impact, you can use the skills associated with "loving the one" to magnify your work. Forming personal connections, actively listening, and increasing empathy are not merely soft skills; they are the cornerstones upon which you build your understanding of a social issue and its potential solutions.[12] The individuals you connect with serve as poignant reminders of why you engage in this demanding field.[13] It is through these personal connections that you internalize the profound importance of addressing the problems faced by one person. Once you see how a solution changes one person's life, you are better able to scale that solution to benefit a larger population.[14]

Who are some exemplary people in your life who love the one through personal connection, active listening, and empathy?

Think of a specific example where you saw them use these skills.

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CHAPTER 6: COMPASSION

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Differentiate between pity, sympathy, empathy, and compassion.

2. Understand the critical role that compassion plays in solving social problems.

3. Understand how to foster compassion.

INTRODUCTION

Compassion is a fundamental human quality that transcends cultures, religions, and societies.[1] It is a powerful force that not only connects people to one another but also drives them to take action in the face of suffering. In the realm of social impact, compassion serves as both the inspiration and the fuel for creating lasting and meaningful change. This chapter explores the essence of compassion: what it is, how it differs from related emotions like empathy and pity, and how it can be cultivated. It also examines the crucial role that compassion plays in addressing social issues and fostering a more just and equitable world.

Watch Two Takes on Empathy:

Brene Brown

Paul Bloom

WHAT IS COMPASSION?

Compassion is derived from the Latin roots "com-" meaning "with" or "together," and "passion," meaning "to suffer."[2] At its core, compassion means "to suffer together" or "co-suffering." It's more than just an emotion; it's a complex response that includes an inclination to act. Compassion involves recognizing the suffering of others, feeling moved by their suffering, and having the desire to alleviate it.[3]

HOW DOES COMPASSION DIFFER FROM ITS EMOTIONAL COUNTERPARTS?

Compassion, as a concept, is often misunderstood and may be confused with other related emotions. The following section clarifies key terms to distinguish these concepts and provide a more precise definition of compassion. Ultimately, the inclination to act is what differentiates compassion from other emotions like pity, sympathy, or empathy.

Pity: Pity is generally defined as a feeling of sorrow for someone else's misfortune, but with a distinct undertone of condescension. Though it does require the acknowledgement of someone's suffering, pity reinforces a sense of inequality between the observer and the person affected.[4]

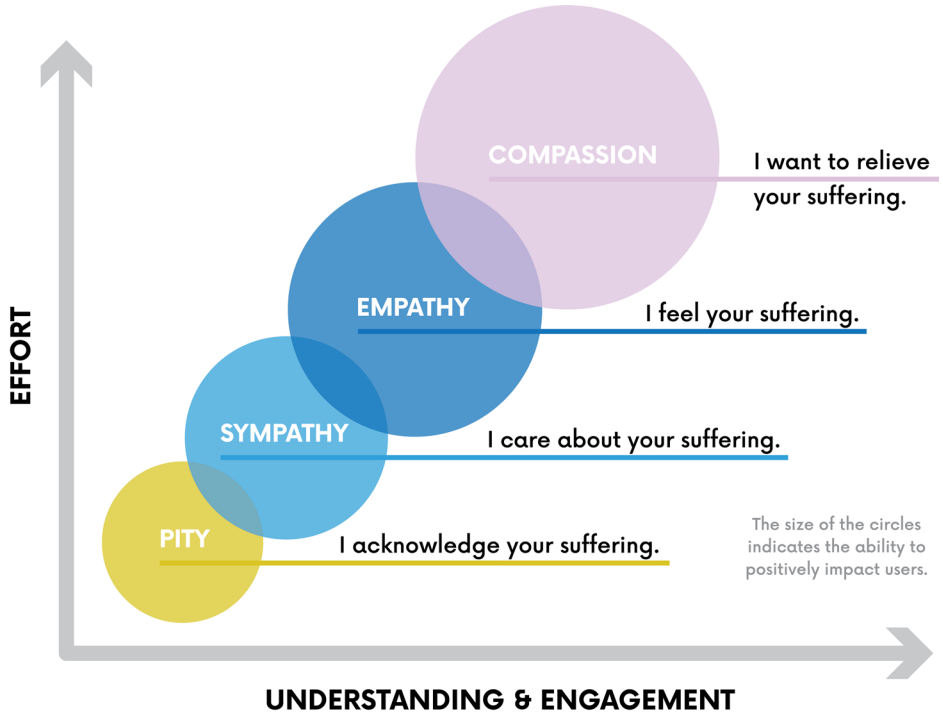
Feeling pity does not necessarily result in meaningful support or change. When pity does prompt action, those responses often serve more to ease the observer's discomfort than to address the immediate needs of the person involved.

Sympathy: Sympathy involves feeling sorry for someone's circumstances while maintaining an emotional distance from the situation. Though sympathy can sometimes motivate supportive behaviors, it does not necessarily include efforts to change or improve the cause of suffering.

Empathy: Empathy is the ability to share another person's emotional experience by placing oneself in the other's mindset or position. It nurtures deeper relationships between individuals and can act as a powerful force for connection and understanding.

Compassion is empathy in motion. It moves beyond emotional validation, using those feelings to drive action to help alleviate the suffering of the affected individual or population.

Consider the situations in which you've exhibited these different emotions. Write down one example for each emotion. How could you exercise greater empathy and be moved toward compassion regarding these situations?



HOW DOES COMPASSION PREVENT BURNOUT?

Emotions like empathy, especially when intense and constant, can be overwhelming and emotionally draining if no productive action grows from them. This feeling of emotional exhaustion can reduce an individual's effectiveness in social impact work.[5] However, by focusing on compassion in the work rather than just empathy, individuals can channel that emotional energy in a positive and purposeful direction. Viewing compassion as a skill to be developed, practiced, and applied can empower those engaged in social impact work to continue moving forward.

HOW CAN I DEVELOP GREATER COMPASSION?

Developing compassion is a journey that involves both internal reflection and external practice. While some people might have a natural inclination towards compassion, it's a quality that can be cultivated and strengthened over time. Here are several approaches to developing greater compassion:

1. Cultivating Self-Compassion

It's important to remember that compassion starts within yourself. Self-compassion involves treating yourself with the same kindness and understanding that you would offer to a friend. This doesn't mean excusing your mistakes but instead acknowledging them without harsh judgment and recognizing that suffering and imperfection are part of the shared human experience.

Self-Compassion Practices:
Practice self-compassion by improving your internal narrative and speaking kindly to yourself when you make mistakes, taking time for self-care, and recognizing your own needs. By being compassionate to yourself, you strengthen your ability to extend compassion to others.[6]

2. Practicing Mindfulness and Self-Awareness

Mindfulness practices, such as meditation, can enhance your capacity for compassion. By acknowledging your thoughts and emotions without judgment or harsh criticism, you become more aware of how your situation, circumstances, or suffering may be affecting you and how outside circumstances might affect others. This awareness is the first step toward compassion, allowing you to be present with someone's pain and not overwhelmed by it.

Mindfulness Practices:
Boost mindfulness with a specific mindfulness practice that focuses on developing compassion, such as loving-kindness meditation (also known as meta meditation). This type of meditation encourages goodwill toward oneself and others—often through silently repeating phrases such as "may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe" while

visualizing oneself, a loved one, or others—and is included in the Mindful Self-Compassion program studied by Neff and Germer. It helps people become more aware of their thoughts and emotions without judgment, creating space for greater compassion.[7]

3. Viewing Another's Perspective

As previously mentioned, compassion is empathy in motion. Practicing empathy by actively trying to see the world through another's perspective, whether a close friend, a stranger, or even someone with differing views, can deepen compassion and one's willingness to act. Perspective-taking requires intentionally reflecting on the difficult realities of others through their point of view and can be a powerful conduit for increased compassion.

Empathy Exercises:
Engage in exercises that challenge you to think about others' situations. For example, ask yourself: "What might this person be feeling right now?" or "How would I feel if I were in their shoes?" By practicing this mental shift regularly, you train your mind to more naturally consider others' experiences—creating a foundation for more consistent, compassionate action.[8]

4. Engaging in Acts of Service

One of the most effective ways to cultivate and increase compassion is through direct action. Volunteering your time, resources, and skills not only benefits others but also reinforces your own sense of compassion. Acts of service can range from small, everyday gestures, like helping a neighbor, to more organized efforts, including volunteering at a shelter or participating in community service projects.

Service Exercises:
Participate in service-learning types of opportunities that combine academic learning with community service. These activities not only help others but also provide a deeper understanding of the issue and can further foster compassion.[9]

5. Increasing Education and Awareness

Educating yourself on the challenges others face can enhance your capacity for compassion. This involves actively seeking out information about different cultures, social issues, and the experiences of marginalized groups. Compassion develops naturally as our understanding of one another grows. We become bonded by common human experiences and emotions. By increasing your knowledge and awareness of a social issue, you can better relate to those experiencing the problem and increase your compassion for them.

Education Exercises:
Expose yourself to diverse narratives by doing things like reading books, watching documentaries, and engaging with content that provides insights into the lives and struggles of people from different backgrounds to expand your empathy and compassion.[10]

6. Building Community and Connection

Compassion flourishes in communities where people actively support one another. When you're surrounded by individuals who practice compassion, it naturally inspires you to do the same. That's why intentionally building strong, positive relationships—grounded in mutual respect and care—helps reinforce compassion as a daily habit.

Community Engagement Exercises: Participate in compassionate action within your community. Whether through a faith-based group, social club, or advocacy organization, these community entities can provide support, share resources, and work together to address collective challenges.[11]

7. Reflecting on Common Humanity

Compassion is rooted in the recognition of common humanity. Awareness of the fact that everyone experiences pain, joy, love, and loss helps break down barriers separating individuals from one another. This understanding fosters a sense of connection and shared purpose, encouraging compassionate responses to observed suffering.

Universal Connectedness Exercises: Regularly remind yourself of the interconnectedness of all people. This can be done through meditative practices, journaling about your experiences and connections with others, or simply contemplating the ways in which your actions affect those around you.

What approaches for developing greater compassion could be applied in your daily life?

WHAT ROLE DOES COMPASSION PLAY IN SOCIAL IMPACT?

Compassion is a powerful force in the realm of social problem-solving. It helps individuals recognize a shared humanity, reminding them to honor the equal dignity of those who are suffering. This awareness challenges their assumptions and biases, motivating them to pursue real, lasting change. Compassion goes beyond simply feeling for others. It calls individuals to act with them, co-creating solutions that are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. It also invites those involved to not only care about creating solutions but to engage deeply with the problem itself.

Compassion moves people from a mere awareness of suffering to active engagement in solving the issues that cause it. It is the foundation of meaningful social impact and a driving force in the effort to build a world where everyone can flourish.[12]

Who do you feel compassion toward? What issue are they facing that you would like to alleviate? How can you help solve that problem?

SUMMARY

Compassion is more than just an emotional response; it is a catalyst for change. In a world where social issues often seem overwhelming, compassion provides a pathway to action and connection. By understanding what compassion is, how it differs from similar emotions, and how you can cultivate it, you unlock the potential to make a real difference in the lives of others. Compassion propels you to see beyond your personal experiences, to engage with others' suffering, and to work together to create a more just and equitable society. As you continue to develop your capacity for compassion, you not only enrich your own life but also contribute to the betterment of the world.

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LOVE THE PROBLEM

PHASE 1: LOVE THE PROBLEM

Chapter 7: Identifying the One

Chapter 8: Scoping the Issue

Chapter 9: Secondary Research

Chapter 10: Monolithic Thinking

The first phase in the social impact cycle is love the problem. This does not mean celebrating the problem. Instead, it means developing a deep understanding of the problem before attempting to solve it. Rather than rushing into action, take time to examine root causes, contributing factors, and the real consequences the problem creates in people's lives. When you love the problem, you focus on clearly defining who is affected, where the issue exists, and how different contexts, such as culture, systems, and environment, shape the experience. This requires intentional listening, comprehensive research, and learning directly from those experiencing the problem.

Without this level of understanding, solutions are often ineffective or, at times, harmful. Similarly to loving the one, loving the problem is an ongoing process. It continues throughout the Social Impact Cycle, as you gain new insights and information.

The next four chapters aim to strengthen your ability to understand a problem by identifying who is affected, defining the scope of the issue, implementing effective research strategies, and avoiding monolithic thinking.


Low Income
Low Income

CHAPTER 7: IDENTIFYING THE ONE

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Explain who "the one" is and why they matter.

2. Use affinity and proximity to identify the one or the social issue.

3. Construct an issue triangle to map out the population, geography, and issue.

INTRODUCTION

As explained previously, loving the one is the central principle of the Social Impact Cycle. It reminds those involved in social impact work that by improving the life of one specific individual, they can create solutions that will benefit a larger group or population. Loving the one is, however, different than identifying the one. This chapter will begin to explore how you can utilize specific strategies to identify the one in social impact work and how identifying the one lays the foundations for designing and implementing effective solutions.

WHO IS THE ONE?

The one is an individual directly involved in the social issue. They are firmly rooted in the affected community and understand the nuances of the social problem, usually because they've lived them.[1] They are someone who grounds you to the cause and those it affects. The one is oftentimes a real person, possibly someone you've met and built a relationship with who inspired you to engage with the cause, or they could be someone you met as you began to research a particular social problem.

The one could also be a detailed persona that represents the targeted population on an individual level.[2] Regardless, the emotions, needs, and hardships of the one should act as a frequent reference point for how an intervention might affect people personally and should prevent your efforts from becoming too abstract. Remembering the needs of the one acts as a stabilizing force in building effective, lasting solutions.

Some key strategies for identifying the one include evaluating your affinity and proximity to an issue and constructing an issue triangle.

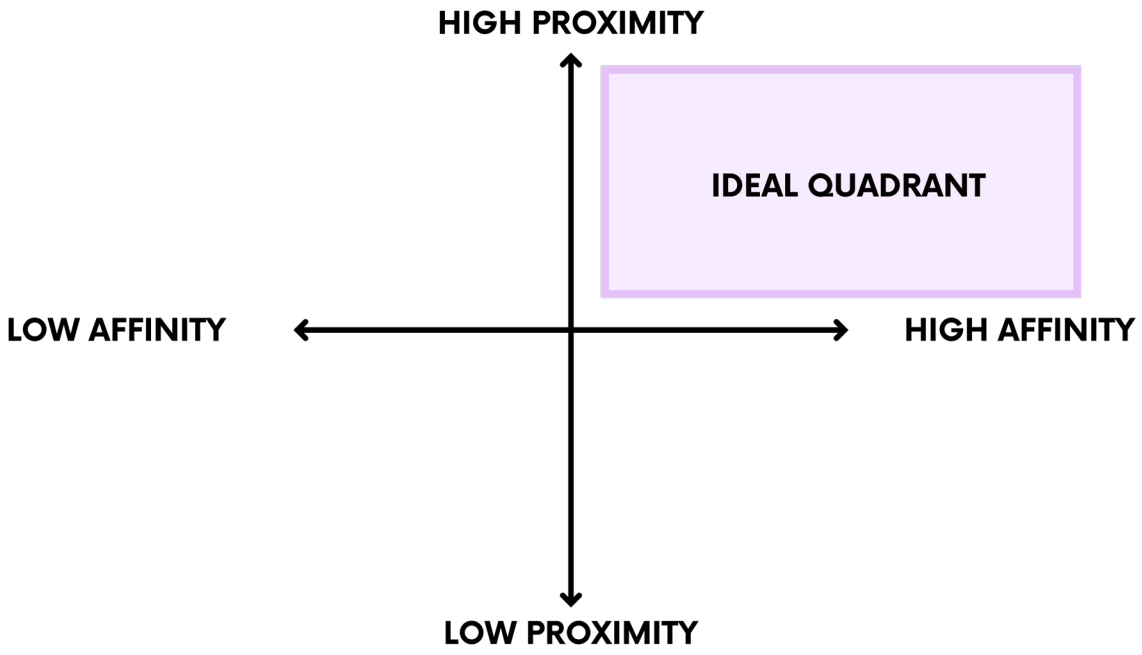
HOW DO AFFINITY AND PROXIMITY CONNECT TO SOCIAL IMPACT WORK?

Examining your affinity and proximity is a key step in identifying the focus of your work. They help you narrow a broad social issue into something more specific and actionable, something you can meaningfully engage with and address. First, let's define affinity and proximity.

Affinity: A natural liking, attraction, or connection between people or things based on shared interests, values, or qualities.

Proximity: Nearness in space, time, or relationship to a person, place, event, or circumstance.

In the social impact sphere, having an affinity for a cause means you have a natural interest or desire to help with a particular social issue. Proximity means that the issue is close to you in time, space, location, or relationship. Oftentimes, this means that the issue is relevant in your school, community,



or family. Your interest in and closeness to the issue increase your likelihood of success when working to solve the problem.[3] Having both affinity and proximity to a social issue also makes it easier to identify the one.

Before beginning phase one of the Social Impact Cycle and working to love the problem, you will first identify an individual or a location-specific social issue to which you have both affinity and proximity. For example, a high school student might realize that their friend doesn't have enough food to eat on the weekends. They are moved by compassion for their friend and want to take action. This friend has become the one. As a result, the high school student might begin asking specific questions about how they can improve the life of their friend. Does the friend receive free lunch at school? What resources are currently available to them outside of school? Is parental involvement required to access the food bank as a minor? By identifying the one, this student has also clarified what social issue they want to engage with: food insecurity among high school students in their community.

Some people may have affinity and proximity to an issue without already having the one in mind. If this is the case, they might begin their research on the topic and find the one during the research process. The goal is to identify an individual amidst the affected population on whom they can center their efforts. In both cases, the next step, after identifying either an individual or a social issue, is creating an issue triangle.

For what social issue/individual do you have an affinity? To what social issue/individual are you proximate?

WHAT IS AN ISSUE TRIANGLE?

Now that you've identified either the one or the social issue, the next step is creating an issue triangle. An issue triangle contains valuable information about the population, geography, and social issue you plan to engage in, with the one acting as the center of the issue triangle. By examining your affinity and proximity, you can identify at least one piece of your issue triangle: the one or the social issue. From this point, the goal is to define three key aspects of your social issue before beginning your research.

- **Population:** Those impacted by the problem
- **Geography:** Where the problem occurs
- **Issue:** What the problem is

Clarifying these three focus areas sets helpful parameters around your social impact work. It sparks productive questions and steers future research in a distinct direction. Gathering information on the demographics and geography tied to a social issue also helps you understand how localized factors influence the nature and severity of the problem. Later in the Social Impact Cycle, having a firm grasp on the issue's geography and how the population adapts to that geography will improve how resources are allocated and interventions are prioritized.

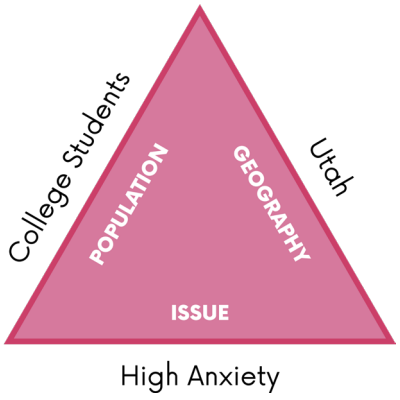
Constructing an Issue Triangle

An issue triangle is constructed by combining its three parts into a single statement, with each element present and clearly defined. If one component is vague or disconnected from the others, the research focus moving forward will be too unstable to build on. Use the formula:

[Issue] + [Population] + [Geography]

For example: "High Anxiety Among College Students in Utah."

The diagram below illustrates how the elements come together:



Construct an issue triangle with a social issue you recognize in your community. What is the affected population? What is the geography? What is the issue?

Using an Issue Triangle to Identify the One

If you haven't already identified the one during the affinity and proximity stage, you can do so after building your issue triangle. The one sits at the center of the issue triangle, as a symbol of the population, geography, and issue.

This individual should be experiencing the effects of your specific social problem while being firmly established within your chosen population and geographic boundaries. By designing your efforts around helping this individual, your work becomes customized to the specific needs of the people living with your issue, in that particular place. Thereby allowing you to serve the whole by serving the one.

SUMMARY

Creating meaningful social impact starts by focusing your efforts on improving the life of one person. To identify that person, begin by reflecting on your affinity and proximity to specific issues and communities—what you care about and where you have a natural connection. This helps you either recognize someone to center your work around or clarify an issue you're closely tied to. From there, you can construct an issue triangle to narrow your focus. By defining the issue, the population, and the geographic context, you can identify the one at the intersection of all three. This commitment to identifying the one before moving forward with your social impact efforts is a simple but powerful method to ensure you're beginning the love the problem phase with clear, purposeful intent.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 8: SCOPING THE ISSUE

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Explain the difference between correlation and causation.

2. Use causal thinking to analyze a social issue and avoid false assumptions when designing an intervention.

3. Scope a social issue by identifying its contributing factors and negative consequences.

INTRODUCTION

Now that you've identified the one and constructed an issue triangle, you can scope your social issue. As you scope, keep in mind that the information gathered during the secondary research stage will better inform your efforts. This chapter will clarify causation from correlation, explain causal thinking, and equip you to identify contributing factors and negative consequences. Each of these elements acts as a tool to increase the productivity of your issue scoping and prepare you to conduct quality research.

WHAT IS SCOPING A SOCIAL ISSUE?

Scoping is a tool for defining the boundaries and specifics of the issue at hand by identifying contributing factors, negative consequences, and additional context related to an issue. This process centers around the specified population, geography, and issue identified in your issue triangle, and is meant to catalog what outside sources are affecting the chosen problem and how the problem is manifesting in that particular community. Gathering this information allows you to "scope" the issue and clarify objectives, ensuring those involved have a clear and consistent understanding of what the work entails. Properly scoping the issue provides crucial context for how future interventions should be implemented and what influences might alter their effectiveness.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CORRELATION AND CAUSATION?

A key part of scoping a social issue is correctly identifying its causes and effects, or causation. Causation is often mistaken for correlation, though the two are quite different. Correlation means that two variables move together and have a loose connection, whereas causation means that one variable is directly producing a change in another. Looking for causation when solving social issues can help you identify variables with a direct cause-and-effect relationship to the problem.

To establish causation, you need all of the following:

1. **Correlation Between the Variables:** The variables must be moving together, implying a relationship.

2. **Temporal Order:** The cause must precede the effect.

3. **Elimination of Alternatives:** Confounders must be ruled out (if other correlated factors are present, that means causation cannot be identified).

4. **A Plausible Mechanism:** A logical reason why one affects the other.

To illustrate the difference between correlation and causation, think of the amusing correlation between shark attacks and ice cream consumption.

Although shark attacks and ice cream consumption both occur during the summertime, ice cream consumption has nothing to do with shark attacks.[1] Both variables are moving together, proving correlation, but not necessarily causation. In other words, eating ice cream on the beach will not increase your likelihood of being attacked by a shark.

In the same way, not everything happening in the same population or geography of your social issue has a cause-and-effect relationship with your social issue. Some factors may be correlated, but do not necessarily cause the issue.[2] Referring to the list of requirements for causation, the factor of ice cream consumption is correlated with shark attacks (the first requirement), but there is no temporal order, elimination of alternatives, or plausible mechanism. As a result, ice cream consumption cannot be proven as a cause of shark attacks.

Mistaking correlation for causation can cause problematic misunderstandings about social issues. In the analogy of shark attacks and ice cream, imagine a social entrepreneur wanting to prevent shark attacks. If this social entrepreneur mistook correlation for causation, he might create an intervention to discourage ice cream consumption. Rather than preventing shark attacks, the social entrepreneur has just created some unhappy beachgoers. Mistaking what is correlated with a social issue for what is causing it can derail an attempt to make a positive impact.

By understanding the clear distinction between correlation and causation, you are able to begin appropriately scoping a social issue and searching for its root causes. Complete this lesson from Khan Academy to learn more about the difference between correlation and causation.[3]

Complete the **Correlation vs. Causation** Khan Academy Lesson

WHAT IS CAUSAL THINKING IN SOCIAL IMPACT?

Causal thinking refers to the process of identifying and understanding the cause-and-effect relationships within a system.[4] Driven by causation, not correlation, this kind of thinking analyzes how certain actions or events (causes) might lead to specific outcomes (effects). Honing this skill enables individuals to better discern which underlying factors, if altered, could drive positive change. The practice of causal thinking can also help those engaged in social impact work anticipate the consequences of different interventions, both positive and negative, thereby facilitating productive brainstorming and meaningful reflection regarding potential solutions.

Causal thinking can act as a vital tool in social impact work when used

correctly. By applying causal thinking, practitioners can:

- **Identify Root Causes:** Determine the fundamental issues driving a social problem and how they interact with their environment, rather than merely recognizing the symptoms.
- **Design Effective Interventions:** Develop targeted strategies that address an issue's root causes, leading to more sustainable and impactful solutions.
- **Allocate Resources Efficiently:** Ensure resources are used effectively by focusing on interventions that address the root cause of a problem.
- **Predict Outcomes:** Anticipate the potential effects of various interventions, enabling better planning and resource allocation.
- **Measure Impact:** Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions by linking outcomes to specific actions or policies.

Causal Thinking in Practice:

In approaching the topic of food-related health issues in urban areas like Chicago, causal thinking focuses on how specific conditions directly produce poor health and food access outcomes.[5] For example, rather than simply noting that areas with more fast food have higher obesity rates, causal thinking examines how the lack of nearby grocery stores (cause) forces reliance on fast food (effect), contributing to diet-related illness. It also shows how transportation barriers (cause) limit access to healthy options (effect), and how economic instability (cause) reduces individuals' ability to afford nutritious food (effect).

By understanding these root causes, city planners and community organizations can design targeted interventions like mobile food markets, better public transportation routes to grocery stores, or local urban farming initiatives to improve healthy food access in a sustainable format. This example shows how causal thinking encourages you to consider the cause-and-effect relationships between a problem and the surrounding infrastructure so you can create more promising solutions.

A local government notices that neighborhoods with higher youth crime have fewer after-school programs. They respond by funding new after-school programs, assuming this will reduce crime.

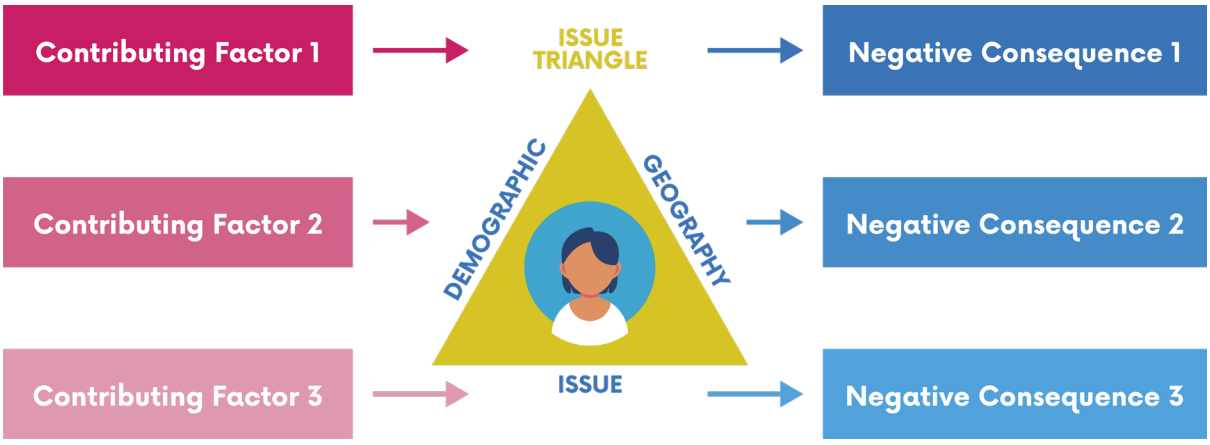
Why is it important to confirm causation before they invest? What problems can arise if decisions rely only on correlation?

WHAT ARE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS?

Social issues typically arise from a complex interplay of contributing factors, including economic disparities, institutional barriers, cultural norms, and environmental conditions. Contributing factors are the various elements that play a role in increasing the prevalence or severity of a social problem. Some of these factors may be causal, while many are simply correlational.

As explained earlier in the chapter, it is critical to clarify which factors are merely correlated with an issue and which are directly causing it. Though correlated factors may increase the intensity and complexity of a social issue, they do not necessarily cause it. Causation identifies which contributing factors, if addressed, will directly impact the issue itself: If we can solve these factors, the social issue will be improved. Identifying these factors helps changemakers concentrate their efforts on the root causes.

SPSOs often start by identifying numerous contributing factors for a given issue. Out of the many contributing factors, a SPSO might pick the top three to understand deeply. For example, addressing healthcare disparities may involve prioritizing factors such as inadequate funding for healthcare infrastructure, lack of health education programs, and regulatory barriers to healthcare access. By focusing first on some of the more critical factors, SPSOs can maximize their impact and allocate resources toward interventions with the greatest potential for positive change. Over time, a SPSO might add a wider variety of contributing factors to its focus.



What are some potential contributing factors to childhood obesity in the United States?

After coming up with a few ideas, check out this Ballard Brief: **Childhood Obesity in the United States** to compare your answers.[6]

WHAT ARE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES?

Negative consequences are the adverse conditions that affect individuals, families, or communities because of a social issue. These consequences can manifest through economic, social, psychological, and also health-related circumstances. In theory, if the social issue were to be solved, all the negative consequences would be taken care of as well. Understanding the negative consequences of an issue is key when gauging the urgency and scale of the problem, as well as informing stakeholders why they should take action.

Before moving forward, you should identify the negative consequences related to your social issue. Looking at the population and geography, specified in your issue triangle, is the best place to start. Why is this issue bad for the community? What is happening as a result of this particular issue? Be careful not to oversimplify negative consequences into general terms that fail to convey the specific impact on individuals. A broad term like "poverty" can be specified even further. What happens because this individual is experiencing poverty? What occurs in the community because of these circumstances? Answering these questions can help you identify some of the unique negative consequences related to your social issue. Being aware of the variety and severity of your issue's negative consequences can help guide your research and direct your problem-solving efforts.

What are some potential negative consequences of childhood obesity in the United States? After coming up with a few ideas, go back to the Ballard Brief given on the previous page to compare your answers.

SUMMARY

Scoping a social issue involves analyzing the cause-and-effect relationships that shape it. Causal thinking is central to this process because it clarifies the difference between correlation and causation. This ensures that interventions focus on the factors that drive the problem, rather than those that simply surround it. Scoping also requires the identification of both key contributing factors and the issue's resulting negative consequences. With these insights, organizations can prioritize the more significant factors, enabling them to allocate resources more strategically and increase their overall impact. In this way, effective scoping establishes a strong foundation for meaningful and sustainable social change.

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#98
#99
Prevalence of Malaria in Sub-Saharan Africa
and
Avery Stonely
Political Science &
Global Women's Studies
LOVE THE PROBLEM
(NOT the solution)
ECOSYSTEM MAP
NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES:
· poor health
· infant mortality
· cyclic poverty
END HUNGER
DO GOOD.
BETTER.
Specify Outcome | Flip Negative Consequences
Negative consequence
NAME IT
The positive opposite
FLIP IT
Desired outcome from the flip
FRAME IT
Consequences
POPULATION
GEOGRAPHY
ISSUE
65
Do Good. Better.

CHAPTER 9: SECONDARY RESEARCH

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Define what secondary research is, how it differs from primary research, and what it includes.
2. Explain why secondary research matters and when to apply it.
3. Understand how secondary research enables you to gain a better understanding of social issues.
4. Know how to conduct secondary research and evaluate its credibility.

INTRODUCTION

Secondary research involves utilizing existing information to gain a deeper understanding of a problem before designing a solution. This chapter explains how secondary research is defined, conducted, and implemented within social impact work by outlining research methods and introducing the role of context. The process of conducting secondary research is pivotal in establishing subject matter, navigating the various aspects of an issue, and learning to love the problem.

Before continuing: Visit the Ballard Brief website and review one of the student-written research articles in their library. These briefs are strong examples of how secondary research can deepen your understanding of a complex issue. While reading, take note of the sections included and the types of content covered.

Explore the Ballard Brief Online Research Library: https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs

WHAT IS SECONDARY RESEARCH?

Secondary research is the process of analyzing information that others have already collected and published, otherwise known as secondary data.[1] Secondary data can be both quantitative (numeric and measurable) and qualitative (descriptive and abstract), including items like surveys, polls, public records, reports, academic studies and reviews, and other collected research. An individual conducting thorough secondary research pulls information from as many applicable data sources as possible. Secondary research is most effective when there is already a substantial amount of published and relevant research available regarding your topic, and time and budget constraints limit your primary data collection.[2] The goal of secondary research is to synthesize existing information from various sources to clearly establish what is known on a certain topic and where gaps in the knowledge exist.

Real-World Example: Dr. Julie Valentine's work on the connection between mental illness and sexual assault is a great example of how secondary research functions in a real-world context. In her study, *Mental Illness as a Vulnerability for Sexual Assault: A Retrospective Study of 7,455 Sexual Assault Forensic Medical Examinations*, Valentine and her co-authors conducted a retrospective chart review of 7,455 sexual assault medical forensic examinations from 2010 to 2020. The research

team collected the information documented by sexual assault nurse examiners, coded it into a shared dataset, and examined the demographic details, self-reported mental illness, medication use, assault characteristics, and injury documentation of those affected. To strengthen the study, the team also reviewed crime-lab information and de-identified data. By gathering these existing resources together, the authors were able to identify patterns that proved mental illness was associated with greater vulnerability to sexual assault, as well as more violent assault characteristics.[3]

Secondary vs Primary Research

To better understand the role of secondary research, it's helpful to distinguish between secondary and primary approaches. Secondary research and primary research are complementary, not competing methodologies. Identifying the difference between them is essential for knowing when each is appropriate to use and how they might work together when applicable.

Primary research involves the direct, first-hand collection of new data.

Meaning, you, or your team, are personally conducting and documenting survey responses, interviews, focus groups, field observations, and controlled experiments—all of which generate original data that did not previously exist. Primary research can be tailored to specific research questions that give practitioners direct insight into the population they are studying. However, it is time-intensive, resource-demanding, and requires careful ethical planning, particularly when working with vulnerable populations.

Secondary research, by contrast, works entirely with data and findings that others have already produced. Rather than going out to collect new information, the researchers synthesize, analyze, and draw meaning from existing sources. This makes secondary research significantly faster and more cost-effective than primary research, though it is worth noting that accessing certain databases, proprietary datasets, or specialized industry reports can still carry real costs. Additionally, since secondary data was collected for a different purpose and audience, it may not perfectly fit a practitioner's specific question—a limitation that primary research does not share.

In practice, the two methods are most powerful when used together. Secondary research typically comes first: it establishes the knowledge base, narrows the focus, and identifies where new data is needed. Primary research then fills the gaps that secondary sources cannot address.

For many social impact projects, secondary research alone is sufficient

to inform a theory of change, scope a problem, and justify an intervention, but primary research becomes essential when the existing literature is sparse, when local context differs significantly from published findings, or when new, original evidence is required for credibility with funders or stakeholders.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN TYPES OF SECONDARY RESEARCH?

Secondary research takes many forms, and choosing the right type depends on your question, your context, and the kind of evidence you need. The following methods are among the most commonly used in social impact work:

Literature Review: A literature review is the most common form of secondary research in academic and applied settings. It is a comprehensive analysis of existing scholarly content on a given subject. This involves gathering, studying, and synthesizing applicable published research to establish a knowledge base and identify research gaps.

Statistical and Database Research: This type of secondary research involves examining existing quantitative datasets that were collected for other purposes, often by governments, international organizations, or research institutions. Examples include census data, administrative records, economic indicators, and public health surveillance data. Statistical secondary research is powerful because it provides access to large, representative samples that would be expensive to collect independently.

Case Study Research: A case study is an in-depth examination of a specific organization, program, community, or event. Secondary case study research draws on existing documentation—such as program evaluations, organizational reports, and journalistic accounts—rather than conducting new, firsthand investigations. This approach is particularly powerful in social impact work, where learning from real-world precedent—understanding not just what worked or failed, but why—can meaningfully inform future interventions.

Secondary case studies are valuable because they capture the kind of complex, context-rich detail that surveys or statistics often miss. However, they come with limitations. The quality and completeness of existing documentation varies widely, and because each case reflects a specific context, findings may not transfer directly to a different population, setting, or problem.

WHY DOES SECONDARY RESEARCH MATTER?

Before you can design a solution, propose a program, or seek to advocate a new policy, you must have a robust understanding of the issue. Secondary research allows practitioners and organizations to build on existing

knowledge rather than starting from zero—saving time, reducing cost, and grounding decisions in evidence rather than assumption.

In social impact work specifically, secondary research serves several critical functions.

- **Learning from past successes and failures:** It reveals what has already been tried. By reviewing existing studies, evaluations, and reports, practitioners can identify which approaches have worked, which have failed, and under what conditions. This protects against repeating well-documented mistakes and enables programs to move forward with realistic expectations.

- **Identifying research gaps:** Secondary research draws attention to areas where evidence is sparse, results are unclear, or questions remain unresolved. These gaps often point directly to where primary research or innovative programming is most needed.

- **Strengthening your theory of change:** A theory of change (which will be thoroughly discussed in a future chapter) is a strategic framework used to map out how an intervention or set of actions will lead to a desired future state. This framework relies on the evidence found through secondary research to justify why it thinks certain actions will lead to certain outcomes.

Understanding past successes and failures, identifying research gaps, and strengthening your theory of change are not isolated tasks. They work together to reduce the risk of unintended harm and increase the likelihood of meaningful impact. It is also important to recognize that secondary research is not simply a preliminary step to be completed before the "real work" begins. Effective practitioners return to it continuously as programs evolve, new studies are published, and the broader context of an issue shifts. In social impact work, staying grounded in existing evidence is not a one-time exercise but an ongoing discipline.

HOW DOES SECONDARY RESEARCH HELP YOU UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF THE ISSUE?

One of the most important outcomes of secondary research is a deeper understanding of the context surrounding an issue—the historical, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors that interact to shape a social problem. Without this understanding, even well-intentioned interventions risk being ineffective or harmful.

To begin mapping an issue's context, secondary research should address foundational questions such as:

Who is affected? What is important to

know about these populations? What makes their situation unique?

What is the issue at hand? How is it defined and by whom?

When did this issue begin? How has it developed or changed over time?

Where is the issue occurring? How does it compare to other communities with similar problems?

Working through these questions builds the kind of contextual foundation that allows practitioners to clearly define the problem, identify its contributing factors and negative consequences, and design responses that align with the lived realities of those affected.

Context in Practice: Child Helpline International

One powerful example of the importance of context is Jeroo Billimoria's work founding Childline India, an emergency telephone service for unhoused children in India.[4] These children frequently navigated emergencies like injury and illness, with no way to access aid. In India's society at the time, children living on the street were often viewed with suspicion and distrust, and police frequently saw them as criminals rather than vulnerable youth. This created a deeply-rooted fear of law enforcement among the children, who avoided police even in emergencies. Pay phones were common, and could be used in an emergency, but the children didn't have the money to pay for them. Billimoria's awareness of both barriers directly shaped her response: a free helpline (Childline) and an "uncle police" program designed to rebuild trust between children and local police, so they could better access Childline.

Without that contextual understanding, her intervention would have struggled to reach the people it was designed to serve. Childline India has since grown into Child Helpline International, now active in over 180 countries, and a testament to what becomes possible when solutions are built to address real-life barriers.

The Danger of Ignoring Context

Moving forward with a solution without first understanding the context of a problem can lead to serious harm. Just as a doctor wouldn't operate on a patient without first knowing their symptoms, medical history, and overall condition, a SPSO shouldn't seek to solve a social issue before understanding its own underlying history.

The Bangladesh arsenic well disaster serves as a powerful illustration of how well-intentioned efforts can worsen an issue if context is ignored.[5] In the 1970s and 1980s, millions of shallow tube wells were installed across Bangladesh to provide safe drinking water and combat deadly waterborne diseases, a logical, well-intentioned intervention. However, the geological context specific to the region was not appropriately examined, and the soil was not properly tested. As a result, the wells exposed more than 50 million people to toxic levels of arsenic,

triggering widespread illness, death, and social disruption. The very effort designed to save lives created a new public health crisis.

This is precisely the danger of skipping contextual research. The problem was not a lack of resources or good intentions. It was a failure to ask the right questions before acting. What are the environmental conditions of this specific place? What factors might interact with this intervention in unexpected ways? Secondary research, done thoroughly, is what surfaces those questions before they become tragedies. Context is not merely helpful; it is essential for defining problems accurately, anticipating unintended consequences, and designing interventions that truly help rather than harm.

What is a time you acted without context? What challenges did that create?

HOW DO YOU CONDUCT SECONDARY RESEARCH?

Once you understand why secondary research is valuable and how it helps build context, the next step is learning how to engage in it effectively. Secondary research is an iterative and flexible process that can be adapted and implemented based on specific research needs. However, there are best practices that, if followed, can strengthen your research.

Qualtrics, an experience management company based in the United States, outlines five key steps to conducting secondary research effectively and efficiently.[6]

Step 1: Define your research topic or question.

To ensure that your research efforts are cohesive and relevant, you need to be clear about what you are trying to learn, solve, or understand. A vague starting question leads to unfocused searching, wasted time, and inconclusive findings.

Step 2: Find existing data sources.

This step prioritizes gathering sources for further study. Draw from a wide range of source types, each with distinct strengths and limitations, to compile a personal library of research centered around your topic.

Step 3: Begin studying and sorting existing data.

As you study your gathered sources, document the quality and application potential of each source. This step requires both strategic thinking and disciplined record-keeping. Filter out unnecessary or irrelevant data and begin building your evidence base.

Step 4: Combine the data and compare the results.

Collecting data is only part of the work. The real intellectual effort of secondary research begins when you start

synthesizing across sources, identifying patterns, reconciling contradictions, and building a coherent picture of what the existing evidence says about your question or research topic.

Step 5: Analyze your data and explore further.

Analysis transforms your research from a collection of facts into valuable insights. This requires interpreting what the combined evidence has proven or disproven. Which of your assumptions were incorrect? How does the collected research change your perspective on the issue? Strive to gain a clear understanding of the verified claims regarding your topic, as well as its existing research gaps.

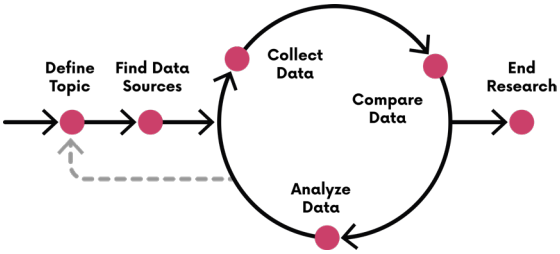
You will cycle back through some of these steps as your topic is refined and your research exposes valuable new subtopics to explore. Continue compiling research until you feel thoroughly grounded in the various aspects of your topic.

Handling Conflicting Evidence

It's common to find sources that contradict one another. Rather than dismissing conflicting evidence, treat it as informative. Ask yourself:

- Do the studies use different methodologies or definitions that could explain different findings?
- Were they conducted in different geographic, cultural, or temporal contexts?
- Are the conflicting sources of different quality or rigor? Is one peer-reviewed while another is an industry report?
- Does the conflict reveal a genuine area of scholarly debate that your report should acknowledge?

Acknowledging conflicting evidence in your research can strengthen your credibility. It suggests you have engaged deeply with the literature rather than specifically selecting sources that confirm a predetermined conclusion.



HOW TO KNOW WHAT SECONDARY RESEARCH SOURCES TO TRUST?

Conducting secondary research requires careful evaluation of the quality and credibility of found sources. Not all sources are reliable, which is why it's essential to develop the skills to assess source validity. The recommendations listed below offer simple reference points to help you find the best sources available.

- **Using Credible Sources:** Prioritize peer-reviewed articles and studies published in reputable journals.

Peer-reviewed research undergoes rigorous evaluation by experts in the field, ensuring that the methods and findings are reliable.

- **Leveraging Academic and Public Resources:** Utilize search engines like Google Scholar and AI-driven tools such as Elicit to find relevant studies. Additionally, draw on university and public library databases, which often provide free access to a wealth of academic resources.
- **Assessing Source Validity:** Always critically evaluate the sources encountered. Consider whether the source is peer-reviewed, the credibility of the journal or publisher, and the extent to which the findings have been corroborated by other studies. This vigilance helps ensure that the information used is accurate and trustworthy.
- **Avoiding Cognitive Biases:** Be mindful of the "sleeper effect," a phenomenon where persuasive information from unreliable sources influences beliefs over time, even if it was initially clear the source was untrustworthy. To avoid this, always cite sources and prioritize information from the most credible sources available.

Watch this short, 3-minute video to learn more about how a study or article becomes peer-reviewed.

SUMMARY

Secondary research is a critical piece in loving the problem because loving the problem is rooted in understanding it. The process of collecting, studying, and analyzing existing research enables you to develop a nuanced understanding of the issue and its context. This research process then informs how an intervention is designed, implemented, and how it should be evaluated. Combined with available primary research, this foundation becomes the bedrock for innovative solutions and, when done correctly, sets the stage for successful, long-term social impact.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 10: MONOLITHIC THINKING

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Describe the key characteristics of monolithic thinking.
2. Explain the basic principles of breaking down a complicated social issue.
3. Identify real-world examples of social issues that are often oversimplified.
4. Understand the difference between monolithic thinking and wicked problems.

INTRODUCTION

Social issues exist on a spectrum, ranging from those with clear causes and direct solutions to deeply complex, evolving problems that require long-term, adaptive strategies. Understanding the complexity and scope of social issues is essential for social problem-solving organizations (SPSOs) to implement appropriate intervention methods. As issues become more complex, the framework used to define and understand them becomes increasingly important. How social issues are categorized can shape the way solutions are designed and applied, especially when impacted by simplistic or monolithic thinking.

This chapter teaches you how to recognize when monolithic thinking is at play, how to break down complicated issues, and how to distinguish these situations from truly wicked problems—complex, interconnected, and evolving issues that require a different approach.

Watch the video: What's a Wicked Problem? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwABiQBmuLA

WHAT IS A MONOLITH AND WHAT IS MONOLITHIC THINKING?

Traditionally, a "monolith" is a large single block of stone, particularly one shaped into or serving as a pillar or monument. It's meant to be symbolic and intimidating; indivisible. Another use of the term "monolith" refers to problems that have some of the same characteristics. They are treated as one giant issue or problem and are considered intractable. The truth, though, is that most problems—even ones that seem monolithic—are actually made up of much smaller parts.

The problem isn't that the issue itself is an impossibly large, indivisible, unsolvable monolith; it's that people think about it as though it were one. This is called monolithic thinking. Monolithic thinking occurs when people see a complex issue in a way that oversimplifies it and treats it as unsolvable, without breaking it into its component parts and understanding that these smaller parts can be addressed.

One of the surest ways to identify monolithic thinking is when an issue appears both as a contributing factor and as a consequence of the same social problem. This can be referred to as a recursive loop. Recursive loops refer to how some issues reinforce themselves in cycles, creating a problem that feels unapproachable and unending. Social issues like poverty are particularly vulnerable to this kind of thinking. Limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities all contribute to and result from poverty, creating a feedback loop that extends across generations.

This self-reinforcing nature encourages monolithic thinking by making poverty feel like a single, immovable issue, even though it's made up of many interrelated parts. However, recognizing the recursive loop is precisely what allows you to break the issue into smaller, more specific pieces, ones that are far more useful in your analysis and ultimately more actionable.

What are three ways that monolithic thinking can make addressing social issues more difficult?

HOW CAN YOU DECONSTRUCT MONOLITHIC THINKING?

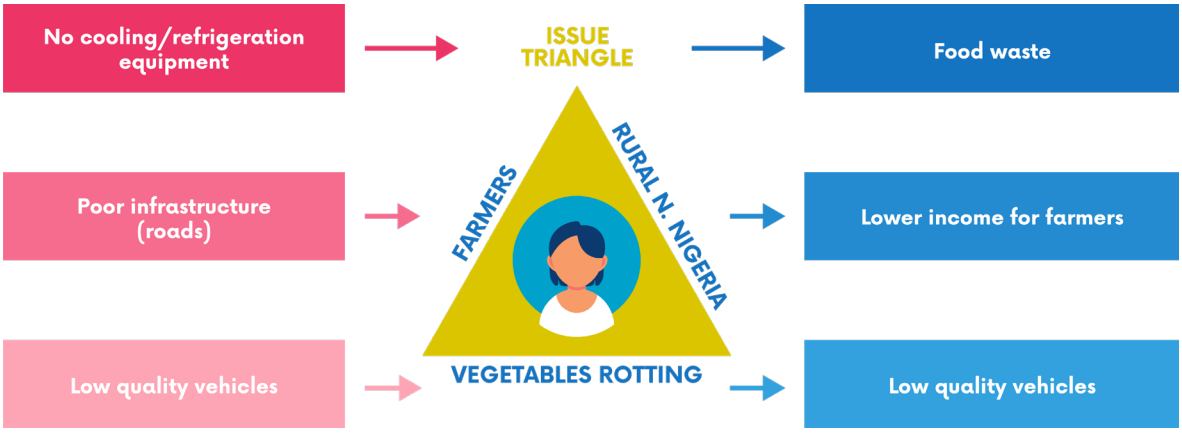
Deconstructing monolithic thinking begins with rejecting the illusion that a large social issue is a single, unified problem. It only appears that way because it hasn't been scoped effectively. The key to deconstruction is moving away from a surface-level view of the issue and instead working to find and understand the issue's root causes. This is accomplished by breaking the issue into smaller, more manageable pieces through scoping. After a problem is appropriately scoped and its key contributing factors and negative consequences have been identified, interventions can be designed to reflect its actual complexity rather than oversimplified assumptions. Once broken down, the perceived monolith becomes a network of solvable challenges.

Methods for Deconstructing Complex Social Issues

As you approach and break down complex social issues, utilize these methods to avoid monolithic thinking:

1. **Build an Issue Triangle:** An issue triangle consists of three elements: the defined issue itself, the affected demographic, and the specific location or geography. Issue + Demographic + Geography. This helps narrow down the larger problem and gives you a clear starting point.

2. **Identify Contributing Factors and Negative Consequences:** Once your issue triangle has been created, list some of its contributing factors and negative consequences. Mapping out what leads to the issue and what results from it helps clarify its internal structure. This turns the problem from something vague and overwhelming into something traceable and specific.



3. **Break it into smaller parts—then into smaller parts again**: Take each contributing factor and ask: What else is inside this? What makes this true? Breaking problems down into layers exposes opportunities for targeted intervention. A broad issue like housing insecurity, for example, might include rental pricing, zoning laws, shelter access, social stigma, and tenant protections—all of which can be broken down even further.

4. **Focus:** Once the issue has been broken down, pick one section and go deeper. Look at a specific contributing factor, the surrounding community dynamics, and the negative outcomes that stem from this factor. What solutions have already been tried? What gaps remain? Remember: focusing on one part doesn't ignore the larger system, it gives you an entry point into it.

Consider a social issue in your community that seems large and overwhelming. What are three smaller parts of that issue?

WHAT ARE WICKED PROBLEMS?

Wicked problems are the most complex and challenging type of social issue to address. The term "wicked problem" was coined by theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber in their 1973 paper "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," in which they chose to label this kind of problem as "wicked" to depict the "malignant," "vicious," or "tricky" nature of issues that resist straightforward treatment. Rittel and Webber asserted that wicked social problems are never solved: "At best, they are only re-solved—over and over again."[1]

Unlike monolithic thinking, wicked problems are not created by the mindset used to approach the problem—they're an entirely separate classification of social issues. These problems are characterized by causes and effects that shift over time, stakeholders with conflicting priorities, and interventions that result in new complications.[2] Wicked problems cannot easily be broken down into clear parts and tackled one by one.[3] An attempt to address one aspect creates new challenges, and any implemented solutions are frequently met with unintended consequences.

Part of what makes wicked problems so difficult is that even defining them is a challenge. As Rittel and Webber explain, "The formulation of a wicked problem is the problem." Essentially, the process of understanding the issue and developing a response are inseparable.[4] You cannot fully describe the problem without already beginning to think about solutions, and every new piece of information changes how the problem is understood. This continuous gathering of information constantly shifts how the causes and effects surrounding the issue are deciphered and addressed. The involvement of different stakeholders also complicates matters. Each approaches the problem with their own perspectives and priorities, and agreeing on both the problem and the solution is difficult. However, regardless of the wicked nature of these problems, long-term, collaborative, and adaptive strategies can still be leveraged to improve them.

Example: Climate Change

Climate change is generally viewed as a wicked problem. It involves various interconnected factors, including greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, industrial practices, and consumer behavior.[5] Implemented solutions intended to mitigate climate change, like reducing carbon emissions, often lead to new challenges, like policy conflicts, shifts in global markets, or new environmental tradeoffs (such as the resource extraction required for battery materials). The complex interconnections between social, economic, and environmental systems make it a dynamic and ongoing issue that cannot be permanently resolved.

Climate change is not simply "wicked" because it's complicated; rather, the problem itself shifts as solutions are

put into practice. New technologies create new possibilities but also new challenges. Invested stakeholders (governments, industries, communities, and individuals) hold conflicting priorities and can inadvertently create problems for one another. The problem resists being "solved" in any final way.

Approaching Wicked Problems

Approaching a wicked problem requires accepting that no permanent solution likely exists. Rather than attempting to solve it outright, effective responses rely on flexible, iterative strategies continuously assessed and adjusted as the problem evolves. Collaboration, experimentation, and humility are essential.

Wicked problems remain deeply complex even after thorough scoping, requiring more collaboration, adaptation, time, and iteration than other types of challenges. They are a well-established classification of social issues, signifying complexity and interconnectedness that persists even after careful analysis. Some issues that appear straightforward or monolithic are actually wicked problems in disguise, and some wicked problems may even appear simple at first, making it important to approach unfamiliar problems with curiosity and an open mind.

Think of a wicked problem you've encountered in your life. What makes it wicked?

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MONOLITHIC THINKING AND WICKED PROBLEMS?

Understanding the difference between a mis-scoped (or monolithic) social issue and a wicked problem can change how you approach potential interventions. Any social issue can fall victim to monolithic thinking if it hasn't been scoped well. Difficulty in approaching the issue does not necessarily mean it's a wicked problem. Monolithic thinking is merely the oversimplification of a problem, which can be overcome through effective scoping. By acknowledging the many layers of the problem, you can improve interventions and take steps toward solving it.

Unlike monolithic thinking, wicked problems are given their own distinct social issue classification. Even after thorough analysis, wicked problems remain difficult to fully understand, not because they haven't been studied enough, but because this tangled complexity is fundamental to what they are.[6] The problems themselves are constantly changing in ways that make understanding the issue and developing solutions more difficult.

Wicked problems require long-term, flexible strategies that evolve over time and often resist full resolution. Engaging with wicked problems demands resilience, ongoing iterations, and systems-level coordination. These efforts are valuable; however, their

impact generally helps to manage the problem rather than solve it.

SUMMARY

Social issues exist on a spectrum. At one end, there are issues with clearly defined causes and solutions. In the middle, there are more complex challenges subject to monolithic thinking because of poor scoping and limited understanding. At the far end, there are wicked problems—intensely interconnected, constantly evolving, and resistant to any permanent solution. Recognizing the distinction between these categories is critical for SPSOs to choose the right strategy. Issues that feel monolithic often require a more thoughtful, structured scoping process to break them down into solvable parts. Whereas wicked problems call for ongoing adaptation, collaboration, and flexible approaches. Understanding these differences helps SPSOs navigate the complexity of social impact work with greater clarity, aiding their pursuit of meaningful, lasting change.

Endnotes

1 Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. Policy Sciences, 4(2), 155–169.

2 Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. Policy Sciences, 4(2), 155–169.

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4 Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. Policy Sciences, 4(2), 155–169.

5 IPCC Reports (latest version, 2021/2022)

6 Rittel & Webber (1973)


DESIGN THE CHANGE

PHASE 2: DESIGN THE CHANGE

The second phase of the social impact cycle is design the change. In this phase, you take what you've learned from loving the problem and begin creating solutions grounded in the needs of real people.

When you design the change, you work with individuals as partners to co-create interventions that reflect their lived experiences. This process includes brainstorming, prototyping, testing, and refining ideas through small, iterative cycles. Rather than committing to a finalized solution quickly, you focus on learning, improving, and revising along the way. Designing the change also requires careful thinking and planning. You define what success looks like, map how your intervention will lead to meaningful outcomes, and ensure your approach is practical and informed by evidence.

The next five chapters aim to strengthen your ability to design meaningful solutions through systems mapping, stakeholder collaboration, testing ideas, and building a clear plan for change.


WISHES + NEED
FAITH
SOCIAL

CHAPTER 11: ECOSYSTEM MAPPING

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Define the concept and purpose of ecosystem mapping.
2. Identify and analyze the key components of ecosystem maps.
3. Recognize how ecosystem maps can enhance collaboration, reveal best practices, and identify gaps in solving social problems.
4. Understand the concept "Proudly Found Elsewhere."

INTRODUCTION

The word "ecosystem" often brings to mind a biological system, where organisms are interconnected, each depending on and shaping the others. Similarly, a social impact ecosystem reveals the interdependencies and relationships within a community working on or experiencing a shared challenge. Addressing complex social issues requires collaboration among all parts of the ecosystem, each with unique expertise and resources. No organization works in isolation. This chapter explores how understanding a social impact ecosystem enhances strategic planning, reveals gaps and best practices, equips social organizations to engage with stakeholders, and improves overall social impact.

WHAT IS ECOSYSTEM MAPPING?

Ecosystem mapping is the process of creating a visual tool that illustrates the relationships, resources, and interactions surrounding a social issue. It shows how different parts of the system connect, using lines, shapes, and colors to represent roles and relationships. In turn, it serves as a strategic guide for identifying assets, strengthening collaboration, and informing more effective solutions.

WHAT ARE THE KEY COMPONENTS OF AN ECOSYSTEM MAP?

An ecosystem map typically includes the following elements:

- **Actors**: The various stakeholders who play a role in addressing the issue, from large nonprofits and formal institutions to individual community leaders and religious groups.

- **Resources**: The assets available within the ecosystem, such as funding, services, expertise, volunteer time, physical spaces, technology platforms, political influences, and infrastructure.

- **Relationships**: The connections between key players (collaborative, influential, dependent), which can be strong or weak, reciprocal or one-directional, and formal (contractual partnerships) or informal (shared board members, regular communication).

- **Processes**: The flow of information, resources, and services within the ecosystem that show, for example, how a person experiencing homelessness accesses shelter, how funding gets from donors to programs, or how data is shared between organizations.

- **External Factors**: The broader environmental, economic, social, and political conditions that impact

the ecosystem and shape what's possible, such as government policies, economic conditions, or technological changes.

These components help map out the complex web of relationships and resources within their social impact context, revealing how each part of the system plays a role in shaping outcomes. A well-constructed ecosystem map doesn't just list these elements; it shows how they interact and depend on each other.

Think of a personal challenge you are currently facing. What resources and relationships might be helpful to you in addressing this challenge?

WHY IS ECOSYSTEM MAPPING IMPORTANT?

An ecosystem map provides a comprehensive overview of a social issue's landscape. By mapping out the various components of an ecosystem, stakeholders can:

- **Identify Key Players**: Recognize who the most influential actors (key players) are in an ecosystem, including organizations, individuals, and institutions, and strive to understand their specific role, capacity, and influence.
- **Understand Relationships**: View the networks of collaboration, competition, and influence between key players to determine how resources flow and where bottlenecks occurs.
- **Spot Gaps and Opportunities**: Detect missing elements or weak links in the ecosystem. Consider how to fill these critical gaps with targeted interventions and resource allocation.
- **Enhance Collaboration**: Facilitate coordination among different organizations to promote working toward common goals, rather than duplicating efforts or competing unnecessarily. [1]

Through this type of visual diagram, stakeholders can gain a much deeper understanding of how each part of the ecosystem influences the other, providing insight into possible solutions and interventions. As a result, ecosystem mapping transforms an overwhelming landscape into a navigable map.

Why is it important to visualize the relationships and resources within an ecosystem when working to address social issues? How can this help in making strategic decisions?

WHO ARE THE KEY PLAYERS IN AN ECOSYSTEM?

Key players in an ecosystem are organizations, individuals, or institutions that have a direct stake in the social issue being addressed.[2] They are the most influential actors. Not only is it important to identify these players, but it is crucial to understand their role, their resources, and their connection to other parts of the ecosystem.

Key Player Categories

Peers: Organizations or people doing similar work in a comparable way. These are your colleagues in the field. They're addressing the same issue with similar approaches, serving similar populations, or working in the same geographic area. While you might sometimes compete for funding or attention, peers are valuable sources of learning and potential partners.

Collaborators & Resource Providers: Those who assist in parts of the work, offering resources, expertise, or support. These actors don't fill the same role as you, but they provide essential input. Collaborators and resource providers might include foundations that fund your work, universities that provide research support, government agencies that offer data or facilities, or businesses that donate goods or services.

Competitors: Organizations that may compete for the same resources or attention but offer opportunities for learning and improvement. Competition isn't necessarily negative. It can drive innovation, reveal what works, and show where the field is heading. Understanding your competitors helps you differentiate your approach and learn from their successes and failures.

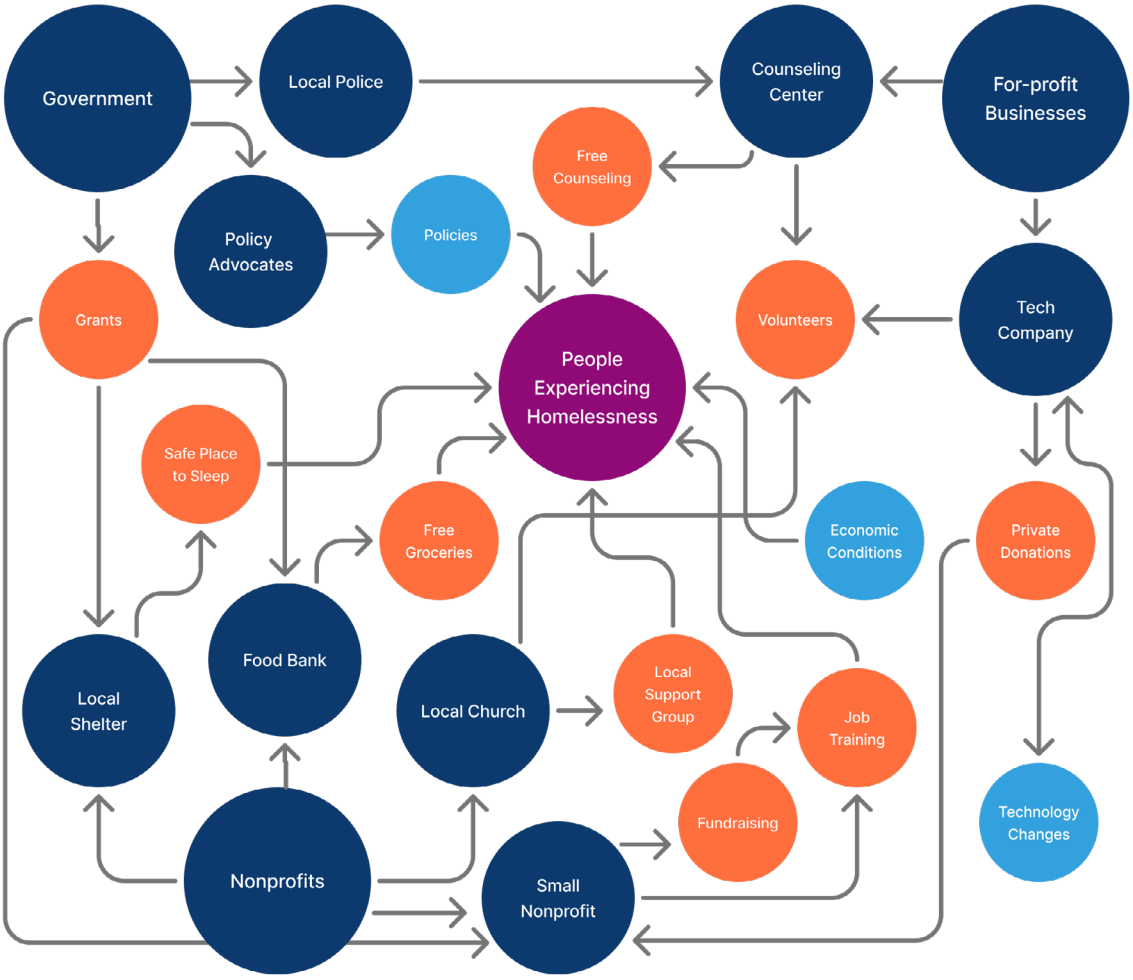
Customer-Partners & Target Users: The individuals or groups directly affected by or benefiting from the interventions. These are the people experiencing the social issue you're trying to address. They should be at the center of your ecosystem map because ultimately, the entire ecosystem exists to serve them.

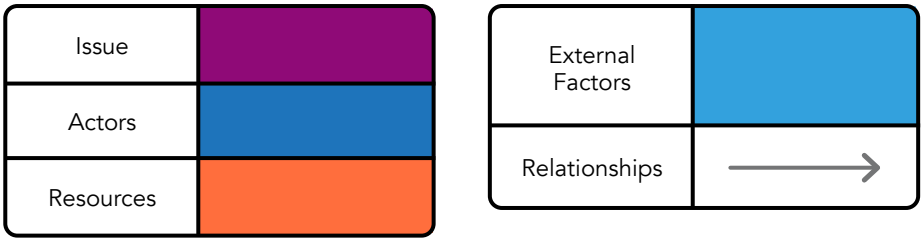
Example: Homelessness Ecosystem

An ecosystem map for an organization addressing homelessness might include these key players:

- **Shelters (peers):** Provide similar emergency housing services.
- **Community groups (peers):** Offer related support and advocacy.
- **Healthcare providers (collaborators & resource providers):** Address medical needs of people experiencing homelessness.
- **Government agencies (collaborators & resource providers):** Provide funding, data, and policy frameworks.
- **Other nonprofit organizations**

ECOSYSTEM MAP





(peers and/or competitors): May compete for the same grant funding but also offer complementary services.

- **Individuals experiencing homelessness (customer-partners):** The people at the center of your efforts. Important contacts to co-create solutions and gather insights into the issue.

Important note: Some organizations may fill multiple roles. A government agency might be both a collaborator (providing funding) and a competitor (running its own homelessness programs). A peer organization might be a resource provider by sharing best practices, while also being a grant competitor. These overlapping roles are normal, and understanding them helps you navigate complex relationships.
By mapping the connections between key players, organizations can identify gaps (populations or services not being addressed), opportunities for collaboration (complementary strengths), and potential areas for intervention (unmet needs in the ecosystem).

Who are the key players in a social issue ecosystem that you care about? Try to identify at least one actor in each category.

HOW CAN ECOSYSTEM MAPPING REVEAL BEST PRACTICES AND FOSTER COLLABORATION?

Learning from Best Practices

Acting within an ecosystem helps SPSOs learn from existing practices and integrate relevant strategies into their own work. It invites collaboration

with experienced organizations and stakeholders that often possess valuable insights into what strategies are most effective. These strategies are referred to as best practices because they represent the current research and accumulated wisdom surrounding the most effective methods for solving social problems.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, SPSOs are encouraged to build on the proven methods and best practices of other organizations. This approach allows them to develop solutions faster and take them further by expanding on prior learning and demonstrated.[3] The Ballard Center refers to this concept as **"Proudly Found Elsewhere."** It distills the idea that many successful strategies and approaches have already been tested and refined by other organizations.[4] There's no shame in adopting or adapting what works elsewhere. In fact, it's often the smartest and most efficient approach.

By recognizing these existing practices, SPSOs can:

- Learn from past experiences and accumulated knowledge.
- Avoid repeating mistakes others have already made.
- Apply proven solutions with confidence, knowing they've worked before.
- Enhance their own interventions, measurements, evaluations, and organizational learning.
- Focus innovation efforts on areas where new approaches are truly needed.

The principle is simple: Innovation for its own sake can waste time and resources. If someone has already created an effective solution, adapt it rather than starting from scratch. Save your innovative energy for the gaps where no good solution exists yet.

For more information about the concept "Proudly Found Elsewhere" and the prioritization of effective replication over redundant innovation, read the **Stanford Social Impact Review: Enough Innovation Already! by Kevin Starr, with Greg Coussa**

Fostering Strategic Collaboration

Ecosystem mapping also helps organizations connect to a larger network of resources, expertise, and stakeholders. By better understanding the broader context of the issue and the key players, they can join existing partnerships and networks rather than working in isolation.

This collaborative approach offers several strategic advantages:

- **Efficient Resource Allocation:** By understanding what others

are doing, organizations can avoid duplication and focus their resources where they're most needed. If three organizations are already providing job training in one neighborhood but none are offering childcare support, providing childcare would be a better allocation of resources. The ecosystem map reveals this gap.

- **Targeted Interventions:** The ecosystem map shows where other organizations are targeting their efforts and reveals underserved areas of an ecosystem. By consulting the map, SPSOs can target their interventions toward these underserved areas instead of competing for resources in well-served areas. This strategic positioning benefits everyone. The new organization differentiates itself, funders see efficient use of resources, and most importantly, more people are served.

- **Stronger Partnerships:** When organizations understand the full ecosystem, they can form strategic partnerships based on complementary strengths. A health clinic and a housing nonprofit might realize they serve the same population and could share referrals, coordinate services, or even co-locate to better serve their customer-partners.

- **Better Strategic Decisions:** Recognizing gaps and opportunities allows organizations to make better strategic decisions about where to focus, what to offer, and how to position themselves. It transforms strategy from guesswork to informed decision-making.

- **Maximized Impact:** By engaging more effectively with their ecosystem, organizations can achieve greater collective impact than they ever could working alone.

Imagine you are working with a for-profit organization that focuses on providing mental health services to underserved communities. After creating an ecosystem map, you discover several other organizations in your area offering similar services. What steps would you take to foster collaboration and improve your program's effectiveness?

SUMMARY

Ecosystem mapping is a valuable tool for addressing social issues because it makes visible the connections among key players, resources, and external factors. By clarifying how the system functions, it helps organizations position themselves strategically, collaborate more effectively, and maximize their impact. In particular, it strengthens collaboration by enabling organizations to identify stakeholders, understand their roles, and recognize available support. It also accelerates the development of effective strategies by revealing gaps, highlighting best practices, and making it easier to learn from others. This aligns with the concept of "Proudly Found Elsewhere," which encourages organizations to build on proven approaches rather than reinventing solutions, saving time and effort while achieving stronger outcomes.

Ultimately, ecosystem mapping drives sustainable and meaningful social change by deepening understanding, strengthening partnerships, and enhancing the impact of social programs. It transforms a fragmented landscape of isolated efforts into a coordinated network working toward shared goals, benefiting not just individual organizations but the communities they serve.

Endnotes

1 Visible Network Labs. "Ecosystem Mapping 101 Infographic: System Change for Social Impact." (2023)

2 Stanford Social Innovation Review. "Cultivate Your Ecosystem." (2007)

3 Starr, Kevin, and Greg Coussa. "Enough Innovation Already!" (2020)

4 Starr, Kevin, and Greg Coussa. "Enough Innovation Already!" (2020)


do good. better.

CHAPTER 12: CUSTOMER-PARTNER MODEL

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Recognize the importance of dignity in designing effective and respectful social interventions.
2. Break down the consequences of using a beneficiary mindset.
3. Summarize how the customer-partner model differs from a traditional beneficiary mindset.
4. Describe how you might use a customer-partner model to design a solution to a social issue.

INTRODUCTION

When solving social problems, it's essential to respect and preserve the dignity of the people you are trying to help. Historically, the importance of maintaining dignity has often been overlooked in international development and social impact.[1] However, there have been growing efforts to protect human dignity in social impact work since the 20th century, and these efforts have been exponentially increasing in recent years.

The concept of dignity is closely tied to how affected individuals are positioned within social impact efforts. This chapter explores those relationships and examines how the different positioning of individuals within the work can affect the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of potential solutions.

Read these resources to better understand dignity and its role in social impact.

Read: The Dignity Report

Impatiently Waiting for Dignity in International Development

WHAT IS A "BENEFICIARY"?

When seeking to create change through social impact work, individuals and organizations often treat those they serve as beneficiaries of their intervention. A beneficiary, within a social impact context, is a person who receives help or services from a social impact program without any kind of active involvement in procuring those services. Though these individuals may benefit from the received support, the term carries hidden implications that can undermine the well-being of the people being served.

Beneficiaries are generally treated as passive recipients of aid, which can undermine their dignity, limit their agency, and reinforce their dependency on externally directed resources.[2] This one-sided relationship becomes transactional rather than transformational, with power concentrated among those providing aid rather than being shared with those receiving it. This stifles meaningful long-term change because the recipients are not actively contributing to the solution meant to improve their circumstances. If those affected by the problem are not engaged in the solution, it is less likely to endure.

It's important to note that this limitation exists because the individual or organization offering aid is using a beneficiary mindset. They see the individuals they are serving only as beneficiaries of their work and do not allow themselves to view them as

collaborators or partners. This is not a fault of the recipients themselves but rather a result of how the organization has chosen to approach the issue.

Consequences of Beneficiary Thinking

A beneficiary mindset can lead to several problematic outcomes, both with those involved and the implementation plan itself:

- **Eroded Dignity:** Being consistently positioned as someone who only receives and never contributes can erode a person's sense of dignity and self-efficacy. It reinforces a narrative of helplessness rather than resilience.
- **Passive Participation:** When individuals are treated as passive recipients, they lose the sense of control and decision-making power within their own lives. Solutions are designed for them rather than with them.
- **Dependency:** When aid is given without engagement or empowerment, it can create ongoing reliance rather than sustainable improvement. Those affected by the problem aren't equipped to maintain progress once support ends.
- **Ineffective Solutions:** Without input from the people experiencing the problem, solutions often miss the mark. The implemented solutions may not address people's real needs or might fail to fit within the context of their lives.

The customer-partner model addresses these challenges by offering a more dignified approach. It recognizes affected individuals as active participants and collaborators, promotes respect, fosters engagement, and supports the development of more effective solutions. It reinforces the belief that individuals experiencing social issues are not lacking in worth or intelligence; they're simply in circumstances that require support.

Consider a time when you may have unintentionally treated someone as a "beneficiary"? How could you have engaged them differently?

WHAT IS A CUSTOMER-PARTNER MODEL?

A customer-partner mindset is an approach in which people who receive a service, program, or support are treated not merely as beneficiaries, but as active partners in shaping services and support. **Instead of designing solutions for them, organizations work with them to shape decisions, services, and outcomes.**

This approach redefines the relationship between SPSOs and the

people they serve by integrating two complementary frameworks from the business world: customer orientation and partner orientation. **Together, these concepts recognize individuals both as customers, those who receive services, and as partners, those who contribute to building those services and outcomes.** The following sections define those roles in greater depth and explain how they complement each other in social impact work.

Customers: Choice, Voice, and Influence

Customers drive demand and influence product development. As such, businesses invest heavily in understanding their customers to ensure their satisfaction and loyalty. It's well-known that a business's success is dependent on its customers' continued engagement.[3]

Why does this matter in social impact? When affected individuals are treated as customers, the power dynamic fundamentally shifts. Customers have:

- **Choice:** They can select from different options, reject what doesn't work for them, and choose alternatives that better fit their needs.
- **Voice:** Their feedback and perspective are heard and used to shape how services are delivered.
- **Value:** Their satisfaction is a measure of success, not just their participation.
- **Respect:** Organizations work to earn their trust and meet their needs, rather than assuming they know what's best.

In social impact work, treating affected individuals as customers means designing programs and solutions that respond to their wants and needs, while also listening to and implementing their feedback.

Real-World Example: The (SNAP) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a federal anti-hunger program in the United States. They treat their program participants as customers instead of beneficiaries by allowing participants to choose foods that fit their preferences, dietary needs, and household circumstances rather than giving families a predetermined box of food. SNAP benefits are accepted by participating retailers, enabling people to shop in ordinary grocery stores alongside their neighbors rather than visiting a separate assistance center. This approach preserves dignity, gives people a voice in what they receive, and improves the likelihood that provided assistance will meet their needs.[4]

How would you utilize the customer orientation if you were working to solve child hunger in local elementary schools?

Partners: Collaboration and Co-Creation

Partners are collaborators with common goals. They work together to accomplish specific objectives by sharing knowledge and resources. Through mutual respect, clear communication, and a commitment to shared success, effective partnerships foster collaboration and magnify potential results.

Why does this matter in social impact?

When treated as partners, the expertise of affected individuals is recognized. Their experiences and understanding of the problem's nuances are acknowledged and utilized to create better interventions. Partners:

- **Co-create solutions:** They don't just receive services, they help design them.
- **Share ownership:** They have a stake in the success of an intervention because they helped build it.
- **Contribute expertise:** Their lived experience and local knowledge are treated as valuable assets.
- **Build sustainability:** Solutions created in a partnership are more likely to last because they're rooted in an intimate understanding of the community.

A partner orientation emphasizes creating and maintaining beneficial relationships, aligning strategic goals, and fostering collaboration to achieve mutual success. This means moving from "I'm here to fix your problem" to "Let's work together to address this challenge."

Real-World Example: DC Central Kitchen (DCCK) in Washington, D.C. implements a partner focus by recruiting individuals who have personally experienced food insecurity and employment barriers to train as culinary professionals through its Culinary logistics shape how meals are planned and delivered to local schools, shelters, and nonprofits. Many graduates return as culinary instructors and mentors, ensuring that those closest to the problem remain central to the solution.[5]

How would you utilize partner orientation if you were working to solve child hunger in local elementary schools?

Customer-Partner Model: The Best of Both Worlds

The "customer-partner" model brings these two roles together in a single, cohesive approach. As customers, individuals are able to receive important services with respect. Their preferences matter, and their feedback drives improvement. As partners, they are involved in co-creation and decision-making, making them integral to designing and implementing solutions.

When these two concepts are brought together, affected individuals are both valued and actively engaged in the work. It recognizes that people can simultaneously be recipients of support (customers receiving quality services) and contributors to change (partners shaping those services). Aligning organizational decisions with people's needs and preferences creates a more respectful, effective, and sustainable approach to social impact. Because both roles emphasize different aspects of dignity, utilizing the customer-partner model amplifies the agency and empowerment of affected individuals.

Real-World Example: In a customer-partner approach to child hunger, families have choices about meal options and timing (customer focus), while also participating in program design, providing feedback that shapes policy, and potentially helping run certain aspects of the program like weekend food distribution (partner focus). Families might provide input on menu preferences and timing (customer focus) while also serving on advisory committees or peer education teams (partner focus).

How would utilizing the customer-partner model change or influence your ability to solve child hunger in local elementary schools?

SUMMARY

The customer-partner model offers a more dignified and effective approach to social impact by moving beyond the traditional "beneficiary" mindset. Rather than treating individuals as passive recipients of aid, it recognizes them as active participants with agency, insight, and a meaningful voice in shaping solutions. This shift not only respects their lived experience but also leads to more relevant and sustainable outcomes. By engaging people as partners, organizations can build relationships grounded in mutual respect and shared responsibility, where each party contributes knowledge, perspective, and value. In doing so, the model strengthens both the quality of the work and the long-term impact it creates.

Endnotes

1 IDinsight. "The Dignity Report." (2023): Poverty Unpacked. "Impatiently Waiting for Dignity in International Development." (2021)

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5 "DC Central Kitchen." n.d. DC Central Kitchen: Morgan, J.P. 2024. "This D.C.-Based Nonprofit Is Creating Jobs and Fighting Hunger." Jpmorganchase.com. J.P. Morgan. July 24, 2024.


BYU

CHAPTER 13: INTERVENTIONS

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Distinguish between products, programs/processes, and policies.

2. Give examples of SPSOs that use products, programs/processes, and policies as interventions.

3. Explain how interventions can be integrated by SPSOs for maximum impact.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations working toward social impact use a range of interventions to advance their goals and address complex challenges. These interventions lead to outcomes, the measurable changes or effects seen within a given social issue. Understanding the link between what an organization does and the results it achieves is key to designing effective solutions.

Interventions typically fall into three broad categories: products, programs or processes, and policies. While these categories provide a useful framework for organizing different approaches, they are not rigid or mutually exclusive; many organizations combine elements of all three to maximize their impact. This chapter explores each type of intervention, drawing on real-world examples to illustrate how they are applied in practice and how they contribute to meaningful outcomes.

WHAT ARE PRODUCTS, AND HOW ARE THEY USED AS INTERVENTIONS?

Products are tangible goods, either durable or non-durable, that are designed to address specific social challenges. These products often improve quality of life, enhance access to essential resources, or aid in solving long-standing problems in innovative ways. Social enterprises, nonprofits, and private companies frequently design and distribute products with a strong focus on affordability, scalability, and sustainability.

What makes a product effective as a social intervention?

The best products solve problems people face daily. They're designed with input from the people who will use them, made affordable and accessible to those who need them most, and can be produced and distributed at scale. **Products work particularly well when the social issue involves a lack of access to a physical good or tool that can directly improve someone's life. Examples:**

- **LifeStraw:** LifeStraw, a portable water filtration device that provides access to clean drinking water for individuals in remote or disaster-affected areas.[1] By removing bacteria, parasites, and microplastics, this product addresses the global challenge of unsafe drinking water. LifeStraw is widely used in humanitarian aid efforts and has improved health outcomes for millions worldwide. The product's effectiveness lies in its simplicity. It's portable, doesn't require a power source, and can be used by anyone immediately.

- **Solar Sister:** Solar Sister designs and distributes solar-powered lamps and energy products to rural, underserved communities, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.[2] By replacing kerosene lamps with clean, renewable energy, Solar Sister not only reduces carbon

emissions but also improves safety and education by providing reliable lighting. The organization trains women entrepreneurs to distribute these products, combining the product intervention with economic empowerment. This dual approach addresses both energy poverty and gender inequality simultaneously.

- **Days for Girls Kits:** Days for Girls International provides reusable menstrual hygiene kits to girls and women in low-income regions.[3] These kits address the challenges of menstrual hygiene management, enabling girls to stay in school and women to participate more fully in daily life. Without access to menstrual products, many girls miss school during their periods, creating educational gaps that compound over time. The initiative also promotes awareness and education about menstrual health, addressing both the practical barrier (lack of products) and the social barrier (stigma and lack of information).

Products like these alleviate human suffering or increase human flourishing by offering practical and immediate solutions to the negative consequences of a social issue.

What is an example of an organization that provides a product as an intervention? What social issue does it address, and why is the product an effective solution?

WHAT ARE PROGRAMS AND PROCESSES, AND HOW ARE THEY USED AS INTERVENTIONS?

Programs and processes are structured initiatives or systems that create experiences for customer-partners, leading to social impact outcomes. Unlike products, which are physical objects, programs are organized sets of activities designed to create change through education, training, support services, or community engagement. These interventions are typically implemented by nonprofits, governments, or community organizations.[4]

What makes a program effective as a social intervention?

The best programs are scalable and replicable. They create intervention models that can be adapted and implemented in different contexts and empower individuals and communities rather than creating dependency. They often involve ongoing relationships

and support rather than one-time transactions. **Programs work particularly well when the social issue requires behavior change, skill development, relationship building, or sustained support over time. Examples:**

1. **Grameen Bank's Microfinance Program:** Grameen Bank, a pioneer in microfinance, provides small loans to impoverished individuals, particularly women, in rural Bangladesh.[5] The program empowers borrowers to start small businesses, achieve financial independence, and break the cycle of poverty. What makes this a program rather than just a product (loans) is the structured system around it. The program includes group lending circles to create accountability, required savings components, business training, and peer support networks. The process of utilizing group lending to build accountability has been replicated around the world, demonstrating the program's scalability.

2. **Heifer International's Passing on the Gift Program:** Passing on the Gift® combines a product with a program to create community-wide change.[6]Participants are gifted livestock and then receive training on animal welfare and farming practices, before "passing the gift", sharing the offspring of their livestock with others in their community. The training component ensures families know how to care for animals properly, and the "passing on" requirement builds community bonds and ensures sustainability.[7] The program fosters a culture of generosity and self-reliance while addressing food insecurity and economic inequality.

3. **Teach For America (TFA):** TFA recruits and trains recent college graduates to teach in under-resourced schools across the United States.[8] The program includes intensive training, ongoing support for teachers, and a broader alumni network that continues advocating for educational equity. By addressing educational inequities, TFA improves student outcomes while simultaneously fostering a generation of leaders committed to educational reform.

Programs and processes often involve collaboration with local stakeholders and require ongoing support to ensure sustainability. The program's long-term impact relies on its ability to empower individuals and communities to actively participate in their own change. Unlike products that can be given and used immediately, programs require continued engagement and relationship building to be sustained.

What is an example of an organization that provides a program or process as an intervention? Why is a program better suited to address this issue than a product alone?

WHAT ARE POLICIES, AND HOW ARE THEY USED AS INTERVENTIONS?

Policies are systemic interventions aimed at addressing root causes of social challenges through regulation, legislation, or institutional change. While products and programs help individuals and communities, policies change the rules and structures that govern entire populations. Typically led by governments, advocacy groups, and international organizations, policy interventions have the potential to drive system-wide impact across entire populations.[9]

What makes a policy effective as a social intervention?

Policy has the capacity to address systemic barriers and create structural change that outlasts individual organizations and initiatives. Once implemented, they often require less ongoing resource investment, as the system itself enforces the change. Policies work particularly well when the social issue stems from systemic inequality, lack of regulation, or structural barriers that individual actors cannot overcome alone. **However, policies are also the most challenging interventions to implement.** They require extensive advocacy, research, coalition building, and often years of work before enactment. They face political opposition and may be difficult to enforce or implement consistently. Despite these challenges, well-designed policy interventions can create lasting change that benefits society as a whole. **Examples:**

1. **The Clean Air Act (United States):** Enacted in 1970, the Clean Air Act established a comprehensive framework for reducing air pollution and protecting public health.[10] By regulating what industries and vehicles are allowed to emit, the policy led to significant reductions in air pollutants, improving overall air quality and aiding in the management of health issues like respiratory diseases. The Clean Air Act changed the behavior of entire economic sectors, something that cannot be achieved through individual action alone, thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of policy intervention as a tool for achieving lasting, systemic change.

2. **Fair Chance Ordinances (United States):** Certain documentation and administrative processes can create barriers to housing for individuals navigating homelessness. Because many aspects of homelessness are criminalized (such as sleeping in public, loitering, and panhandling),

people experiencing homelessness often accumulate criminal records, which then prevent them from accessing housing. This creates a vicious cycle where the consequences of being homeless make it harder to escape homelessness. Fair Chance Ordinances encourage local governments to adopt policies aimed at reducing the use of criminal records in the rental housing application process. Most recently, this was adopted in San Antonio, Texas, and went into effect on October 10, 2024.[11] These policies recognize that criminal records often reflect circumstances rather than danger and strive to create a more equitable path to housing. The introduction of this ordinance opens a new avenue to solve a large-scale social problem.

Although these policies require extensive advocacy, research, and negotiation to implement, they have the ability to tackle systemic inequalities on a scale that is otherwise inaccessible. Once positive social impact policies are implemented, they have the power to benefit people for generations.

What is an example of an organization that advocates for policy as an intervention? What systemic barrier does the policy address that products or programs alone couldn't solve?

HOW CAN INTERVENTIONS BE INTEGRATED FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT?

While products, programs/processes, and policies are distinct types of interventions, they often intersect and complement one another. In fact, the most effective social impact work usually combines multiple intervention types to address both immediate needs and systemic challenges.

The Power of Integration

- **Products + Programs:** A product like LifeStraw becomes more effective when distributed through programs that also provide education about water safety, community health, and maintenance. Solar Sister succeeds not just because of its solar products, but because it combines them with entrepreneurship training programs for women distributors.

- **Programs + Policies:** Microfinance programs like Grameen Bank's

can inform policy changes that support financial inclusion at a national level. Evidence from successful programs demonstrates what works, building the case for policy adoption. In turn, supportive policies make programs more effective. For instance, policies that protect micro-borrowers from predatory lending make microfinance programs safer and more sustainable.

- **Products + Policies:** LifeStraw may be distributed through programs led by nonprofit organizations and supported by government policies promoting clean water access. Policies can mandate or incentivize the use of certain products, while products can make policy implementation practical and affordable.

- **All Three Together:** Organizations that effectively combine all three intervention methods often achieve the greatest social impact. For example, the success of Solar Sister stems from its solar products but is increased by its training programs for women entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, its organizational advocacy for renewable energy policies contributes toward solving the larger-scale problem. These elements operate cohesively, with each intervention serving a distinct role: the products provide an immediate benefit, the program creates sustainable distribution and economic empowerment for those affected, and the policy work moves them toward needed systemic change.

Strategic Sequencing

Integration does not always mean implementing all possible interventions simultaneously. In many cases, the intervention order significantly affects the impact. For example, organizations may start with products or programs to

demonstrate effectiveness, then use that evidence to advocate for policy change. On the other hand, they might focus on policy advocacy first to create an enabling environment and then seek to develop programs and products that thrive within that new policy framework. The key is to think strategically about how different intervention types can reinforce and amplify each other over time.

Choosing Your Approach

Not every organization needs to work across all three intervention types. A small organization might focus on one intervention type and partner with others who work at different levels, while large organizations may integrate all three. Ultimately, understanding which intervention type (or combination) best aligns with the nature of the social issue and the organization's current capacity is the key to enhancing the intervention's effectiveness.

Ask yourself:

- Does the issue require immediate practical solutions? (Products)
- Does it require behavior change, skill development, or sustained support? (Programs)
- Does it require changing systemic structures or rules? (Policies)
- Or does it require all three to work together?

Think of a social issue you care about. How might products, programs, and policies work together to address it more effectively than any single intervention type could alone?

SUMMARY

As you move forward in your social impact efforts, understanding the tools available to you is essential. Social impact interventions—whether products, programs, processes, or policies—are the means through which you can create change. Each intervention operates at a different level of the system: products often meet immediate, tangible needs, programs and processes shape behaviors, access, and service delivery, and policies influence the broader structures and incentives that sustain change. However, the effectiveness of any intervention depends on how well it aligns with the root causes of the issue it seeks to address.

The greatest impact is often achieved when these approaches are intentionally combined. Products can address urgent gaps, programs can expand reach and build capacity, and policies can embed successful solutions into systems at scale. By combining multiple interventions, organizations can create a more comprehensive and lasting impact. Understanding how

and when to apply these interventions is critical for anyone seeking to make a difference in the social impact field.

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CHAPTER 14: HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Describe the three, nonlinear phases of human-centered design.

2. Recognize how human-centered design is implemented by SPSOs.

3. Analyze the use of human-centered design in real-world case studies.

INTRODUCTION

Creating effective solutions to social problems requires more than good intentions. It requires genuinely understanding the people experiencing those problems. Too often, well-meaning organizations design interventions based on what they think people need rather than what people actually need. Human-centered design (HCD) offers a different approach: one that places the voices, experiences, and expertise of those affected by social issues at the heart of the solution-building process.

This chapter explores HCD as both a methodology and a mindset for creating sustainable, meaningful change. You'll learn how to engage authentically with communities, how to move from ideas to prototypes to implementation, and how to adopt a human-centered mindset.

Watch the video:
What is Human-Centered Design

WHAT IS HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN, AND WHAT ARE THE THREE PHASES?

Human-centered design (HCD) is a problem-solving approach that focuses on the individuals experiencing the problem, putting them at the center of the design process. Any and all solutions should be created with input and insight from those affected by the issue. In social impact work, this technique reaffirms the belief that the people experiencing a problem are the experts in it. They understand the problem's nuances, barriers, and context in ways outsiders never could. Rather than designing solutions for people, HCD asks you to design with them.

HCD is a powerful tool many SPSOs use to create sustainable change. It was widely shared with the social impact ecosystem by the group IDEO.org, which claims that "Human-centered design is all about building a deep empathy with the people you're designing for; generating tons of ideas; building a bunch of prototypes; sharing what you've made with the people you're designing for; and eventually putting your innovative new solution out in the world."[1] This principle, along with its accompanying phases, gives loving the one a more tangible structure by encouraging compassion, connection, and collaboration on an individual level. Human-centered design is now used frequently within social impact work as a means to create enduring solutions. More details and resources on HCD can also be found on the IDEO.org website, www.designkit.org.[2]

The Three Phases

HCD has three phases: Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation.[3] It is

important to note that **these phases aren't linear**, meaning you'll move back and forth between them as you learn and refine your solution.

1. Inspiration Phase: Understanding Deeply

The inspiration phase gathers information and feedback from customer-partners through genuine conversations and connections. This isn't just collecting data. It's about immersing yourself in the lives and experiences of the people you're designing for. By observing, listening, and empathizing, you'll begin to truly understand their challenges, aspirations, and contexts. This phase shares many similarities with the love the problem phase of the Socia Impact Cycle and reiterates the importance of personal connections within the work.

During this phase, you:

- Conduct in-depth interviews with people experiencing the problem.
- Observe how they navigate their daily lives and current workarounds.
- Ask open-ended questions that reveal unspoken needs and hidden barriers.
- Challenge your own assumptions about what the problem is and what solutions might work.

2. Ideation Phase: Creating Possibilities

The ideation phase interprets information that was gathered during inspiration, imagines possible solutions, and creates prototypes for testing with those same customer-partners. This is where creativity meets reality. In this phase, intervention concepts are turned into tangible solutions that can be tested and refined.

During this phase, you:

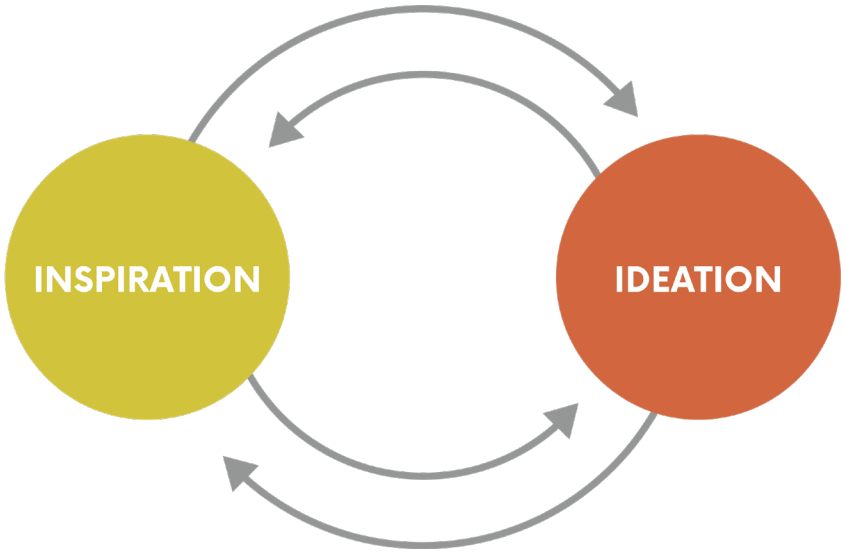
- Brainstorm many possible solutions without judgement.
- Create low-fidelity prototypes (simple versions of a design) to test concepts quickly.
- Get feedback from customer-partners on what works and what doesn't.
- Refine and iterate based on what you learn.

3. Implementation Phase: Making It Real

At a certain point, your prototype becomes refined enough to become your actual product, program, or service. The implementation phase focuses on delivery, assessment, and making the intervention's practices long-lasting and sustainable.

During this phase, you:

- Deliver the solution at an wappropriate scale.
- Continuously assess how it's working in the real world.
- Gather feedback to make ongoing improvements.
- Build the infrastructure and partnerships needed for sustainability.



The Cyclical Nature of HCD

Teams using HCD spend most of their time moving back and forth between inspiration and ideation. You gather insights, create a prototype, and test over and over again. This cyclical process creates increasingly more effective prototypes until you reach a solution that genuinely works for the people experiencing the problem.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO USE HCD?

HCD is a fantastic tool for SPSOs who need a more focused outlook and clear direction. When examining an issue from a bird's-eye view, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and uncertain about where to begin. Starting at the individual level helps SPSOs simplify a broad issue into a bite-sized piece. By concentrating their efforts on an individual, SPSOs can design specific plans and solutions that often end up being a solution for the whole. In this way, HCD mirrors the Ballard Center belief that loving and serving the one is the first step to love and serve the whole.

HCD doesn't require perfect clarity at the starting point. Since it focuses on meeting the needs of customer-partners through an iterative process, HCD embraces learning and adaptation along the way. In short, by centering around individuals and embracing continuous iteration, HCD allows SPSOs the flexibility to find direction and build their vision over time.

How could a SPSO benefit from using HCD?

What makes HCD more personal (or people-focused) than other design methods?

What experiences have you had with good HCD?

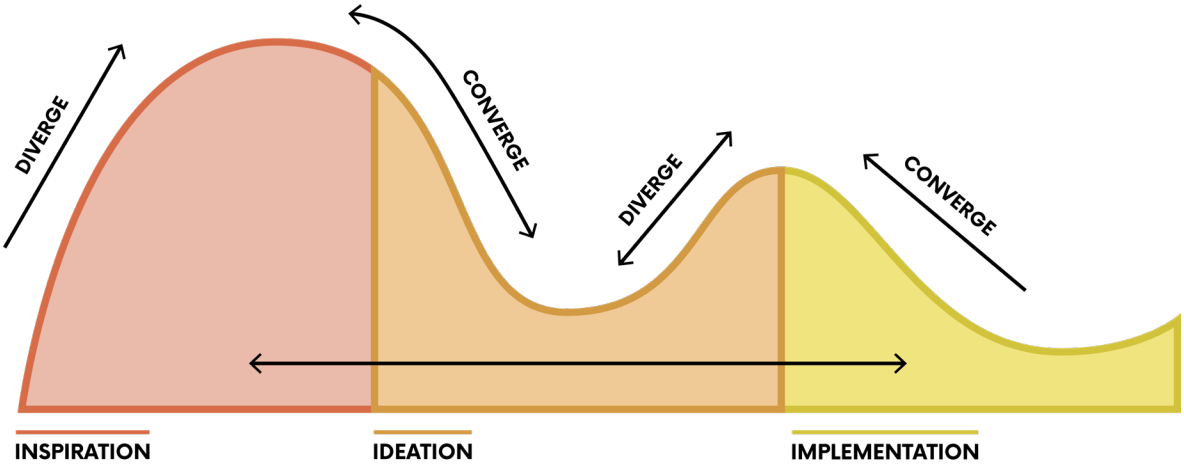
WHY DOES BEING A HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGNER MATTER?

Being a human-centered designer isn't just about following a process. It's about adopting mindsets and ways of working that center people at every stage. Here's what that looks like in practice:

Trusting the Constantly Changing Process

Since HCD aims to have designers learn directly from affected individuals, the goals, design, and process frequently change direction. Human-centered designers must learn to be flexible and adapt. The HCD process requires designers to open themselves up to new creative ideas and narrow down what products or services work best for the people they're designing for.

Throughout the design process, you should expect to move between abstract ideas and more concrete ones. This is called **diverging and converging**. **Diverging** means opening up, generating a wide variety of ideas, exploring widely, and considering new possibilities without judgment or reserve. **Converging** means narrowing



down, evaluating options, selecting what's most promising, and focusing on what will actually work. During the ideation phase, for example, you might brainstorm hundreds of solutions (diverging), then zero in on what's most desirable, viable, and feasible (converging). The process of diverging and converging happens repeatedly until the solution is ready to be tested, frequently changing between creative possibilities and practical constraints. This constant change is what leads to solutions that are both innovative and implementable.

Believing Real Impact is Possible

The goal of a human-centered designer is to create desirable solutions for the people experiencing the problem that are technically feasible and financially viable. Being a human-centered designer also means believing that all problems are solvable by working with and relying on the expertise of those experiencing the problem. By keeping their design goals in focus and working from the belief that a viable solution exists, designers are better positioned to create real impact.

Approaching Social Issues with Empathy and Compassion

As discussed in the chapter on compassion, empathy is the ability to understand people's experiences and see social problems from their perspective, while compassion is the recognition of their suffering coupled with a desire to alleviate it. In human-centered design, practices such as in-person interviews deepen empathy by helping designers move beyond surface-level observations to understand the underlying reasons behind what people say and do. This deeper understanding reveals not just what the problem is, but why it exists. When empathy is paired with compassion, it motivates designers to act on these insights, working alongside those affected to co-create solutions that truly address their needs. Together, empathy and compassion shift designers away from assumptions and toward a more open, informed perspective, enabling more thoughtful and effective solutions.[4]

Working with Optimism

Design is inherently optimistic. It perpetuates the belief that intentional, thoughtful design can solve some of the world's largest problems. Therefore, human-centered designers must adopt this attitude of optimism in their work. They must believe that any progress is good progress and answers are within reach. Optimism drives them to solutions and encourages them to keep moving forward regardless of dead ends. Human-centered designers remain optimistic by focusing on the possibility of progress rather than the countless obstacles that may get in their way.

Constantly Iterating

In human-centered design, iteration is not a final step, it is an ongoing process embedded throughout the work. Designers regularly test their ideas with

the people they are designing for, using feedback to validate assumptions, uncover new insights, and ensure that solutions remain grounded in real needs rather than initial guesses.

By revisiting and improving ideas over time, designers can explore alternative approaches, adapt to new information, and correct course early when something isn't working. This not only leads to more creative and effective solutions but also reduces the risk of investing in ideas that fail to meet people's needs. Ultimately, constant iteration accelerates learning and increases the likelihood of arriving at solutions that are both impactful and sustainable.

Creating with Confidence

The belief that anyone can generate meaningful ideas and act on them encourages designers to move past hesitation and engage fully in the creative process, even when solutions are not yet clear. Creative confidence is what enables designers to turn ideas into action. It supports a willingness to prototype, test, and learn from failure without losing momentum. By embracing uncertainty and viewing mistakes as part of the process, designers build resilience and continue refining their approach. Over time, this iterative, action-oriented mindset increases the likelihood of discovering solutions that are both innovative and responsive to real human needs.

Making

For a human-centered designer, making is not just about building; it's a way of thinking and learning. Designers bring ideas to life early and often, using whatever tools and materials are available, from simple prototypes to more refined models. Making ideas tangible allows others to interact with them, provide feedback, and surface insights that would remain hidden in abstract concepts.

By putting ideas into a physical or visual form, designers can quickly assess feasibility, uncover challenges, and identify new opportunities. This process reduces uncertainty and ensures that solutions are grounded in real-world use. Ultimately, making accelerates learning and leads to more practical, effective outcomes.

Embracing Ambiguity

Designers often begin without clear answers, which pushes them to engage directly with the people experiencing the problem. This openness helps them ask better questions, challenge assumptions, and gain a deeper understanding of the issue.

Rather than rushing to conclusions, designers use ambiguity as space for exploration. It encourages curiosity, invites diverse perspectives, and makes room for unexpected ideas to emerge. By staying open and adaptable, designers are more likely to discover creative solutions that might otherwise be overlooked.

Learning From Failure

Learning from failure is a critical piece of being a human-centered designer. Experimenting, prototyping, and testing are important parts of the process, and failure is expected. Not all intervention ideas will work, and many will prove ineffective after multiple rounds of testing. However, the ability to evaluate, analyze, and derive insight from failure, no matter when it occurs, progresses the work. The knowledge gained from unsuccessful attempts refines the outputs and processes of both the design and the designer.

For more information, access **The Field Guide to Human Centered Design** and read through page 25.

Which of the above mindsets stood out to you the most and why? Is there one you would like to implement better in your own social impact endeavors?

LET'S PRACTICE: HCD CASE STUDY

One case study by IDEO.org called "The Brilliance by D-Rev Case" helps provide some context for the HCD method.[5] Complete this case study activity in preparation for class:

1. Access The Brilliance by D-Rev Case
2. Read this short case and answer these questions below:

You can find out how **the Brilliance product** is still working by going to the Equalize Health website (previously called D-Rev).

Is there something surprising from the inspiration section?

Describe how the 'rapid prototyping' mentioned in the ideation section gained additional inspiration, ideas, and information from all types of users.

Is there anything surprising in the implementation section?

What are your three biggest takeaways from this case study?

interventions address root causes, are culturally appropriate, and empower communities. This method shifts power dynamics, positioning community members as active collaborators rather than passive beneficiaries, ultimately fostering more inclusive and impactful social change. The process of becoming a human-centered designer and consistently applying the principles of this chapter requires the adoption of specific mindsets as well as a constant willingness to learn.

SUMMARY

Human-centered design (HCD) is an approach to problem-solving that prioritizes the needs, experiences, and perspectives of the people most affected by an issue. It is widely used by SPSOs to create solutions that are not only effective but also equitable and sustainable. By placing the voices of those impacted at the heart of the design process, HCD helps ensure that

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CHAPTER 15: THEORY OF CHANGE

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Define a theory of change and understand its purpose in planning social interventions.
2. Describe the steps involved in developing a theory of change for a social issue.
3. Identify the importance of outcome goals and understand how they guide interventions.
4. Illustrate the role of backwards mapping in creating an evidence-based intervention.

INTRODUCTION

A theory of change builds on everything you've already learned about social impact work: loving the one, constructing an issue triangle with its negative consequences and contributing factors, implementing the customer-partner model, creating an ecosystem map, and applying human-centered design principles. Now, it's time to put them all together and formulate a plan for meaningful action.

A theory of change provides a roadmap for organizations to navigate the complexities of addressing social issues. It links specific actions to long-term transformation and connects evidence-based strategies with structured planning to ensure measurable impact. In this chapter, you'll learn the process of developing a theory of change by utilizing outcome goals, logic models, and backwards mapping to craft effective and strategically organized interventions.

WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE?

A theory of change is a strategic framework used to map out how an intervention or set of actions will lead to a desired future state.[1] It acts as a broad overview showing the vision of the social impact project. By combining evidence-based strategies with structured planning, the theory of change ties every step of an intervention to the end goal, serving as a connector for each element in the project and giving purpose to every action.[2]

This connection is often articulated using an **"if . . . then . . ." statement** that clearly expresses the logic behind each step.[3] The "if" phrase represents the planned intervention, and the "then" phrase represents the desired outcome. For example: "If you increase access to nutritious food through improved food distribution networks, then there will be a reduction in health issues like stunting or underweight children." "If you increase access to nutritious food" is the planned intervention, and "then there will be a reduction in health issues" is the desired outcome. Well-crafted "if . . . then . . ." statements are the heart of a theory of change.

Why do you think it's important for an organization to clearly define its theory of change before launching an intervention? How can this framework impact the success of the program?

Once the problem is well understood, the next step is to identify the desired outcomes—what long-term changes the organization hopes to see. The theory of change should then outline specific actions or interventions, explaining how these will directly lead to the desired outcomes. By linking actions to outcomes, a theory of change provides clarity on the path to achieving meaningful social change.

HOW IS A THEORY OF CHANGE DEVELOPED?

Developing a theory of change starts with a thorough understanding of the social problem being addressed.[4] This involves analyzing contributing factors, negative consequences, and the broader context of the issue. Both primary data (collected first-hand) and secondary data (compiled pre-existing research) are vital in providing a complete picture of the issue. The majority of this work should have already been completed within the love the problem phase of the Social Impact Cycle.

Once the problem is well understood, the next step is to organize this information into a theory of change. First, set outcome goals—what you hope your intervention will accomplish. Second, put the contributing factors, negative consequences, and outcome goals together to form "if . . . then . . ." statements. Third, outline the specific actions or interventions you believe need to be implemented in order to achieve the desired outcomes.[5] Example: *If* low literacy levels among elementary students (negative consequence) are driven by a lack of early reading support (contributing factor), *then* providing targeted literacy programs (intervention) will improve reading proficiency (outcome goal). This process links actions to outcomes, thereby creating a theory of change.

WHAT ARE OUTCOME GOALS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

An important aspect of a theory of change is creating outcome goals, or the specific, measurable changes the organization aims to achieve through its intervention.[6] These goals can range from short-term to long-term; however, even short-term goals should ultimately contribute to a long-term goal. Later, in the evaluation stage, these outcome goals provide a useful baseline to measure actual outcomes against desired outcomes and look for means to improve. This is how an organization measures and enhances the effectiveness of its programs, as opposed to simply tracking its activities.

Creating an effective outcome goal starts with knowing the negative consequences and contributing factors of an issue. Here's the key: outcome goals should be the opposite of the negative consequences faced by those experiencing the social issue. If the intervention is appropriately aimed at addressing the issue's contributing factors, outcome goals should naturally address the negative consequences identified during the initial assessment of the problem.

Example

- **Social Issue:** High rates of childhood malnutrition in a rural community.
- **Contributing Factor:** Limited

access to affordable, nutritious food due to geographic isolation and inconsistent food supply (e.g., long distances to grocery stores, reliance on convenience foods, or irregular deliveries).

- **Intervention:** Improve access to nutritious food by establishing a community-based distribution network, such as mobile markets, partnerships with local farmers, or subsidized produce delivery programs.
- **Negative Consequence:** Increased rates of stunting, underweight children with weakened immune systems, leading to long-term developmental and health challenges.
- **Outcome Goal:** A measurable reduction in childhood malnutrition—reflected in improved growth indicators, healthier weights, and stronger overall child health outcomes. (Note that this goal is the inverted or "flipped" version of the negative consequence.)

Consider a program aimed at reducing recidivism (repeated imprisonment) among adolescents. What are some negative consequences associated with this issue, and how could you use them to define outcome goals?

Now that you have determined outcome goals, brainstorm an intervention and create a simple theory of change statement ("if . . . then . . ."), explaining how that intervention could lead to potential impact.

WHAT IS A LOGIC MODEL?

A logic model is a visual tool used to expand on a theory of change. It provides a clear, structured overview of how an organization's intervention

(inputs, activities, and outputs) will lead to the desired outcomes. The logic model helps stakeholders understand how the intervention process works and ensures that every component is logically connected to the overall goal.

Although the theory of change and logic model both provide roadmaps to navigate the complexities of a social issue, it is important to acknowledge that they are not the same. While a theory of change focuses on the broader causal pathways and underlying assumptions about how and why change will occur, a logic model is a visual tool that lays out the sequence of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes for a specific program, often serving as a more operational companion to the theory of change. Put simply, a theory of change explains "why" change will occur, while a logic model plans "what" will happen.

There are many different methodologies used to develop logic models; however, their components generally include:

- **Inputs:** Resources used to implement the intervention (e.g., funding, staff, training materials).
- **Activities:** Actions taken to achieve the desired outcomes (e.g., conducting workshops, providing services).
- **Outputs:** Immediate products or measurements of the activities (e.g., number of workshops held, number of people served).
- **Outcomes:** The effects expected to occur because of the intervention. These should be the opposite of the issue's existing negative consequences (e.g., increased graduation rates, improved resource access).
- **Impact:** The portion of the outcomes that can be directly attributed to the intervention, demonstrating a clear cause-and-effect relationship (e.g., reduced disease incidence due to a vaccination campaign).

WHAT OUTCOMES CAN RESULT FROM AN INTERVENTION?

As you set outcome goals for the intervention, keep in mind the different types of outcomes that could occur as a result. Your logic model may include multiple types of outcomes. The following examples build on the malnutrition case among rural children introduced in the outcome goals section to present the different categories of outcomes.

- **Short-term outcomes:** The immediate effects after intervention implementation (e.g., improved access to nutritious food through mobile deliveries, increased access to nutritional knowledge among community members).
- **Intermediate outcomes:** The effects seen if the intervention is tracked over months, which may be included in the logic model

if considered necessary (e.g., improved dietary diversity in households, greater community participation in nutrition initiatives).

- **Long-term outcomes:** The sustained changes that occur after intervention implementation (e.g., reduction in chronic malnutrition—like stunting or underweight children, strengthened local systems to prevent malnutrition).

- **Impact:** The portion of the outcomes that can be directly attributed to the intervention, demonstrating a clear cause-and-effect relationship (e.g., 20% increase in household dietary diversity scores directly linked to nutrition education sessions, based on pre/post surveys).

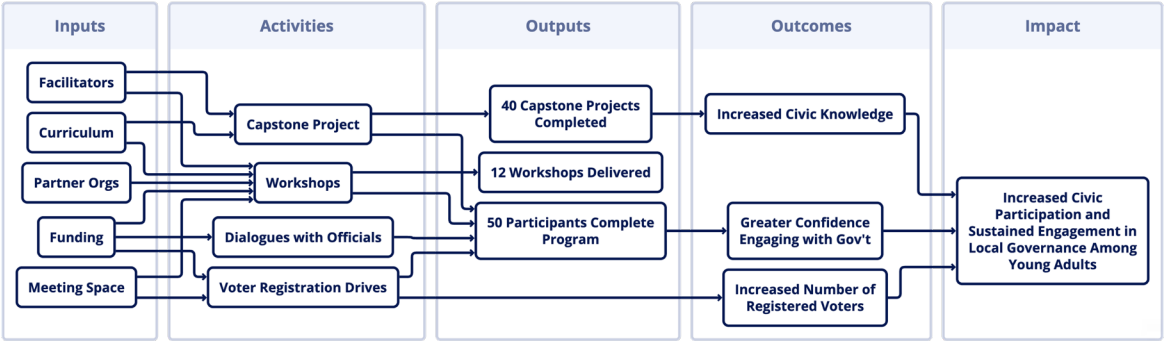
Once developed, the structure of your logic model should look somewhat similar to the example below.

WHAT IS BACKWARDS MAPPING AND HOW DOES IT HELP IN DEVELOPING A LOGIC MODEL?

One method often used to develop a logic model is backwards mapping. You begin by defining the desired impact you hope to have on your chosen social issue and start working backward to determine the necessary steps to achieve it.[7] This approach ensures that every activity in the intervention is directly linked to the end goal.
If your desired impact was to decrease homelessness rates in your hometown and you chose to use backwards mapping as your logic model strategy, the process would look something like this.

Step 1: Desired Long-Term Outcome

What is the ultimate goal of the intervention?



- Reduced homelessness, reflected in increased long-term housing stability for individuals and families.

Step 2: Short-Term Outcomes
What must change for this impact to occur?

- More individuals and families secure and retain stable housing.
- Individuals increase income stability and financial capability.
- Barriers to housing (e.g., credit issues, lack of documentation) are reduced.

Step 3: Identify Outputs
What measurable results indicate progress toward these outcomes?

- Number of individuals placed into stable housing.
- Number of participants completing financial literacy or job readiness programs.
- Number of individuals receiving housing support services (e.g., case management).

Step 4: Identify Activities
What actions will produce these outputs?

- Develop and maintain affordable housing units.
- Provide rental assistance and housing navigation services.
- Offer financial literacy and employment support programs.
- Deliver case management to address individual barriers.

Step 5: Identify Inputs
What resources are required to carry out these activities?

- Funding (government grants, donations).
- Trained staff (case managers, financial counselors).
- Partnerships with housing providers and employers.
- Facilities, materials, and administrative infrastructure.

By the end of this exercise, you will have clarified potential next steps, as well as each piece of your logic model. The goal of backwards mapping, and the logic model as a whole, is to provide you with a step-by-step overview of how to move forward in achieving your desired impact.

Imagine a program is working to reduce hunger in your city. Using backwards mapping, start with a desired outcome goal and work backward to identify the necessary inputs, activities, and outputs to achieve the desired outcomes and impact.

SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the theory of change as a practical framework for designing, testing, and refining social interventions. At its core, a theory of change begins with a clear understanding of a social problem and defines outcome goals that address its contributing factors and negative consequences. From there, a logic model maps how inputs, activities, and outputs are expected to lead to those outcomes and, ultimately, to long-term impact. Backwards mapping strengthens this process by starting with the desired end state and working step-by-step to ensure that every action is intentionally aligned with that goal.

In social impact work, where resources are limited and challenges are complex, this level of clarity is essential. Without it, efforts can become disconnected, ineffective, or difficult to measure. A well-defined theory of change helps organizations make informed decisions, allocate resources strategically, and adapt their approach based on evidence and learning.

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IMPLEMENT THE INTERVENTION

PHASE 3: IMPLEMENT THE INTERVENTION

Chapter 16: Funding and Legal Structures

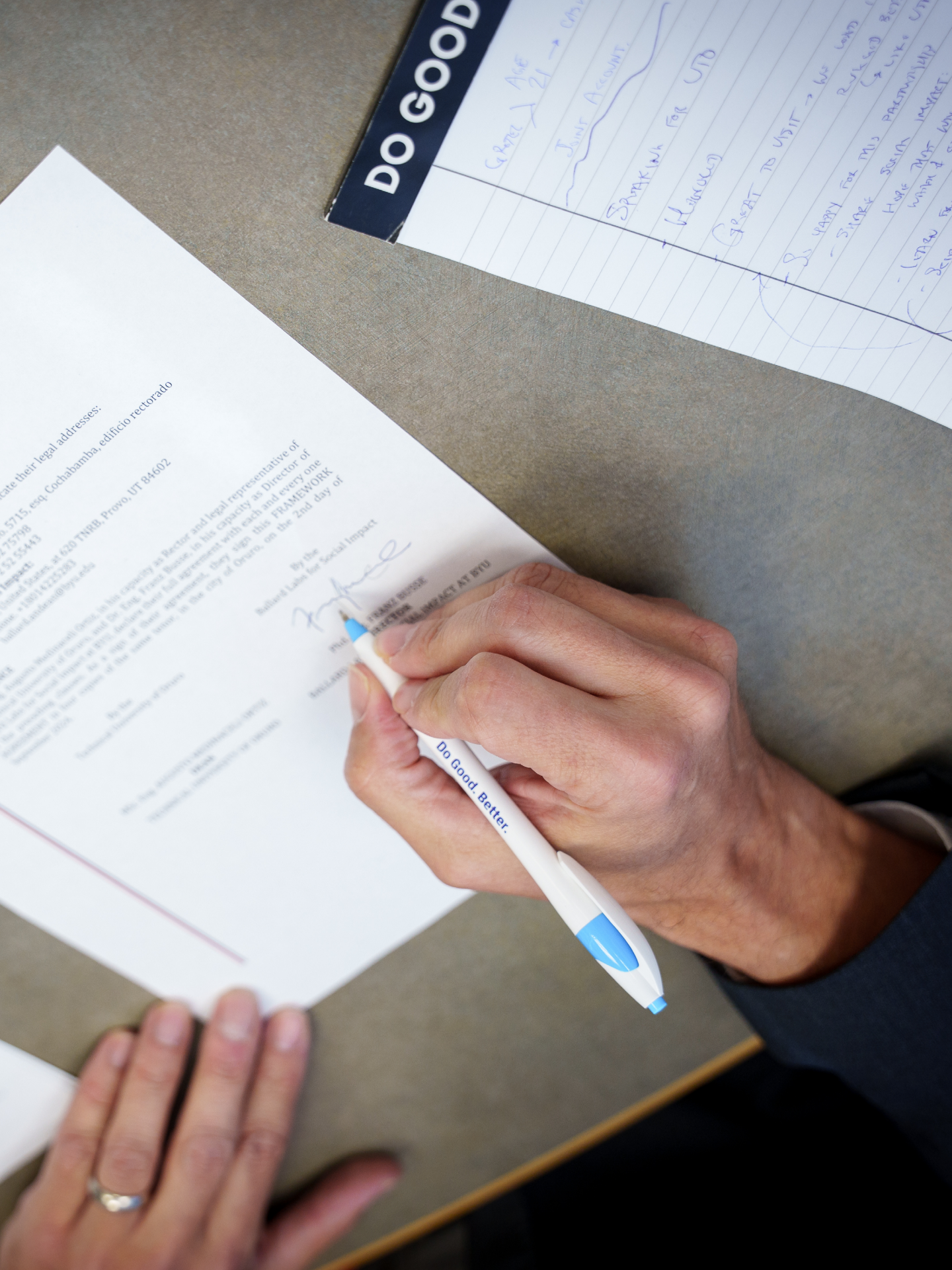
Chapter 17: Scaling Social Impact

The third phase of the social impact cycle is implement the intervention. This is where your ideas begin to take shape in the real world. You move from planning to action by putting your intervention into practice.

When you implement, you often begin at a smaller scale. This allows you to test your approach, observe early results, and make adjustments before expanding. Implementation requires clear planning, including securing resources, building the right structures, and ensuring you have the capacity to carry out your work effectively.

At the same time, implementation is a dynamic process. You must remain aware of what is happening in real time and be willing to adapt as needed. Early results can reveal whether your efforts are leading to the outcomes you expected, or if changes are needed.

The next two chapters aim to strengthen your ability to carry out and grow your work by securing resources, choosing an effective legal structure, and scaling your intervention in thoughtful and effective ways.


DO GOOD
Do Good. Better.

CHAPTER 16: FUNDING AND LEGAL STRUCTURES

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Identify the various legal structures for Social Problem-Solving Organizations (SPSOs) and understand their characteristics.

2. Evaluate the impact of legal structures on a SPSO's ability to fulfill its mission and address social issues effectively.

3. Determine the most appropriate legal structure for a SPSO based on its practices, funding sources, and mission.

INTRODUCTION

a SPSO is any organization dedicated to solving social problems, regardless of its official designation or tax status. Since "SPSO" is an unofficial and relatively unused term outside of the Ballard Center, there are no strict criteria for classifying an organization as a SPSO. They can vary widely from one another but are united by a common focus: producing a positive social impact. The true worth of a SPSO lies in its measurable outcomes, not its appearance, branding, name, or tax status.

There is a general misconception about which types of organizations can address social problems. That's why the term SPSO is preferable to traditional labels like NGO (non-governmental organization) or NPO (nonprofit organization) because it encompasses a broader, more inclusive category of companies, agencies, and organizations intentionally engaging in social impact work.

As such, SPSOs can adopt various legal structures, including nonprofit, for-profit, governmental, hybrid, or informal organizational forms. Because each structure carries distinct advantages and disadvantages, understanding which best fits your SPSO's mission and goals is crucial for effectively solving social problems.

WHAT ARE LEGAL STRUCTURES?

Legal structures refer to the organizational frameworks that define how an entity is established, governed, and operated within the law. These structures directly shape the organization's funding options, tax obligations, and legal liabilities.[1] Within social impact work, legal structures play a critical role in how SPSOs obtain funding, collaborate with other organizations, and fulfill their mission.

A myriad of legal structures exist worldwide, each one differing in purpose, access, benefits, and limitations. While great variation exists among which legal structures are offered and what their specifics look like from one country to another, these five common structures exist globally:

- **Sole Proprietorship:** A sole proprietorship is the simplest legal structure, where one individual owns and operates the organization. Often referred to as a "sole trader" in some countries, the owner has full control over decisions and operations but is also personally responsible for all debts and legal obligations. This structure is easy to establish and maintain, but it offers no separation between personal and organizational liability.[2]

- **Partnership:** A partnership is a legal structure in which two or more individuals share ownership and responsibility for the organization.

There are several forms of partnerships, including general partnerships, limited partnerships, and limited liability partnerships (LLPs), each offering different levels of responsibility and liability protection for partners. Partnerships allow for shared decision-making and pooled resources but require clear agreements to manage roles, profits, and liabilities.[3]

- **Corporation:** A corporation is a more complex legal structure that exists as a separate legal entity from its owners. In some contexts, particularly outside the United States, this may be referred to as a public limited company (PLC). This separation provides strong liability protection and allows the organization to raise capital through investors or shareholders. Corporations are governed by formal structures and regulations, but they offer significant potential for growth and scalability.[4]

- **Limited Liability Company (LLC):** A limited liability company is a flexible legal structure that combines elements of both partnerships and corporations. In some countries, this structure is referred to as a private limited company. It provides limited liability protection, meaning owners are generally not personally responsible for the organization's debts or legal obligations. This structure is widely used due to its balance of flexibility, protection, and relative simplicity.[5]

- **Cooperative:** A cooperative is an organization owned and governed by its members—those who use its services or are directly impacted by its work. Often described as member-owned, cooperatives operate with a focus on shared benefit rather than profit maximization. Decision-making is typically democratic, with members having a voice in how the organization is run, making this structure well-suited for community-based and collaborative efforts.[6]

While legal structures define how an organization is formally established and operates, it can still be difficult to see how those structures relate in practice. One helpful way to understand the broader landscape is through sectors.

Sectors serve as umbrella categories, grouping legal structures based on their general orientation, funding approaches, and role in society. Rather than replacing legal structures, sectors help organize them into more intuitive groupings, making it easier to see patterns in how organizations operate and pursue impact. Many organizations fit more naturally into one sector than another, but some also operate across sectors or use hybrid models. Each legal structure previously mentioned can be categorized within the following general sectors:

1. **Public Sector:** This sector includes all levels of government—local, state, and federal—along with specialized districts like school districts, water districts, and military installations. Governments are

inherently tasked with maintaining societal peace and functionality, focusing on the needs of society as a whole. their specific mission addresses social issues and furthers positive social change. Their social impact efforts are supported by public funds, tax revenue, and grants[7]

Real-World Example: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) operates as a public sector SPSO, addressing public health crises through disease prevention and health promotion. Similarly, a local public school district functions as a SPSO by working to solve educational inequality in its community.

2. **Private Sector:** Known as for-profit entities, this sector includes companies, corporations, and businesses that provide goods or services with the goal of generating profit. While these organizations are traditionally focused on financial gain, there is an increasingly large number of social enterprises and businesses that aim to solve social problems while still generating sustainable revenue.[8] These organizations, though profit-driven, can function as SPSOs by embedding social impact into their business models. They offer solutions to societal challenges through market-driven solutions and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Real-World Example: Saie Beauty operates as a for-profit company creating clean, sustainable cosmetics while simultaneously addressing environmental concerns in the beauty industry through plastic-neutral practices and reef-safe formulations. Similarly, Blueland disrupted the cleaning products industry by creating reusable bottles with dissolvable tablets, reducing single-use plastic waste while still earning a profit.

3. **Nonprofit Sector:** The nonprofit sector includes organizations that operate for purposes other than making a profit. These include charities, churches, humanitarian organizations, and others focused on human services such as disaster relief, healthcare, and education. Nonprofit organizations generally rely on donations, grants, and volunteers to fulfill their missions.[9] They play a crucial role in social impact work, as they typically reinvest the majority of their revenue back into their programs. As SPSOs, nonprofits can directly address social issues by focusing on root causes, providing essential services, and advocating for systemic policy changes.

Real-World Example: Feeding America operates as a nonprofit SPSO, coordinating a nationwide network of food banks to address hunger and food insecurity. The organization relies on donations, corporate partnerships, and grants to distribute billions of meals annually. Similarly, Habitat for Humanity mobilizes volunteers and charitable contributions to build affordable housing, address homelessness and housing insecurity, and empower families toward self-sufficiency.

4. **Hybrid Sector:** Hybrid organizations operate at the intersection of multiple legal structures, creatively integrating elements from both nonprofit and for-profit models. Unlike traditional organizations that work within one specific sector, hybrids are designed to balance social impact with financial sustainability and operational flexibility. They take various legal forms, such as benefit corporations (B Corps), low-profit limited-liability companies (L3Cs), or social purpose corporations, depending on their goals and state regulations. By combining mission-driven work with revenue-generating strategies, hybrids can reduce dependency on grants and donations while maintaining a strong focus on solving social problems.

Real-World Example: Greyston Bakery operates as a B Corp, employing a unique "open hiring" policy that provides jobs to people regardless of their background, including those with criminal records or experiencing homelessness. The bakery generates revenue by selling baked goods while simultaneously addressing unemployment and social exclusion. Another example is Patagonia, a certified B Corp social enterprise that has a 501(c)(4) non-profit built into its structure. Through this model, the proceeds of the for-profit, which are not reinvested back into the business, go to environmental conservation and advocacy efforts.

5. **Informal Sector:** The informal sector includes loosely organized groups and individuals such as grassroots movements, community groups, and individual activists who work to address social problems without the formal legal status of a registered organization. These efforts can be powerful and responsive, often rooted in local knowledge and the immediate needs of a community. Though not registered or structured in the legal sense, these informal entities can serve as effective SPSOs

by organizing volunteers, creating awareness, mobilizing community resources, and catalyzing social change from the ground up.

Real-World Example: Many community fridges and free pantry initiatives operate as informal SPSOs, with neighbors gathering together and organizing efforts to stock refrigerators and shelves with food for anyone in need. In this way, they address food insecurity without any formal organizational structure. Similarly, local "Buy Nothing" groups on social media connect neighbors to share resources, reduce waste, and build community resilience through gift economies. Another example is the community-led disaster response networks that form organically after natural disasters. This occurs when neighbors organize supply distribution, wellness checks, and mutual aid without waiting for formal organizations to arrive. These informal groups often demonstrate remarkable agility and responsiveness because they're deeply rooted in local knowledge and relationships, though some eventually formalize their structure as they grow and scale their impact.

Each sector presents distinct advantages and constraints for SPSOs, making it essential to understand how different legal structures operate and the contexts in which they are most effective. Careful alignment between an organization's structure and its mission, goals, and funding strategy enables more strategic decision-making. This alignment not only strengthens operational effectiveness and long-term sustainability but also enhances an organization's capacity to generate meaningful and lasting social impact.

How might the legal structure of a SPSO impact its ability to address social issues effectively? Think of a SPSO you know and evaluate how its structure supports its mission.

WHICH LEGAL STRUCTURE DO YOU CHOOSE?

Each legal structure has its own unique strengths and limitations, as well as the capacity to create positive social change. Selecting a structure depends on your SPSO, the social issue you're addressing, and the specific needs that exist within your community. While no single legal structure is universally best, the right structure will meet your SPSO's needs and maximize the good you can do. When considering which structure and sector are right for your SPSO, keep the following in mind:

How does your intervention interact with your legal structure?

The type of intervention you plan to implement plays a significant role in determining the most appropriate legal structure for your SPSO. Different interventions require varying levels of funding, flexibility, and licenses. For example, a healthcare organization may need to operate as a nonprofit entity to procure certain grants, qualify for tax exemptions, or meet regulatory requirements. In contrast, interventions that provide social impact solutions through innovative products or services may need to adopt a for-profit structure to secure private investment, attract venture capital, or generate sustainable revenues through sales. A social enterprise in the private sector could also combine social goals with profit-making activities, enabling access to both traditional business funding and impact investors. Understanding what resources and funding are necessary for your intervention can help clarify which legal structure would be most compatible.

Real-World Example: Partners In Health, a nonprofit healthcare organization, leverages its nonprofit status to secure grants from foundations and government agencies, allowing it to provide free healthcare services in impoverished regions. Conversely, 23andMe operates as a for-profit company, using revenue from genetic testing services to fund research that contributes to medical breakthroughs and personalized healthcare solutions.

How will you fund your work?

Funding is another major consideration when choosing your legal structure. Different sectors have distinct sources of funding, which can greatly impact your SPSO's financial sustainability and growth potential.

Public sector organizations typically rely on taxpayer funding, government appropriations, and public grants, which provide stable but sometimes inflexible funding streams.

Private sector entities may depend on investors, sales, venture capital, or social impact bonds, offering potentially unlimited growth but requiring profitability and returns on investment.[10]

Nonprofit sector funding is more reliant on donations, grants, and fundraising, which can create financial uncertainty but also provide access to special tax exemptions and philanthropic support.

Understanding your ideal funding sources—whether individual donors, impact investors, government agencies, corporate sponsors, or the community—will help determine the most effective structure for your SPSO. Additionally, you should consider whether your funding model needs to be flexible enough to adapt to changing donor priorities, economic conditions, or policy shifts.

Real-World Example: Improving education access is a social issue that can be approached from each of the above sectors, as shown in the following examples. Teach For America operates as a nonprofit, relying heavily on foundation grants, individual donations, and corporate partnerships to fund its mission of educational equity. In contrast, Coursera functions as a for-profit social enterprise, generating revenue through course fees and partnerships with universities while making education accessible globally. Some organizations, like Khan Academy, have adopted a hybrid funding approach, operating as a nonprofit but generating some revenue through partnerships while primarily relying on philanthropic donations.

Hybrid Models and Cross-Sector Collaboration (CSC):

Many organizations are adopting hybrid models, strategically blending different sectors to leverage the strengths of each while mitigating their individual weaknesses. For instance, a for-profit company may establish a nonprofit arm or foundation to carry out social impact programs and access charitable funding, while a nonprofit organization may operate some revenue-generating activities within a for-profit subsidiary to reduce dependency on donations. This flexibility allows SPSOs to access more diverse funding streams and better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Similarly, CSCs bring together organizations from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to tackle large-scale social issues that no single organization could solve alone. These strategic partnerships allow organizations to pool resources, share expertise, leverage collective networks, and combine their unique strengths to achieve transformative change.[11] For example, governments often partner with nonprofits to deliver public health programs or social services, combining public funding with nonprofit operational expertise and community trust; whereas, private businesses may work with community organizations to address local environmental challenges. This could include contributing corporate resources to the cause while benefiting from community knowledge and relationships.

Real-World Example: The Partnership for a Healthier America brings together government agencies, private corporations, and nonprofit organizations to combat childhood obesity. Companies like Walmart and Subway have committed to offering healthier options while government agencies provide

policy support, and nonprofits deliver community programs. Another powerful example is Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which combines public sector funding from governments, private sector pharmaceutical partnerships, and nonprofit implementation through organizations like UNICEF to increase vaccine access in developing countries. The program has immunized over 888 million children since its inception.

Choosing the right legal structure hinges on selecting the model that aligns with the SPSO's specific goals, available resources, and planned interventions. Whether through a traditional single-sector approach, hybrid model, or cross-sector collaboration, the most effective structure enables your organization to deliver its mission sustainably, adapt to challenges, and operate at the scale necessary to create meaningful change.

Your organization has developed an eco-friendly fertilizer from recycled food waste, designed to be affordable and accessible for everyday households. Which legal structure would you choose, and why? Consider factors such as funding sources, scalability, pricing strategy, and how you would balance social impact with financial sustainability.

SUMMARY

Choosing the right legal structure is critical to the long-term success and impact of a social problem-solving organization. An organization's structure—and the sector it operates within—influences its funding opportunities, operational flexibility, and ability to collaborate with others. It also shapes how the organization positions itself within a broader ecosystem of partners and stakeholders. In some cases, hybrid models or cross-sector collaborations may be necessary to leverage the strengths of multiple approaches.

Although each legal structure involves trade-offs, all can drive meaningful social change when aligned with an organization's mission, resources, and strategic priorities. The key is to assess your intervention, funding strategy, and partnership needs, and select the structure that best supports sustainable and scalable impact.

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CHAPTER 17: SCALING SOCIAL IMPACT

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Understand and explain different intervention scaling methods.

2. Identify which scaling method best suits a specific intervention by weighing the pros and cons of each option within the situation.

3. Build basic scaling plans for various interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Once you've implemented your intervention and demonstrated its effectiveness within a specific population or context, the next step is to consider how it can grow. Scaling is not simply doing more of the same—it is the intentional and strategic expansion of your intervention's reach, depth, or influence. It requires careful planning to ensure that what made the intervention successful at a smaller scale can be sustained and adapted as it grows.

As organizations scale, they may expand to serve more people, extend their work into new geographic areas, or deepen their impact by addressing additional dimensions of a problem. Scaling can also involve replicating successful models in new contexts or partnering with others to broaden reach. However, growth introduces new challenges, including maintaining quality, adapting to different environments, and ensuring sufficient resources and infrastructure. When done thoughtfully, scaling allows organizations to amplify their impact, bringing effective solutions to more people while continuing to respond to the complexities of the social issues they aim to address.

Watch the video:
Scaling vs. Scaling IMPACT

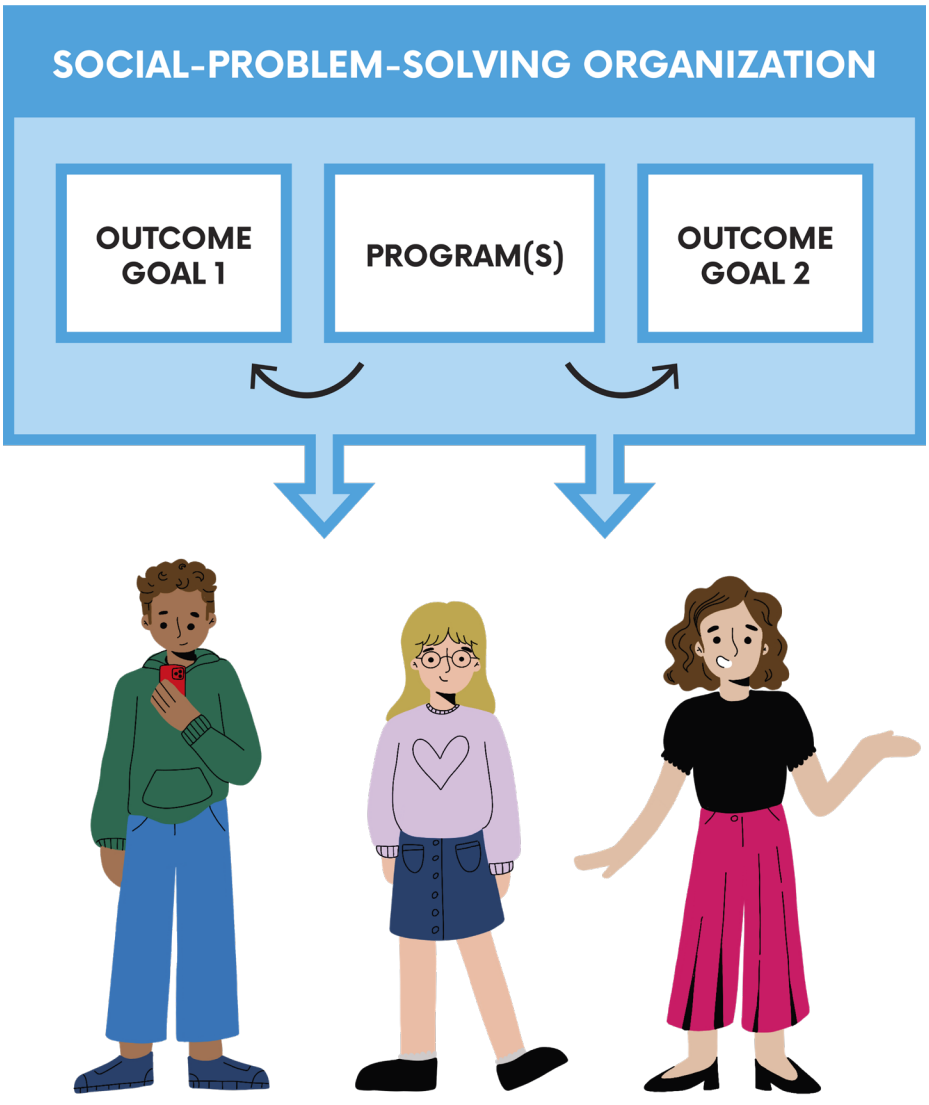
HOW DO YOU SCALE AN INTERVENTION?

Because different situations require different goals, scaling isn't a copy-and-paste process. A successful intervention in one context may require some fine-tuning to be successful on a different scale. There are three primary approaches to scaling an intervention: depth, reach, and replication. Each approach offers different paths to growth and impact, and the approach you choose will depend on thoughtful consideration of your organization's goals, the nature of the problem you're addressing, and the unique needs of the population you're serving. Each approach also offers different advantages and challenges to be carefully considered.

To scale effectively, you must follow the same rigorous principles that guided your initial intervention, or in other words, apply the Social Impact Cycle. First, understand the problem and the people affected through thorough research and community engagement. Second, design a clear, strategic scaling plan using methods like backward mapping and human-centered design. Third, implement and test your plan at different levels, measuring success along the way to ensure you achieve your intended outcomes. Fourth, evaluate the results, identify what worked and what didn't, and refine your approach to maximize impact while minimizing unintended consequences. Regardless of your chosen scaling approach, returning to

the phases of the Social Impact Cycle is a key step in preparing your solution for its next iteration. The following sections will address each approach further, providing you with the necessary information to choose the right approach for your intervention.

What makes scaling successful? Consider both the technical aspects (funding, infrastructure, capacity) and the relational aspects (community trust, cultural sensitivity, stakeholder engagement).



HOW CAN I DEEPEN MY IMPACT?

Scaling Through Depth

Scaling through depth means deepening your impact on the individual(s) you've already helped. Rather than expanding the number of people you're serving, increasing depth means enhancing the quality and breadth of the services you offer them. This approach addresses additional root causes and negative consequences connected to your social issue and provides another layer of support to the specific population you're already working with. To scale through depth, you might choose a new negative consequence of the social problem you're currently working with and adjust or expand on your existing intervention to address that consequence. Set new outcome goals and make plans to measure your deepened impact. Then focus on building solutions that are complementary to your existing intervention or expand the range of services you offer.[1] Scaling for depth allows you to concentrate your resources on one specific population and pursue true transformative change within that targeted group.

Real-World Example:
Reading Partners, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving literacy rates among elementary school students, initially focused on helping children read at grade level through one-on-one tutoring. After successfully achieving measurable reading gains, the organization decided to deepen its impact by addressing additional barriers to educational success. They began incorporating social-emotional learning into their tutoring sessions, recognizing that many struggling readers also faced confidence issues and anxiety about school. By training tutors to build students' self-esteem alongside their reading skills, Reading Partners created more profound, lasting change in the children's overall academic trajectories and life outcomes.

Benefits of Scaling Through Depth

- **Enhanced Impact:** By addressing several interconnected aspects of a social issue, you can create a more profound and lasting change for your target population, often breaking cycles that your initial intervention couldn't address alone.
- **Strengthened Relationships:** This approach often fosters stronger, more trusting connections within the community you serve. It demonstrates a long-term commitment to the population's overall well-being rather than a transactional service delivery model.

- **Comprehensive Solutions:** Tackling multiple facets of a problem can lead to more holistic and sustainable outcomes, addressing root causes rather than just symptoms and creating systemic change within the existing community.

HOW CAN I INCREASE MY REACH?

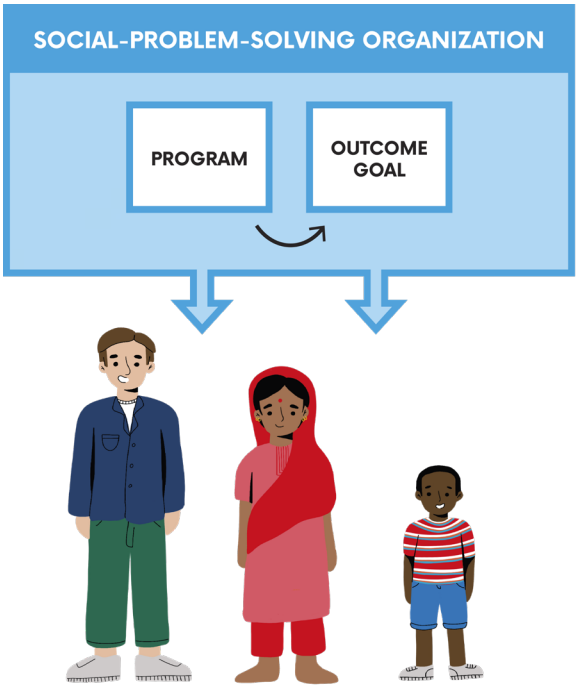
Scaling Through Reach

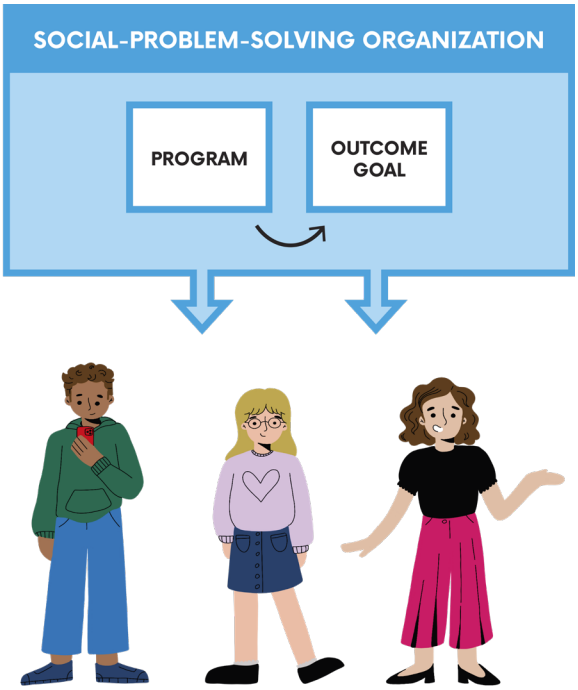
Scaling through reach means expanding your intervention beyond the initially chosen population to serve more people who experience the same social problem. The goal is to increase the number of individuals benefiting from your intervention while maintaining the quality and effectiveness that made it successful initially.

To scale your reach, you might broaden the targeted population within the initial intervention area by serving two adjacent towns rather than just one. The process of expanding reach will likely involve increasing resources and staffing, expanding your physical or digital infrastructure, forming strategic partnerships with organizations that can help you reach more people, and

finding innovative ways to connect with those you have not yet reached but who could benefit from your services.[2] The key is maintaining fidelity to your original model while adapting your delivery mechanisms to serve more people effectively.

Real-World Example: Crisis Text Line, a mental health organization that provides free, 24/7 crisis support via text message, initially launched in the United States with limited capacity to serve young people experiencing emotional crises. As they demonstrated success and demand grew exponentially, they increased their reach by recruiting and training thousands more volunteer crisis counselors, developing sophisticated AI-powered systems to prioritize the most urgent conversations, and expanding their texting capacity to handle hundreds of thousands of conversations monthly. They maintained their proven intervention model while dramatically expanding the number of people they could serve, eventually reaching four countries (the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, and the United States) and serving diverse populations including LGBTQ+ youth, veterans, and individuals in abusive situations.





Benefits of Scaling Through Reach

- **Broader Impact:** More people benefit from your successful intervention, resulting in a broader-scale change within the community or society, and potentially preventing problems that would be caused by the social problem if left unaddressed.

- **Increased Awareness:** Expanding reach often involves raising awareness about both your intervention and the social issue itself, which can lead to greater community support, increased funding opportunities, and broader participation from stakeholders.

- **Foundation for Further Scaling:** This approach often lays the groundwork for further expansion or replication, as it tests your capacity to serve larger populations and helps identify operational challenges before you attempt to scale in new locations.

HOW CAN I REPLICATE MY SUCCESS ELSEWHERE?

Scaling Through Replication

Scaling through replication involves taking a successful intervention or model and implementing it in new geographical locations, different communities, or even across different cultural contexts. This approach is about broadening the scope of your impact by reproducing your methods, strategies, or entire operational models in other settings where similar problems exist, but your services haven't yet reached.

To successfully replicate your intervention, you must carefully consider the unique factors of each new location, thoughtfully adapt your strategies accordingly, and build the necessary capacity to support the intervention in the new context. This process often involves training new teams who understand both your model and their local context, forming partnerships with local organizations who have community trust and knowledge, and ensuring that your intervention is culturally and contextually appropriate.[3] You should create systems for knowledge sharing, quality control, and continuous learning across all sites while allowing for local adaptation and innovation. In essence, replication isn't merely copying and pasting a successful intervention into a new location but adapting a successful solution to a new setting.

Real-World Example: Kiva, a microfinance organization that connects lenders with entrepreneurs in underserved communities, successfully pioneered its crowdfunded microlending model in East Africa. After proving the model's effectiveness in reducing poverty and empowering small business owners, Kiva replicated its approach across more than 80 countries worldwide. However, they didn't simply duplicate their model. They adapted their strategies to account for different banking regulations, cultural attitudes toward lending and borrowing, local economic conditions, and varying levels of internet connectivity in each new location. They partnered with local microfinance institutions that understood their communities, provided training for local staff, and adjusted loan terms and structures to match cultural norms while maintaining their core principle of zero-interest, crowdfunded loans. This thoughtful replication has enabled Kiva to facilitate over $1.6 billion in loans to more than four million borrowers globally.

Benefits of Scaling Through Replication

- **Impact Across Borders:** Successful models can be scaled to impact multiple communities, regions, or countries, potentially creating global change and addressing problems that transcend geographic boundaries.
- **Sustainable Growth:** Replication supports the sustainable expansion of a proven intervention, allowing it to adapt to various contexts and cultural nuances while maintaining the core principles and effectiveness that made it successful initially.
- **Broad Social Change:** This approach contributes to widespread social change by addressing similar issues in diverse locations, leading to a cumulative global impact and creating networks of practitioners who can learn from each other's experiences and innovations.

HOW DO I CHOOSE THE RIGHT SCALING APPROACH?

Scaling your intervention presents a significant opportunity to enhance social impact. However, expansion also carries substantial risks. If not carefully planned and executed, scaling can unintentionally exacerbate problems rather than solve them. To ensure positive outcomes, you should

approach scaling with the same level of care and strategic planning as your original intervention, if not more. Interventions should be scaled in the right way, for the right people, in the right place, and at the right time.

Thoughtful, data-driven, and community-centered planning is essential to scaling while safeguarding your intended impact. As you consider how to grow, revisit your logic model to reassess the inputs, activities, and outcomes that guided your initial work. Determine whether your desired outcomes and long-term impact have evolved now that your intervention has proven effective and clarify what success looks like at a larger scale. Use available data and feedback from the communities you serve to identify where your model is strongest, where it may need adaptation, and what risks could emerge with expansion. From there, evaluate which scaling approach—whether increasing reach, deepening impact, or replicating in new contexts—best align with your updated goals. By grounding these decisions in evidence and community insight, you increase the likelihood that your intervention will remain effective, relevant, and sustainable as it grows.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE BEFORE SCALING?

Before scaling, you must thoroughly assess the key factors that shape the local context where you plan to expand. This includes understanding cultural traditions and their significance to community identity and social cohesion, evaluating current practices and their effectiveness, and considering the region's economic stability, resource availability, and infrastructure capacity.[4] Local assets, both human and material, must also be considered to ensure your intervention can be sustained long-term without creating unsustainable dependencies on external funding or expertise.

Additionally, you must evaluate your own capacity to scale, ensuring you have the necessary funding, expertise, operational structure, staff capacity, and strategic partnerships to support expansion without compromising the quality or effectiveness of your intervention. Engaging with the community, conducting rigorous research, and identifying potential risks and unintended consequences are critical steps in determining whether and how your intervention should be scaled. By integrating these considerations thoughtfully, you can expand in a way that is both effective and ethically responsible.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SCALING IS DONE UNSUCCESSFULLY?

The decline of traditional rice farming in Bali, Indonesia, is a striking example of the risks of scaling. For centuries, Balinese farmers relied on the Subak system, a sophisticated, community-managed irrigation method overseen

by water temple priests. This system not only distributed water equitably, but also controlled pests naturally by coordinating the alternating planting of wet and dry fields. The Subak was more than an agricultural technique. It was deeply embedded in Balinese spiritual and social life and a reflection of Hindu philosophy.

In the 1970s, as part of the Green Revolution, the Indonesian government introduced high-yield rice varieties, chemical fertilizers, and continuous cropping schedules to boost production and achieve national food security. External development agencies, eager to modernize Indonesian agriculture and increase yields, encouraged rapid adoption of these new methods without fully understanding the complexity of the existing Subak system. Initially, yields soared, and the intervention appeared successful by conventional metrics.

However, the rapid shift disrupted Bali's ecological balance. The new farming methods required more water than the island's irrigation system could sustainably provide, and continuous planting eliminated the natural pest control cycle that had evolved over centuries, leading to severe infestations of rice pests like the brown planthopper. Farmers became dependent on expensive chemical pesticides that further damaged the ecosystem and reduced soil fertility over time. As a result, harvest began to decline. Beyond damaging the ecosystem, these changes also fractured Balinese society in profound ways. Farmers, once united by the cooperative Subak system where decisions were made collectively and benefits were shared communally, began competing for limited water resources. Conflicts arose as some farmers adhered to government mandates while others resisted, creating economic disparities and weakening long-standing community ties that had sustained villages for generations.[5] Additionally, the religious significance of the water temples diminished as agricultural decisions moved from community priests to government agricultural offices, eroding cultural identity and social cohesion.

A more effective approach might have enhanced the existing Subak system rather than replacing it entirely. Integrating modern agricultural advancements with traditional practices, such as improving irrigation efficiency through better canal maintenance, selectively introducing new rice strains that were compatible with the existing planting cycles, or providing organic pest management training that complemented natural pest control, could have increased yields without destabilizing local ecosystems and communities. The unfortunate experience of these Balinese farmers underscores the need for thorough research, deep cultural understanding, and genuine collaboration with local stakeholders before scaling interventions. It demonstrates that solutions should aim to strengthen and build upon existing systems rather than undermine or replace them, and that seemingly successful short-term

metrics can mask long-term damage to social, cultural, and environmental systems.

Can you think of a service, product, or program that worked well for one group of people but failed to meet the needs of another? Why was this the case? What cultural, economic, or contextual factors might have been overlooked during the scaling or implementation process?

SUMMARY

Scaling your social impact intervention is a valuable step in maximizing the positive change your SPSO can create. Whether you choose to scale through deepening impact, increasing reach, or replicating success, each approach offers different advantages and challenges that must be carefully weighed. Understanding these approaches and selecting the right one based on the organization's goals, available resources, and the specific needs of the population you serve is key to achieving your long-term mission.

However, scaling is not simply about growth; it's about responsible, thoughtful expansion that respects existing community systems and prioritizes the voices and needs of those you're serving. Your scaling decisions should be guided by rigorous research, community engagement, and honest assessment of both opportunities and risks. When done well, scaling can amplify your impact exponentially and transform lives across communities. When done poorly, it can cause harm, waste resources, and undermine the very communities you seek to support. The difference lies in your commitment to maintaining the quality of your intervention.

Endnotes

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EVALUATE THE OUTCOMES

PHASE 4: EVALUATE THE OUTCOMES

Chapter 18: Outputs, Outcomes, and Impact

Chapter 19: Outcome Measurement

Chapter 20: Impact Assessment

Chapter 21: Organizational Learning

The final phase of the social impact cycle is evaluation. This phase centers on understanding whether your efforts are actually creating meaningful change in the lives of those you are serving.

Designing and implementing an intervention is not sufficient on its own. You must consider whether real change is happening and if your work is contributing to that change. This requires a commitment to honest and thoughtful evaluation, even when the results challenge your expectations. Evaluation requires that you look for evidence to understand what is working, what is not, and why. This process allows you to move beyond assumptions, make informed decisions about how to improve your work, and create accountability to those you serve and those who support your efforts.

Evaluation is not a one-time step. It is an ongoing process that strengthens each phase of the cycle. The insights gained through intentional evaluation help you refine your approach, build more effective solutions, and continue the cycle with greater clarity and purpose. The next four chapters aim to strengthen your ability to measure and learn from your work by helping you track results, assess impact, and use evidence to improve over time.


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CHAPTER 18: OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES, AND IMPACT

When you are done with this section, you'll be able to...

1. Distinguish and identify the relationships between outputs, outcomes, and impact in the context of social interventions.
2. Understand the role of outputs in tracking intervention activities.
3. Explain how outcomes reflect the changes that follow an intervention.
4. Recognize the importance of measuring impact to evaluate the success of social interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Outputs, outcomes, and impact are all terms used to describe different ways of measuring an intervention's effectiveness. However, they are often misunderstood or used interchangeably, which can lead to confusion about what success looks like.[1] Distinguishing between these concepts is essential for accurately assessing whether an intervention is doing more than simply delivering services and whether it's creating meaningful change.

Each type of measurement captures a different level of progress. Outputs reflect what is produced or delivered, outcomes indicate the changes experienced by those served, and impact reveals the extent to which those changes can be attributed to the intervention itself. Without a clear understanding of these differences, organizations risk overestimating their effectiveness or overlooking opportunities for improvement. By using these measures correctly, practitioners can better evaluate their work, make informed decisions, and ensure that their efforts are genuinely improving people's lives.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF OUTPUTS IN EVALUATING SOCIAL IMPACT?

Outputs are the direct products, services, or activities generated or offered by a social intervention. They are the tangible evidence of your work, meaning they are typically quantitative and measure what the intervention has delivered. For example, if an intervention aims to increase literacy, an output might be the number of books distributed, the number of students enrolled in the program, or the number of literacy classes held.

Outputs provide immediate, tangible evidence of an intervention's activities, offering a way to track implementation and ensure that resources are being used as intended and with fidelity. However, an exclusive focus on outputs is insufficient for assessing true impact. Outputs do not reveal whether meaningful change is occurring in people's lives or whether the underlying causes of a social problem are being addressed. Rather, they capture what is produced or delivered, not the extent to which those efforts lead to lasting change.

Real-World Example: Pencils of Promise, a nonprofit that builds schools and increases access to quality education, tracks outputs such as the number of schools built, the number of teacher training sessions conducted, and the number of educational materials distributed. While these outputs demonstrate their activity level and organizational capacity, they don't indicate whether students are learning better or staying in school longer as a result of their activities.

Imagine you're running a health clinic that provides free vaccinations to children in a rural area. The outputs you currently track are the number of vaccinations provided and the number of volunteers.

What additional outputs might you track to measure your program's activities and resource utilization?

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF OUTCOMES IN EVALUATING SOCIAL IMPACT?

Outcomes are the measurable changes that occur among a target population following an intervention. These changes represent shifts in the negative consequences the intervention is addressing and can be short-term or long-term. Importantly, outcomes measure what changed for your customer-partners and the rest of the affected population, not what actions you took or services you delivered.

Short-term outcomes might include immediate changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, or attitudes. For example, you may see an increase in reading comprehension skills after participants complete your literacy class, or improved knowledge about nutrition after attending your healthy eating workshops. These changes typically occur during or immediately following an intervention.

Long-term outcomes are broader and more sustained changes that persist over time, often representing deeper transformations in people's lives or communities. For instance, you might measure improved literacy rates in your community over several years, increased employment rates among program graduates, or reduced crime rates in neighborhoods where you've implemented youth development programs. Long-term outcomes are the changes SPSOs ultimately hope to achieve, though they may take months or years to materialize and can be influenced by factors beyond your specific intervention alone.

Real-World Example: Year Up, a workforce development organization serving young adults, tracks both short-term and long-term outcomes. Short-term outcomes include participants developing technical and professional skills, earning industry-recognized certifications, and securing corporate internships. Long-term outcomes include participants maintaining full-time employment one year after graduation, earning wages above the living wage in their area, and pursuing continued education or career advancement. These outcomes demonstrate the measurable changes in participants' lives, not just the services Year Up provides.

If you were evaluating a job training program for underemployed individuals in your community, what would be an example of a short-term outcome and a long-term outcome that you might track? How would these outcomes differ from the outputs of your program, such as the number of training sessions held?

WHAT IS IMPACT AND WHY IS IT MEASURED?

Impact refers to the portion of outcomes that can be directly attributed to an intervention.[2] It represents the change that happened specifically because of your work, isolating your contribution from other factors that might have influenced the outcomes.

This distinction is crucial because outcomes can occur for many reasons beyond your intervention. For example, if you run a job training program and your participants find employment, that's an outcome. However, some of those participants might have found jobs regardless due to an improving economy, personal connections, or other job search efforts. Instead, impact measurement helps determine how many jobs were secured because of your training program.

Impact measurement ultimately

answers several critical questions: Are your interventions truly contributing to the outcomes you observe? What difference does participation in your intervention make? And what unique value does your intervention provide to the population you serve? By addressing these questions, impact measurement moves beyond surface-level activity tracking to assess whether meaningful change is actually occurring. It also enables you to refine your approach, helping you adjust, improve, and ultimately *Do Good. Better.*

When positive outcomes emerge, it is equally important to understand why. Identifying which elements of your intervention are driving results allows you to strengthen what works and address what does not. Careful evaluation and documentation of these connections ensures that your efforts are not only well-intentioned but genuinely effective.

Just as vital, demonstrating impact helps build trust with stakeholders. Clear, credible evidence of results can strengthen confidence among donors, investors, board members, and community partners. This transparency not only attracts funding and support, but also reinforces accountability to the communities you serve, ensuring that your work remains both responsive and impactful.

Real-World Example: Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), a maternal and child health program, conducts rigorous impact evaluations using randomized control trials. They measure program impact by comparing mothers who received home visits from nurses to a control group of similar mothers who did not. Their research has shown that NFP participation directly causes specific improvements, including a 56% reduction in child injuries and ingestions by age 2, a 44% reduction in maternal behavioral problems related to substance abuse, and higher high school graduation rates among participating mothers. This evidence of impact has made NFP one of the most widely replicated, evidence-based programs in the United States.

What are the key differences between measuring the outcomes and measuring the impact of a social intervention? Why is it essential to differentiate between them when communicating your intervention's effectiveness to funders or community partners?

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES, AND IMPACT?

Distinguishing between these three terms is vital for accurately evaluating your intervention's effectiveness. Outputs show what activities have taken place; outcomes reveal the documented changes that occurred after these activities were conducted, and impact proves the extent to which these changes can be attributed to your specific intervention rather than other factors.

These concepts build upon each other in a logical progression: you generate outputs through your intervention's activities, those outputs contribute to outcomes among your participants, and impact represents the portion of those outcomes that occurred specifically because of your intervention. Understanding this relationship helps you design better interventions, set appropriate goals at each level, and communicate more effectively with different stakeholders who may care about different aspects of your work.

Example: Consider a nonprofit organization focused on reducing homelessness:

- **Outputs:** Over the course of a year, the organization provided 1,000 meals to people experiencing homelessness, offered 500 shelter beds, conducted 250 job training sessions, and connected 180 individuals with case management services.
- **Outcomes:** Among the people the organization served, 150

1 MILLION WELLS CONSTRUCTED
(OUTPUT)

30% REDUCTION IN WATER-TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS
(OUTCOME)

20% REDUCTION IN WATER-TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS DUE TO THE WELLS
(IMPACT)

individuals gained employment, 170 individuals found permanent housing within 12 months, 75% of participating individuals reported improved mental health and reduced substance abuse, and 120 individuals maintained stable housing for at least one year.

- **Impact:** Through a rigorous evaluation comparing participants to similar individuals who did not receive services, the results highlight the direct impact of the intervention. Of those who found employment, 100 individuals secured jobs as a result of the organization's job training and case management. An additional 150 participants obtained permanent housing due to the housing placement services and rental assistance—outcomes that would have been unlikely without the organization's support. Participants also demonstrated a 40% greater improvement in mental health outcomes compared to a control group. Together, these findings illustrate the measurable impact of the intervention beyond what might have occurred without it.

How would you assess the impact of a community garden program designed to improve access to healthy food in a food desert? What outputs would you track? What outcomes would you expect to see? What impact would you hope for?

SUMMARY

Knowing how and why to measure outputs, outcomes, and impact is a fundamental piece of productive intervention evaluation. It is not enough to show that activities are being carried out (outputs) or even that positive changes are occurring (outcomes); the goal is to demonstrate that your specific intervention is driving those changes (impact).

Remember that while outputs are the easiest to measure, they're the least meaningful for understanding your true effectiveness. Leveraging outcome measurements to gauge impact is what truly demonstrates an intervention's value and justifies a SPSO's mission. Developing the ability to evaluate impact thoughtfully and accurately is critical to creating meaningful change in the lives of real people.

OPTIONAL PRACTICE

For each of the given scenarios, determine whether the measurement is an example of an **output, an outcome, or impact**.

1. A nonprofit holds 25 financial literacy workshops for low-income families.

2. Follow-up studies show a 25% lower hospitalization rate for mental health issues among frequent users of the hotline compared to non-users.

3. 70% of participants improve their budgeting and saving habits within 3 months of completing the program.

4. Within two years, participants showed a 40% decrease in debt compared to similar households not in the program.

5. A mobile health unit administers 1,200 vaccinations in underserved communities.

6. A food bank distributes 10,000 healthy meals to families in need.

7. Six months after vaccination, local schools report a 30% drop in student absenteeism due to illness.

8. A longitudinal study finds that individuals who completed the internship program earn, on average, 20% more over five years than peers who did not.

9. A job training center offers 100 individuals counseling services.

10. Out of hotline callers, 85% report feeling less anxious after using the hotline.

ANSWER KEY

1. Output
2. Impact
3. Outcome
4. Impact
5. Output
6. Output
7. Outcome
8. Impact
9. Output
10. Outcome

Endnotes

1 "Topic Dive: The Power of Measurement (Outputs, Outcomes, Impact)." Ballard Center for Social Impact. May 17, 2022.

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CAPSTONE

CHAPTER 19: OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Describe the importance of outcome measurement in social impact evaluation.

2. Explain how single-group designs track participant change over time.

3. Recognize how outcome data informs program improvement and decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Outcome measurement provides organizations with a structured way to track progress, evaluate participant change, and use evidence to strengthen decision-making. Rather than relying solely on assumptions or anecdotal observations, organizations can use outcome data to assess whether their interventions are moving participants toward the desired goals outlined in their theory of change.

This chapter explores the core components of effective outcome measurement and how they are applied in social impact work. It also examines how organizations collect and interpret outcome data, the strengths and limitations of common measurement approaches, and the role outcome measurement plays in continuous learning, accountability, and program improvement.

WHAT IS OUTCOME MEASUREMENT?

Outcome measurement is the systematic assessment of changes in participants or systems. Since an outcome is defined as the measured change of a social issue's negative consequences, the goal of outcome measurement is to determine whether meaningful change has occurred within the affected population by the end of the intervention period. Although evaluation comes after implementation in the Social Impact Cycle, outcome measurement can take place at any point while implementing an intervention.

By regularly examining participant outcomes, organizations can identify which aspects of their intervention are working well, which need adjustment, and where additional support may be required. These insights inform day-to-day decision-making, guide intervention refinement, and strengthen accountability to stakeholders who rely on credible evidence of progress.

Effective outcome measurement is built on three key steps. Organizations must:

1. **Articulate their theory of change and logic model** to clarify how program activities are expected to lead to short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.

2. **Select appropriate outcome measures** that accurately capture the specific outcomes the theory of change anticipates.

3. **Develop an evaluation design** that specifies how and when data will be collected, from whom, and under what conditions.

Together, these elements form the foundation of a coherent outcome measurement approach that links intended change, actual change, and measurement strategies. The following subsections explore each of these components in greater depth and will explain how they function as

key elements of effective outcome measurement.

Theory of Change and Logic Model

In previous chapters, a theory of change was described as a logical framework that explains how your intervention is expected to create change. The theory of change describes the causal pathways leading from current conditions to expected outcomes. Remember: the theory of change is different from a logic model. A logic model is a visual companion to the theory of change that explains "what" will happen. The theory of change provides an overview of "why" it will happen.

Within outcome measurement, the theory of change and logic model function as practical guides that shape what data should be collected, when it should be collected, and how results should be interpreted. By clearly mapping the expected progression from activities to outcomes, they reveal which specific changes should be measured as evidence of progress, as well as appropriate measurement points such as baseline, mid-program, and follow-up. The theory of change also provides a reference point for interpreting results. Because it makes explicit the anticipated pathways of change, organizations can compare actual outcomes with those predicted in the theory of change and logic model. If the observed changes do not align with expectations, this signals a need to pause and reassess underlying assumptions, implementation quality, or contextual factors influencing participant progress.

By periodically examining whether real outcomes match those anticipated in the theory of change and logic model, organizations can make timely adjustments to program activities, supports, or delivery strategies. These adjustments help ensure that implementation remains aligned with intended pathways of change and that the program continues progressing toward its desired outcomes and ultimate impact. Utilizing outcome measurement in this iterative way allows organizations to engage in continuous learning rather than waiting until the end of a program to evaluate results.

Real-World Example: Reading Partners is a one-on-one literacy tutoring program that pairs trained volunteers with students who are behind grade level in reading.[1] Guided by a theory of change that links individualized tutoring to improved literacy skills and broader academic success, the program uses outcome measurement to track progress at key stages. For example, evaluators collect baseline reading assessments when students enter the program, monitor students' skill development throughout tutoring, and administer follow-up assessments when students complete the program. If interim data shows that

students are not achieving the expected short-term gains in reading proficiency, program staff can examine factors that influence student success, such as tutor training, session frequency, or curriculum alignment, and make targeted adjustments. In this way, the theory of change acts as a guide for outcome measurement.

Outcome Measures

Outcome measures are the specific methods, instruments, and tools used to collect data on the anticipated changes spelled out in the theory of change and logic model.[2]

- **Methods** describe the procedures that will be used to collect and analyze outcome data. Common methods include surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, or review of administrative records.

- **Instruments** take the abstract concept of what will be measured—such as "improved well-being" or "school readiness"—and transform them into concrete items, questions, or tasks that can be scored and interpreted. Some frequently utilized instruments include validated questionnaires (such as anxiety or depression scales), developmental screening assessments, reading or math tests, or structured skill checklists.

- **Tools** describe the physical or digital aids used to administer instruments and carry out the chosen method. Standard tools include paper surveys, online surveys (e.g., using Google Forms or SurveyMonkey), tablets for data entry, observation rubrics, and case management software to store and organize results.

Together, methods, instruments, and tools work to translate abstract goals into a systematic assessment for evaluating the changes caused by an intervention. These resources also help organizations move beyond intuition or anecdotal evidence and instead rely on empirical information to understand what is working and what is not. Over time, the accumulation of outcome data helps identify patterns of effectiveness and reveals which program components are most strongly associated with positive change. These insights help organizations identify best practices, inform program refinement, and guide decisions about scaling, modifying, or discontinuing specific strategies.

Real-World Example: Head Start, a program that provides comprehensive early childhood education services to low-income children, uses outcome measures to evaluate changes in children's

cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills over time. They use standardized developmental assessments as their data-collection method, conducted when students enter the program, at certain intervals within the program, and when they exit the program to track progress toward school readiness goals. The specific questions and type of assessment act as their instrument, and the online assessment platforms and paper aids act as their tools. By using consistent tools, instruments, and methods, Head Start programs can compare results with other locations, monitor compliance and quality improvement efforts, and adjust support for children who are not demonstrating expected gains. This example illustrates how well-chosen outcome measures translate broad goals—such as improved early learning and development—into concrete, measurable indicators that guide program improvement and demonstrate progress to funders and policymakers.

Evaluation Design

An evaluation design is the conceptual plan or structure that describes how you will collect and analyze data to answer your key evaluation questions.[3] Derived from the program goals outlined in your theory of change and logic model, these key evaluation questions specify the information you need from your evaluation. They address the goals of your intervention and clarify what information you aim to gain from the evaluation.

When designing an evaluation, you must make three core decisions:

1. **Who you'll study:** Who comprises your treatment, comparison, or control groups? How will participants be selected?

2. **When you'll collect data:** When will baseline data be collected? When will follow-up measurements occur? Will there be interim measurements?

3. **What you'll measure:** Which outputs and outcomes will you track to answer your evaluation questions?

Together, these decisions form the foundation of a strong evaluation design. By clearly defining who will be studied, when data will be collected, and what indicators will be measured, evaluators can generate more reliable and meaningful findings. A thoughtful evaluation design not only strengthens the credibility of the results but also ensures the evaluation produces actionable insights that support learning, decision-making, and improved social impact outcomes.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO CONDUCT AN OUTCOME MEASUREMENT?

To understand whether participants actually change over time, you need at least two data points on the same outcome: an initial reference point and one or more follow-up measurements. The initial data point is generally referred to as the baseline and is typically collected just before participants begin an intervention. Later measurements are taken several months after, or at the program's completion, and are compared to the baseline to gauge the extent and direction of the change. When multiple follow-up measurements are collected, organizations can also examine whether early gains are sustained, increase, or fade after the intervention ends.

The type of data you collect should be guided by your theory of change and evaluation questions. Quantitative tools such as standardized scales, behavioral indicators, or administrative records can capture measurable shifts in outcomes, while qualitative methods such as interviews or open-ended responses can help explain how and why those changes occurred. Using both types of data together often provides a more complete picture of participant progress than either approach alone.

Single-Group Design (Performance Measurement)

The most common method to measure participant change over time is a single-group design, often called a "pre-post" or "before-and-after" measurement. This design measures outcomes for one group of participants before and after an intervention, then compares the two measurements, concluding whether a change occurred among the participants. It is most useful for tracking participant progress, monitoring outcomes over time, and supporting internal learning and program improvement. Single-group design is an excellent tool for showing whether change occurred. However, because it does not control for external factors or utilize a comparison group, single-group design cannot confidently state whether the intervention caused that change. While it cannot establish causation, it is still valuable for understanding overall progress and informing operational improvements.

How it works: Measure a baseline characteristic before your intervention, deliver your intervention, and measure again—in the exact same way—after the intervention. By comparing the before-and-after measurements, you can see whether change occurred among your participants.

Example: A literacy nonprofit measures students' reading levels at the beginning of their tutoring program (baseline: 40% reading at grade level), provides 20 weeks of one-on-one tutoring, and measures again at the end (outcome: 75% reading at grade level). They can report that reading levels improved by 35 percentage points among participants.

Strengths

Formative evaluation: You can make improvements to your program while it's still running based on participant feedback and early results gathered through your testing.

Recognizable change: At a quick glance, the design shows whether change is occurring in your desired direction.

Easy implementation: When resources are limited, but you need to track basic progress, a before-and-after test is a valuable and accessible option.
Internal learning tool: The simple model helps provide a basic outline for internal learning and program refinement.

Limitations

The primary limitation of the single-group design is the low internal validity, or the limited capacity of the design to identify a true cause-and-effect relationship. This means you cannot confidently claim your program caused the observed improvements. Other factors may explain the improvement, including:

- Maturation: People naturally change over time, which could lead to improvement even without your program.

- History: External events in the economy, environment, or other unrelated organizations might cause change.

- Regression to the mean: People who start at extreme levels tend to move toward average levels naturally over time, regardless of intervention.

- Testing effects: Sometimes people improve simply because they've taken the same test multiple times and become familiar with it.

- Selection effects: The people who choose to participate in your program might be more motivated or have more resources than those who don't, meaning they might improve even without your help.

The Bottom Line: Single-group designs can demonstrate that change occurred among participants, but they cannot determine with confidence why that change occurred. Consequently, they are most appropriately used for internal learning, monitoring progress, and guiding program improvement rather than making strong causal claims.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF OUTCOME MEASUREMENT?

Outcome measurement offers a practical and accessible way for organizations to understand whether participants are experiencing meaningful change. By tracking outcomes at multiple points in time, organizations can document progress, communicate results to stakeholders, and build a credible record of their

program's contributions. Outcome data also supports transparency and accountability, demonstrating that resources are being used to produce observable benefits for the people served. Because these measures can often be collected through surveys, assessments, or administrative data, they are feasible for many programs to implement on an ongoing basis.

However, outcome measurement also has important limitations. Changes observed among participants cannot always be attributed solely to the program, since other factors in participants' lives may influence results. Without a comparison group, it is difficult to determine whether similar changes would have occurred in the absence of the intervention. In addition, outcomes may not capture the full complexity of participant experiences or the longer-term impacts of the intervention. Measures can also be fallible depending on how questions are worded, when data is collected, and whether participants complete follow-up assessments.
Recognizing both the strengths and limitations of outcome measurement helps organizations interpret their findings responsibly. Rather than overstating conclusions, practitioners can use outcome data as one important source of evidence within a broader evaluation strategy.

SUMMARY

Outcome measurement offers a practical and accessible way for organizations to understand whether participants are experiencing meaningful change. By tracking outcomes at multiple points in time, outcome measurement helps organizations document progress, make improvements, communicate results to stakeholders, and build a credible record of their program's contributions. Outcome data also supports transparency and accountability, demonstrating that resources are being used to produce observable benefits for the people served.

Ultimately, this evidence-based approach moves organizations away from guesswork, providing a shared language for staff and stakeholders to collaborate on informed, systematic improvements. Though outcome measurements alone are insufficient to prove causation, they provide substantial value for organizations looking for accessible evaluation methods. To prove an intervention is responsible for the change among participants, you must apply the impact assessment principles discussed in the next chapter.

Endnotes

1 Robin Tepper Jacob, Catherine Armstrong, and Jacklyn Altuna Willard, Mobilizing Volunteer Tutors to Improve Student Literacy: Implementation, Impacts, and Costs of the Reading Partners Program (New York: MDRC, 2015).

2 Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. "Module 5: Outcome Measures (WWC Group Design Standards Training)." U.S. Department of Education, n.d.

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CHAPTER 20: IMPACT ASSESSMENT

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Define impact assessment and explain attribution in evaluation.
2. Distinguish between observed participant improvement and true program impact.
3. Describe the strengths and limitations of quasi-experimental and experimental designs.
4. Identify how to select the most appropriate impact assessment design for your intervention.

INTRODUCTION

After tracking participant outcomes, organizations must address a deeper question: whether the changes observed within a targeted population can be attributed to their intervention. While outcome measurement documents what changed as a whole, **impact assessment focuses on understanding why a change occurred and how much of it can be directly ascribed to an intervention**. Once outside influences like economic conditions, community resources, and participants' personal resilience are accounted for, those implementing the intervention can gain valuable insight into how their product or program is succeeding or failing.

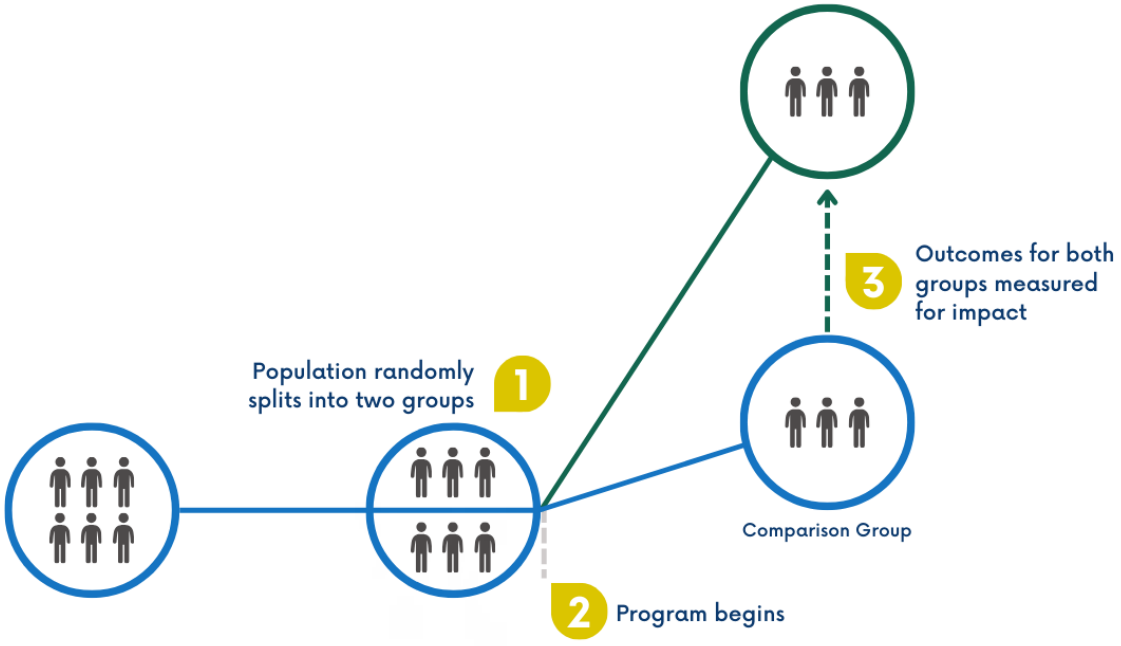
This chapter introduces impact assessment as the next step in a comprehensive evaluation approach. It teaches you how to apply the concepts and designs needed to isolate a program's contribution to observed outcomes and helps distinguish between general participant improvement and improvements that occur as a result of the intervention.

WHAT IS IMPACT ASSESSMENT?

Impact assessment is the process of determining whether an intervention directly caused the observed changes within a target population. These changes may be positive or negative, but the central question remains the same: did the intervention itself produce the observed outcomes, or would those changes have occurred regardless because of external influences?

This focus on attribution represents the core challenge of evaluation. While outcome measurement can demonstrate that change occurred after an intervention was implemented, impact assessment goes a step further by determining whether and to what extent the intervention was responsible for that change. Establishing this distinction is critical not only for demonstrating the value of an intervention but also for strengthening its credibility as an effective social impact solution. As a result, social problem-solving organizations (SPSOs) rely on impact assessment to generate reliable evidence that their efforts are truly driving meaningful change.

To answer questions of attribution, impact assessment builds upon the data collected during outcome measurement and uses evaluation designs capable of isolating the effects of the intervention from other contributing factors. This often requires quantitative data that measures how much change can reasonably be attributed to the program itself. Two of the most common approaches used to accomplish this are quasi-experimental designs and randomized controlled trial designs.



HOW CAN YOU DETERMINE YOUR PROGRAM'S IMPACT?

Quasi-experimental design (also referred to as comparison group design) and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are two effective evaluation methods for clarifying impact. Both approaches aim to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the intervention and the documented outcomes. Each demands a different level of rigor and comes with its own set of practical considerations.

1. Quasi-Experimental Design (Comparison Group)

The comparison group design strengthens causal claims by comparing your treatment group, participants who received your intervention, against a similar group that did not receive it. If the treatment group improves significantly more than the comparison group over the same period, that difference can be reasonably attributed to your intervention rather than to an external factor or the passage of time.

How It Works:

Identify two groups: a treatment group and a comparison group. For example, you might compare adults in your 12-week substance abuse detox program (treatment group) against similar adults on a waitlist for your program who haven't yet received services (comparison group). Measure both groups prior to the intervention period and again after, observing if one group displays any significant differences.

Real-World Example: In 2018, Central City Community College in Ohio partnered with the nonprofit JobsFirst to evaluate its new 10-week[1] workforce development program for unemployed adults. The college enrolled 200 participants into the program (treatment group) and, due to limited capacity, placed another 200 eligible applicants on a waitlist (comparison group).

Central City and JobsFirst administered a baseline survey to both groups early in the program and a follow-up survey six months after the program ended. After the intervention was implemented, they found that 62% of program participants were in stable employment (at least 30 hours per week for 12 consecutive weeks), compared with 38% of individuals on the waitlist. This led to a difference of 24 percentage points, which the evaluation team attributed to the program, after adjusting for baseline differences in age, education, and prior work history.[2]

Strengths:

By measuring two groups within a similar geographic area, the JobsFirst example controls for multiple external factors, like economic shifts or the passage of time, because both affect the groups equally. The similarity of external factors between the two groups can help in identifying and attributing changes in outcome. Additionally, a quasi-experimental design is often more feasible and affordable than a full randomized trial, making it a practical choice for many social impact organizations.

Limitations:

The main limitation of the quasi-experimental design is its lack of random assignment, meaning that individuals in the treatment group may be inherently different from those in the comparison group, even before the program begins. As a result, selection bias can occur, which affects the validity of the results and makes attribution unclear. Some changes found may reflect pre-existing changes, rather than the intervention. This is true, even when external factors are taken into account.

Common sources of selection bias include: **self-selection** (individuals who choose to enroll might have more motivation, stronger family support, or fewer barriers than those who didn't enroll), **geographic differences** (participants in one area of an implementation may differ from those in another when it comes to resources or other factors that affect outcomes), and **timing differences** (conditions that may have changed and affected participants such as funding, staff

expertise, or economic conditions).

The Bottom Line:

Comparing outcomes from a treatment group and a comparison group can provide reasonable evidence of the impact of your intervention. However, selection bias may interfere with the validity of data. This limitation drives the need for other, more complex evaluation designs.

Imagine you're running a job training program and want to use a comparison group design. You decide to compare the employment rates of your program graduates against people currently on your waitlist who haven't yet received services.

Why might the people on the waitlist NOT be a perfect comparison?

What differences might exist between those who got into your program immediately and those who are still waiting?

How might these differences affect your findings?

What could you do to strengthen your comparison group design?

2. Experimental Design (Randomized Controlled Trials -RCTs)

Another methodology for establishing causal evidence is experimental design or RCTs, which uses random assignment to eliminate selection bias and provide solid evidence of an intervention's impact. Random assignment refers to the process of selecting and allocating individuals, at random, to be part of the treatment or control group. Because assignment is random and not based on any characteristics of the participants, the two groups should be statistically identical at the start in both measured characteristics (e.g., age, income, and education) and unmeasured characteristics (e.g., motivation, family support, and resilience). In the two groups, the only systematic difference between them is whether they received your intervention. With only one difference, the outcomes at the end can be confidently attributed

to your program rather than to pre-existing differences, external factors, or alternative explanations.

How It Works:

Randomly assign participants to either a treatment group that receives your intervention or a control group that does not receive your intervention. This control group may still be offered a form of standard treatment or be given a placebo. Statistical principles show that randomly assigning thirty or more participants to each group increases the likelihood of equivalent groups. Compare the before-and-after results from each group to evaluate the impact of your intervention.

Real-World Example: The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), a home-visiting program for first-time mothers, has used randomized controlled trials extensively to prove its impact. In a Memphis study, 743 randomly assigned pregnant women received either home visits from trained nurses during pregnancy and the first two years of the child's life (treatment group) or were offered the standard prenatal and pediatric care available in the community (control group). Follow-up studies found that children from the treatment group had 56% fewer emergency room visits in their first two years of life, and the mothers from the treatment group had 44% fewer maternal behavioral problems related to substance abuse, and longer intervals between births. Because the groups were randomized, researchers could confidently conclude that NFP caused these improvements rather than attributing them to the mother's inherent parenting skills or other external factors.[3]

Strengths:

If RCTs are implemented correctly, evaluators can reliably identify whether the program or intervention is the cause of the observed changes within a targeted population. This results from the design controlling all potential confounding variables, both measured and unmeasured, to ensure the two groups are equivalent at the start of the study. This makes it possible for RCTs to provide policymakers, funders, and the research community with credible evidence of the intervention's impact. As a result, this design confirms whether a new intervention is successful and acts as a necessary precursor to scaling an intervention or advocating policy adoption. When resources are limited, and the intervention is unable to serve everyone in the targeted population, random assignment can also be an ethical way to allocate scarce services fairly.

Limitations:

While RCTs are often considered one of the strongest methods for evaluating effectiveness, their practical challenges, such as contamination—when individuals in the control group seek similar services elsewhere—and non-compliance—when those assigned to treatment do not participate as intended—can weaken the reliability of the findings.

Furthermore, even when an RCT produces strong results under highly controlled conditions, those outcomes may not translate equally well across different contexts or at larger scales. As a result, a program that appears effective in one setting may not achieve the same impact when implemented in more complex real-world environments. RCTs also face ethical dilemmas when the random assignment of individuals treated

The structure of an RCT also demands a significant number of resources, requiring larger sample sizes, longer timeframes, sophisticated data systems, and the use of external evaluators. These resources are expensive to obtain and can cost between $100,000 and $1 million, sometimes more. This is further exacerbated by the length of time these resources are needed. RCTs often require years to show long-term impact, thereby necessitating the need to sustain contact with both groups throughout the study period and maintain the funds to do so. This can make it difficult to evaluate an intervention via RCT if there are significant financial limitations or restricted time frames.

The Bottom Line:

Randomized controlled trials provide strong evidence of the impact of your intervention by proving the causation of evaluation results. RCTs are often the preferred form of evaluation used before scaling an intervention, advocating policy adoption, or contributing to social impact at a broader level. However, while highly beneficial, RCTs are not always feasible because of cost and time constraints.

Given the high costs, long timelines, and resource demands of RCTs, do you think they should always be used before scaling a program or advocating for policy change? Why or why not?

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE IMPACT ASSESSMENT DESIGN?

Choosing the appropriate impact assessment design begins with determining how certain you need to be that the intervention itself caused the observed outcomes. Different evaluation designs provide different levels of confidence in establishing causation. For example, if the primary goal is internal learning or program improvement, a less rigorous and less resource-intensive design may be sufficient to identify patterns, trends, or areas for adjustment. However, if the findings will be used to persuade funders, influence policymakers, justify large-scale investment, or support broader adoption of an intervention, stronger evidence of attribution is often required. In these situations, more rigorous designs are necessary to demonstrate that the outcomes observed were caused by the intervention rather than by external factors or coincidence.

Because impact assessment is specifically concerned with attribution, the design selected should reflect both the purpose of the evaluation and the expectations of the intended audience. Audiences that will use the findings to make significant funding, policy, or implementation decisions typically require a higher standard of evidence and greater methodological rigor. In contrast, audiences focused primarily on organizational learning or program refinement may prioritize timely and practical insights over definitive causal proof. As a result, selecting an impact assessment design involves balancing the level of evidence needed with the practical realities of time, cost, capacity, and context.

HOW DO REAL SPSOS EVALUATE THEIR IMPACT?

Evaluation in Action: The Housing First Example

Let's apply these principles to a real-world scenario addressing homelessness in Utah. This example will walk you through how to design an impact assessment from start to finish.

- **Social Issue:** Chronic homelessness among families in Salt Lake City, Utah.
- **Intervention:** Housing First Program, a model that provides permanent housing immediately to families experiencing homelessness without preconditions like sobriety, employment, or treatment compliance, combined with voluntary supportive services.
- **Evaluation Question:** Does the Housing First program increase housing stability and improve economic outcomes for participating families?

HOUSING FIRST'S EVALUATION DESIGN MATRIX SUMMARY

Design Component	Evaluation Plan Details	Rationale
WHO is studied? (The Groups)	**Treatment Group:** 200 families currently enrolled in the Housing First program who have received permanent housing and supportive services **Comparison Group:** 200 families currently on the waitlist who meet the same eligibility criteria but have not yet received housing services due to program capacity limits	The waitlist provides a "counterfactual"—it shows what happens to similar families who don't receive the program. Because both groups applied and were deemed eligible, they're more comparable than if we compared the participants to families who never applied (who might be less motivated or have different needs).
WHEN is data collected? (The Timing)	**Baseline:** At program intake or waitlist enrollment, before any services are provided **Output Tracking:** At move-in date for treatment group to confirm service delivery **Short-term Outcome:** 6 months post-housing placement **Long-term Outcome:** 12 months post-housing to measure sustained stability	We measure what matters to families and policymakers. These indicators align with our program goals (housing stability and economic improvement) and are measurable, specific, and relevant to proving our program works.

Design Component	Evaluation Plan Details	Rationale
WHAT is measured? (The Indicators)	**Primary Outcomes:** Housing stability: % of families in permanent housing, number of days housed Economic status: Monthly household income, employment status **Secondary Outcomes:** Child school attendance and performance, adult health status and healthcare utilization, and family self-sufficiency scores **Outputs:** Number of families housed, amount of rental assistance provided, and number of supportive service contracts	We measure what matters to families and policymakers. These indicators align with our program goals and are measurable, specific, and relevant to proving our program works.
HOW is impact proven? (Attribution)	**Difference-in-Differences Analysis:** We compare the change in housing stability of the treatment group against the change in the comparison group over the same time period. This approach filters out external factors (like improvements in the overall economy or job market) that would affect both groups equally, isolating the program's specific contribution.	Simply comparing final outcomes isn't enough because the groups might have started at different levels. By comparing how much each group changed, we account for baseline differences and external trends, providing stronger evidence that our program caused the improvements.

SUMMARY

Impact assessment matters because social impact work requires more than good intentions. It requires credible evidence that your efforts are truly making a difference. Without understanding whether your intervention is actually causing positive change, it becomes difficult to know whether resources are being used effectively, whether programs should be expanded, or whether strategies need to be revised. Strong impact assessment helps organizations move beyond assumptions and make decisions grounded in evidence rather than perception alone.

This is especially important when decisions affect funding, policy, scaling efforts, and, ultimately, the lives of the individuals and communities being served. By strengthening your ability to determine what is genuinely effective, impact assessment supports more responsible stewardship of resources, improves organizational learning, and increases the likelihood that successful interventions can be adapted and sustained over time.

Understanding evaluation designs such as quasi-experimental and randomized controlled trial methods also equips you to make more informed methodological decisions. No single assessment, the available resources, ethical considerations, and the practical realities of implementation. Selecting the right design strengthens the credibility of your findings and helps ensure that the conclusions drawn are both meaningful and actionable.

Endnotes

1 Schochet, Peter Z. 2013. Designing and Conducting Strong Quasi-Experiments for Education Research. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, U.S. Department of Education.

2 Brown, C. H., et al. 2019. "Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs in Implementation Research." Psychiatry Research volume(issue): page range.

3 Chien, A., et al. (2020). "Protocol for a randomized controlled trial evaluating the impact of the Nurse-Family Partnership's home visiting program in South Carolina on maternal and child health outcomes." Evaluation and Program Planning.


DO GOOD.
BETTER.

CHAPTER 21: ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Understand the importance of personal development and how to foster it.

2. Know how organizations can continually grow, develop, and improve.

3. Understand the importance of SPSOs becoming learning organizations.

INTRODUCTION

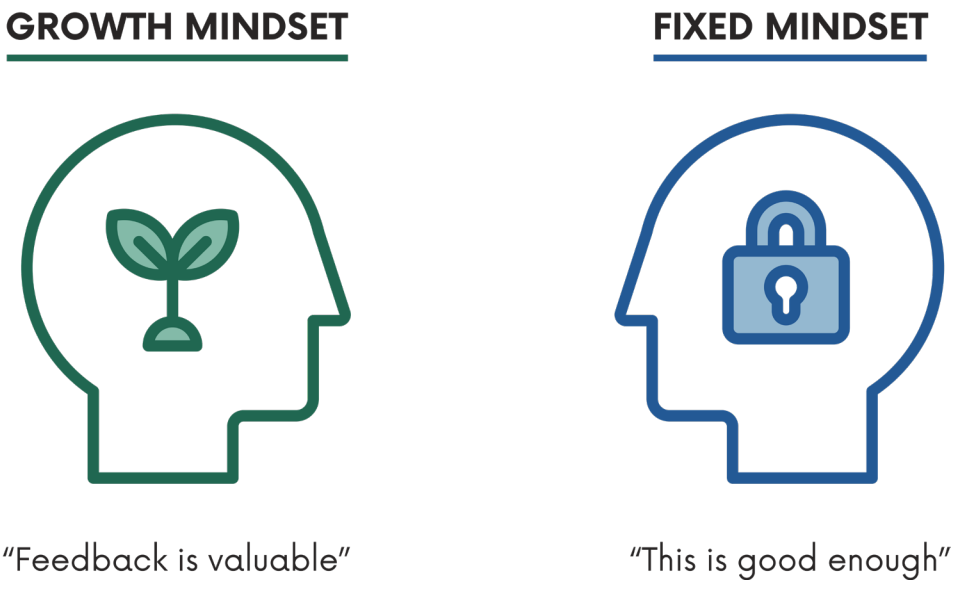
The ability to learn and grow is essential for both individuals and organizations. In today's rapidly evolving world, organizations—especially those focused on social impact—must continuously adapt and improve to remain effective and relevant. Organizational learning means creating a culture and implementing systems that support ongoing improvement and adaptation. This enables the organization to respond to new challenges, leverage emerging opportunities, and achieve its mission more effectively. This chapter explores the importance of personal and organizational development, highlights the characteristics of a learning organization, and applies those principles specifically to organizations dedicated to solving social problems.

WHAT DOES PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT LOOK LIKE IN SOCIAL IMPACT WORK?

Organizational learning begins with individuals who welcome personal development. Once applied on the individual level, the principles of personal development can then be scaled across entire organizations to create lasting change. In social impact work, an individual fostering personal development embraces a growth mindset and finds a balance between the learning zone and performance zone.

Growth vs. Fixed Mindset

Understanding the difference between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset is fundamental for the personal



development and effectiveness of a social impact practitioner. A **growth mindset**, as defined by Carol Dweck, an American psychologist, is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication, hard work, and experiential learning.[1] This mindset fosters a love for learning and builds resilience, which is essential for making progress and overcoming the inevitable challenges in social impact work.

Changemakers with a growth mindset see challenges as opportunities to grow and develop new capabilities rather than as threats to their competence. These changemakers actively seek out and embrace feedback, viewing it as valuable information for improvement rather than criticism. They are inspired by the success of others, seeing others' achievements as proof of what's possible rather than as a threat to their own standing. Most importantly, they understand that effort and persistence are the paths to mastery, not signs of inadequacy.

Conversely, a **fixed mindset** is the belief that abilities and intelligence are static traits that cannot be significantly developed or changed. Changemakers who possess a fixed mindset avoid challenges that might expose their limitations. They are disheartened by their inadequacies but still accept them as their only reality. When faced with a roadblock, a fixed mindset causes a changemaker to decide that they or their efforts have failed, rather than viewing the roadblock as a problem they can solve. When changemakers hold a fixed mindset, they give up easily when faced with obstacles and feel threatened by the success of others. A fixed mindset limits changemakers' potential and prevents them from taking the risks necessary for innovation and growth.

Real-World Example:
Jacqueline Novogratz, founder of Acumen, a nonprofit venture capital fund, exemplifies a growth mindset in social impact work. When early investments failed, she didn't see herself as a failure but instead viewed these experiences as learning opportunities. She sought feedback from entrepreneurs, adapted her approach to patient capital, and continuously refined Acumen's model. Her willingness to learn from mistakes helped build an organization that has invested over $130 million in social enterprises serving low-income communities worldwide.

Is there a moment in your life when you acted with a growth mindset, perhaps embracing a challenge or learning from failure? When did you act with a fixed mindset, avoiding something difficult or giving up quickly? What can you do to develop a growth mindset in your work and personal life?

Learning vs. Performance Zone

The **learning zone** focuses on improvement and development. It involves intentionally taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from them in a relatively safe environment. This zone is crucial for long-term growth because it encourages experimentation, innovation, and the development of new capabilities. In the learning zone, a changemaker might dedicate time to experiment with new strategies, try new approaches to interventions, and solicit feedback from participants. They might pilot small-scale innovations, document what works and what doesn't, and share their findings with colleagues. Throughout their work in the zone, they accept that some activities will fail, but they view these failures as valuable data rather than setbacks. When a changemaker is in the learning zone, they're stretching beyond their current abilities, trying new approaches, and accepting that failure is a natural and valuable part of the learning process.

The **performance zone**, in contrast, is where the emphasis is on executing tasks as well as possible and minimizing errors. This zone is important when high stakes are involved, and the priority is to deliver results efficiently and effectively using already-mastered skills. In the performance zone, a changemaker focuses on delivering polished presentations and showcasing impact with well-rehearsed stories and compelling data. There is a focus on accuracy, professionalism, and using their communication skills to make a strong case for support. In the performance zone, changemakers apply what they know to create value and demonstrate competence, but they're not necessarily developing new capabilities.

Both zones are essential for success as a social impact professional, but they serve different purposes and require different mindsets.

To understand more about learning and performance zones, watch the video:

Eduardo Briceño: How to get better at the things you care about

The key is knowing when to operate in each zone and ensuring sufficient time is spent in the learning zone to continuously develop needed skills and prepare for success in the performance zone.

Real-World Example: Doctors Without Borders exemplifies the importance of both zones and how they work together. A doctor operates in the performance zone when treating patients in crisis situations, where lives depend on executing proven protocols flawlessly. However, the organization also creates dedicated learning zone opportunities for its staff. Through after-action reviews, research partnerships, and innovation labs, staff can reflect on challenges, develop new treatment plans, and improve protocols for future missions, all without risking patient care.

Think about your current work or studies. When are you operating in the learning zone versus the performance zone? Are you spending enough time in the learning zone to develop new capabilities, or are you constantly in performance mode? How might you create more intentional learning zone opportunities for yourself?

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING?

Just as it's important for an individual to continually grow, develop, and improve, organizations need to embrace a similar mindset and create systems that support collective learning.

Organizational learning is the process by which an organization grows and improves together. Nancy M. Dixon describes this form of learning in her Gower-published book, The Organizational Learning Cycle, as "the intentional use of learning processes at the individual, group, and system level to continuously transform the organization in a direction that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders."[2] To do so, the organization applies key aspects of personal development to the organization as a whole. This requires the organization to implement a system that supports continuous

improvement and adaptation across the whole organization, or in other words, a growth mindset.

Organizational learning involves understanding that people and situations change constantly; thus, an organization must be responsive and adaptive to these changes. Continuous improvement ensures that an organization is always moving forward, learning from both successes and failures, and staying committed to growth. This prevents an organization from being stuck in outdated approaches simply because "that's how they've always done it."
The key components of organizational learning include:

- **Gathering Information:** Continuously collecting data and insights relevant to the organization's goals and the populations they serve. This could involve community feedback, participant surveys, outcome measurements, field observations, research on best practices, and environmental scanning to identify emerging trends or challenges. The key is creating multiple channels for information to flow into the organization from diverse sources.

- **Reflecting on Knowledge:** Analyzing and interpreting the gathered information to understand its implications in practice. Reflection helps an organization make sense of the data, identify patterns, understand root causes, and recognize areas for improvement. This isn't just about collecting data—it's about creating space and time for thoughtful analysis and honest discussion about what the information means for strategy and operations.

- **Sharing Insights:** Disseminating knowledge throughout the organization will foster understanding and collective action. Open communication ensures that everyone is working with the same information and can contribute to the organization's learning. This includes both formal knowledge-sharing mechanisms (like reports and presentations) and informal channels (like conversations and collaborative problem-solving sessions).

- **Implementing Changes:** Applying new knowledge and insights to make informed decisions and improvements to an organization's programs, strategies, and operations. This step is about turning learning into action, testing new approaches, and making meaningful improvements based on emerging insights. Without implementation, learning remains theoretical and doesn't create the desired change.

Real-World Example: Partners In Health (PIH) exemplifies organizational learning in action. When treating drug-resistant tuberculosis in Peru, they followed standard protocols, but the gathered data showed poor patient adherence. Rather than blaming patients, they reflected on this feedback and realized that poverty-related barriers—such as an inability to afford transportation to clinics or food to take with medications—were preventing treatment completion. PIH shared these insights across its organization and with the global health community, then implemented a comprehensive approach called "accompaniment" that addressed social barriers alongside medical treatment. This included providing transportation stipends, nutritional support, and community health workers. The result was dramatically improved cure rates. PIH then systematically shared this learning globally, changing how tuberculosis is treated worldwide. This cycle of gathering information, reflecting, sharing, and implementing changes demonstrates true organizational learning.

HOW CAN AN ORGANIZATION BECOME A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

Becoming a learning organization is not something that happens quickly or effortlessly. It requires commitment from leadership, engagement from all staff members, and the creation of supportive systems and structures.

Developing a Culture of Continuous Improvement, Collaboration, and Adaptability

Organizational learning is founded on a culture of continuous improvement with common goals, exemplary leadership, open communication, and celebrated learning. Here are some key ideas to begin cultivating that culture:

- **Establish a clear mission and purpose** that guides all learning activities and aligns everyone's efforts toward common goals. When a team understands the "why" behind the work, they're more motivated to learn and improve their service of that mission.

- **Model leadership** based on curiosity, humility, and an openness to feedback. By prioritizing learning over perfection, intentional leadership can set the tone for the rest of the organization.

- **Encourage collaboration and open communication** throughout

the organization, bringing diverse perspectives together to foster innovation and develop a more nuanced understanding of the challenges being addressed. This creates a psychologically safe environment where people feel comfortable sharing both successes and failures, asking questions, and challenging assumptions without fear of punishment or judgment.

- **Recognize and celebrate learning,** not just results, to reinforce that organizational growth and development are valued. In turn, this creates an environment where everyone feels that their personal growth and progress are also seen and valued.

Real-World Example: IDEO.org, the nonprofit arm of the design firm IDEO, has built a culture of continuous learning through its human-centered design approach.[3] They encourage staff to embrace a "beginner's mind," approaching each project with curiosity rather than assumptions.[4] A key aspect of their design process is to engage in iterative feedback cycles, during which they present ongoing work to peers and customers to solicit constructive critiques and identify opportunities for refinement.[5] They celebrate "productive failures" by sharing stories of projects that didn't work as planned but generated valuable insights.[6] This human-centered methodology has enabled IDEO.org to develop innovative solutions for social challenges across sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and financial services, reaching over 68 million people in its first decade.[7]

Implement Systems for Effective Knowledge Sharing and Data Gathering

Organizational learning relies on gathering, reflecting, and sharing data and research. Here are some tools for implementing systems that facilitate this aspect of organizational learning:

- **Create concrete mechanisms that promote learning** throughout your organization. This involves establishing regular team meetings where people can share insights and challenges, implementing digital platforms for documentation and knowledge management, and fostering informal networks that encourage spontaneous knowledge exchange. Make it easy for people to access information about what's working, what's not, and what others have learned.

- **Build robust systems for gathering feedback** from the

communities you serve, measuring your outcomes and impact, and tracking relevant external trends. Ensure that data collection is purposeful and manageable. The goal is to collect information that informs decisions, not just data for data's sake.

- **Create regular opportunities for reflection** where your team can step back from daily operations to analyze information, identify patterns, and extract meaningful lessons.

- **Apply lessons learned from past experiences** to improve future efforts, documenting what worked, what didn't, and why. Maintain a strong focus on the needs and feedback of those the organization serves, letting their voices and experiences guide learning and adaptation rather than imposing assumptions about what's best for them.[8]

Real-World Example: The nonprofit, Charity: Water, has built impressive systems for organizational learning. They use GPS coordinates and remote monitoring sensors to track every water project they fund, gathering real-time data on functionality. When projects fail, they don't hide these failures; they analyze them systematically, identify root causes (such as poor community engagement or inappropriate technology choices), and share these lessons across their entire network of implementation guides. This systematic approach to knowledge sharing has dramatically improved their project success rates over time.

Encourage Employees to Seek New Knowledge, Experiment with New Approaches, and Strive for Excellence

Organizational learning thrives in an environment where employees are motivated to continuously develop their skills and expand their capabilities. An organization's culture is determined by the employees' collective mindsets and behaviors. Here are some ways to encourage and motivate continuous development in others:

- **Provide opportunities for professional development**, whether through training programs, conferences, mentorship, or stretch assignments that push people beyond their comfort zones.

- **Regularly assess individual growth and improvement**, both personally and within the scope of your organization's mission, creating opportunities for productive feedback and recognition of learning achievements.

- **Hire people who demonstrate growth mindsets,** reward learning behaviors, and create conditions where continuous improvement feels exciting rather than threatening. A learning organization must have employees who genuinely want to learn, who are curious about better ways to achieve its mission, and who see their own development as integral to the organization's success.

- **Lead by example** in your organization. Organizational culture, including learning culture, is greatly affected by the mindsets and actions of its leaders. By modeling learning behaviors themselves, leaders can foster a growth mindset within their organization. [9][10]

Real-World Example: Teach For America invests heavily in developing learning-oriented corps members and staff.[11] They provide intensive 5-7-week training before corps members enter classrooms,[12] create ongoing learning systems, including regular observations with feedback, communities of practice where teachers share strategies, and data systems that help teachers track student progress and adjust approaches.[13] Teach For America describes its organizational culture as one built on continuous learning and reflection, positioning the act of teaching as an ongoing developmental process. In this culture, struggling can be seen as part of the learning process, and seeking help is encouraged rather than stigmatized. This focus on continuous learning has helped participating teachers improve their effectiveness and, ultimately, better serve their students.

By embedding collaborative culture, effective data-collecting systems, and employee improvement into the fabric of an organization, it becomes more responsive to changing needs, more flexible when addressing challenges, and ultimately more successful in achieving its social impact goals.

Are there any organizations you have been a part of that fostered a learning environment? How did they create that culture?

What specific practices, system, or leadership behaviors made learning feel safe and valued?

Conversely, have you been part of organizations that discouraged learning? What made them feel that way?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR SPSOS TO BE LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS?

Organizations that focus on continuous improvement through organizational learning are significantly better positioned to solve social problems. Learning organizations are equipped to adapt and respond to change, scale thoughtfully and effectively, and make difficult decisions.

Adapting and Responding to Change

People and situations change, community needs evolve, and external conditions shift. As a result, organizations that embrace continuous learning are better equipped to respond to new challenges and opportunities as they arise.

a SPSO that embodies the principles of a learning organization keeps itself informed about changing conditions that may affect its area of focus and utilizes that newly gathered information to respond to unforeseen circumstances swiftly and thoughtfully. They are adaptable because they were never stagnant. a SPSO that prioritizes continuous learning maintains its relevance and value by frequently adjusting its services and programs to meet the changing needs of those affected, rather than clinging to outdated approaches.

Real-World Example: Room to Read, a literacy and girls' education nonprofit, demonstrated adaptability when the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools across Asia and Africa. Rather than shutting down operations, they quickly gathered information about how communities were coping,

reflected on their strengths and limitations, and pivoted their approach. Within months, they developed digital literacy programs, radio-based learning, and take-home book packages. They shared these innovations across their country programs, learning from each other about what worked in different contexts. By embracing organizational learning, they continued serving millions of children during an unprecedented disruption.

Scaling Thoughtfully and Effectively

Learning organizations pause and reflect before scaling, rather than rushing to expand a program that appears successful, allowing them to avoid the mistakes that come from scaling prematurely or without adequate understanding. As a result, SPSOs that act as learning organizations can better scale their interventions to new populations or contexts. By systematically gathering information, consistently reflecting, and frequently sharing knowledge, SPSOs can learn why interventions worked, what conditions enabled their success, and what might need to change in new contexts. Learning organizations scale smarter, not just faster, ensuring that expansion improves impact rather than diluting quality or creating unintended harm.

Real-World Example:
VisionSpring, a social enterprise providing affordable eyeglasses to low-income communities, exemplifies learning-oriented scaling. Rather than rapidly expanding after initial success, they systematically tested different distribution models—selling through existing shops, training community health workers, partnering with corporations—and carefully measured which approaches reached the most people sustainably. They gathered data on customer preferences, willingness to pay, and actual usage of glasses. When they discovered that many customers didn't wear the glasses they purchased because of style preferences, VisionSpring reflected on this feedback and expanded their product line. This continuous learning allowed them to scale to 43 countries while maintaining quality and financial sustainability.

Navigating Crossroads and Making Difficult Decisions

All SPSOs encounter crossroads as they strive to address their chosen social problems, including moments when they must make difficult strategic decisions about priorities, partnerships, funding sources, and programmatic

direction. Should the organization expand to a new location or deepen their work in existing communities? Should they accept restricted funding that might compromise their mission? Should they discontinue a beloved program that's no longer showing impact?

A learning organization—one that continually strives to improve, gather honest feedback, and reflect critically on its work—is able to self-reflect honestly and make hard decisions. Rather than relying solely on intuition or tradition, these organizations use data and community feedback to inform difficult choices. The organization with a growth mindset embraces new, improved tactics over familiar approaches. They're willing to acknowledge when something isn't working and pivot accordingly, even when that means admitting mistakes or disappointing stakeholders.

Real-World Example:
PlayPumps International faced a critical crossroads when evidence emerged that their water pumps, which generated water through children playing on merry-go-rounds, weren't working as intended. Communities reported that the pumps required constant play to meet water needs, placing unrealistic burdens on children, and often leading to adults manually operating them. If feedback had been gathered, considered, and addressed early on, this approach might have been pivoted. However, when confronted with this evidence, PlayPumps resisted the results and continued expanding. After substantial criticism, they dramatically scaled back, and many pumps were replaced with conventional hand pumps. This example illustrates what can happen if an organization is reluctant toward honest self-assessments at critical decision points and does not embody a learning organization mentality.

In contrast, when Proximity Designs in Myanmar discovered that some of their agricultural products weren't being used as intended, they quickly gathered more information, reflected on the reasons, redesigned their products with farmer input, and improved their impact, demonstrating how learning organizations navigate crossroads more successfully.

SUMMARY

Organizational learning starts with personal development, the adoption of a growth mindset, and the ability to view challenges as learning opportunities. Once individual changemakers have integrated the principles of personal development into their lives, they can be

applied to the organization as a whole. This leads to an emphasis on continual learning, systematic information gathering, thoughtful reflection, and effective knowledge sharing. These key concepts empower organizations to be adaptive and innovative: critical traits for a SPSO.

Social problems are dynamic and require organizations that are capable of adapting to changing conditions. Effective social impact organizations, therefore, cannot remain static. They must continually learn from their experiences in order to improve their interventions, respond to community needs, and make more informed decisions about growth and implementation.

This capacity to adapt is rooted in organizational learning—an ongoing commitment to growth, reflection, and continuous improvement. Rather than occurring occasionally or only during formal evaluations, organizational learning must be reinforced through everyday practices, leadership behaviors, and organizational systems.

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CHAPTER 22: CONCLUSION

When you are done with this section, you will be able to...

1. Recall the key takeaways from this course, including the Social Impact Cycle and key social impact skills.

2. Develop increased hope in the face of large-scale social issues.

3. Understand the next steps that you can take to Do Good. Better.

INTRODUCTION

This concluding chapter revisits the central ideas explored throughout the course and provides guidance on how you can continue making a meaningful difference in the world. In addition to reviewing key concepts, the chapter offers practical direction for identifying and clarifying the next steps in your personal social impact journey. As the course comes to a close, it's important to pause, reflect on what you've learned, and consider how you might apply these principles in your daily life.

WHAT SHOULD YOU REMEMBER FROM THIS COURSE?

This course has explained the significance and application of a variety of social issues, evidence-based interventions, rigorous evaluation techniques, and much more. All of these materials were shared to help you intentionally and strategically engage in social impact work, regardless of your personal or professional role. The most important, however, is your understanding and use of the Social Impact Cycle.

The Social Impact Cycle

The Social Impact Cycle is a framework created to empower you, as a changemaker, to understand a social issue, design an intervention for it, effectively implement that intervention, and properly evaluate and improve it over time[1] The cycle itself is built around one core principle: **love the one**. Loving the one prioritizes cultivating compassion, pursuing connection, and building solutions around the needs and insights of real people. By centering the individual within the larger social issue, you can create solutions that truly meet their needs, honor their dignity, and can be scaled to benefit larger populations. The four phases of the cycle can, and should, be revisited and repeated regularly to strengthen the research and quality of an intervention.

Love the Problem: Before a social problem can be solved, it must first be understood. The overarching intent of this beginning phase is to establish a foundation upon which a legitimate solution can be built. This includes conducting primary research via interviews, surveys, and engaging directly with affected communities, as well as secondary research to understand what information is already available regarding a social issue. Loving the problem encourages individuals and organizations to take the time to listen and learn from those experiencing the problem and combine those insights with thorough secondary research before attempting to design a solution.

Design the Change: Rather than rushing from problem identification to implementation, organizations must take time to ensure their proposed solution is realistic, evidence-informed, and responsive to the needs of the people it intends to serve. The process

of designing the change includes defining clear outcome goals, applying human-centered design principles, and creating prototypes that allow ideas to be tested before large-scale implementation. Community involvement is essential throughout this stage. By collaborating with customer-partners, changemakers can draw on lived experience to strengthen decision-making, refine priorities, and identify practical considerations that may otherwise be overlooked. During this phase, potential solutions are tested through small-scale, iterative cycles, allowing organizations to evaluate effectiveness early, learn from feedback, and make improvements before committing significant resources to broader implementation.

Implement the Intervention: The implementation phase of the Social Impact Cycle is where small-scale interventions are applied within their intended real-world context. This includes building necessary organizational capacity through staffing and training, developing infrastructure to support program delivery, securing sustainable funding that aligns with your mission and values, and choosing a legal structure that enables you to operate effectively. Once an intervention has been evaluated and proven successful, you can begin considering opportunities to scale your impact through depth, reach, or replication.

Evaluate the Outcomes: Evaluation requires organizations to move beyond anecdotal evidence and embrace data-driven insights to assess whether a social innovation is achieving its intended outcomes effectively. Evaluating outcomes isn't just about proving success; it's about learning what works, what doesn't, and why. This process includes selecting an evaluation design, collecting relevant data, and conducting a thorough analysis of the outputs, outcomes, and impact documented. Although evaluation is represented as the "final phase" of the Social Impact Cycle, measurements, analysis, and adjustments should occur throughout all stages of the cycle whenever appropriate.

Key Concepts for Social Impact

In addition to understanding the framework of the Social Impact Cycle, effectively solving social problems relies on a set of core concepts that can guide your work, regardless of the social impact role you inhabit.

Calling: The social issues you're best equipped to solve are those which you feel personally called to address, where your unique combination of passion, skills, and experiences positions you to make a difference. By drawing upon your personal proximity and affinity, you can identify those issues to which you're most deeply connected and feel drawn to solve. Your calling isn't just about what you're good at. It's about what issue compels you to act.

Caring for Others: To properly love the problem and the one, you must move away from feelings of pity or sympathy and toward feelings of empathy and

compassion. Developing empathy allows you to feel the emotional burdens of those affected by a problem, and compassion fills you with a desire to alleviate that suffering. These emotions should drive your social impact work.

Causal Thinking: As a changemaker, you must be able to identify and understand the cause-and-effect relationships within complex social systems. This critical skill enables you to discern the underlying factors that drive changes in communities, predict the potential effects of different interventions before implementing them, acknowledge contributing factors rather than oversimplifying to a single cause, and describe negative consequences that result from social issues.

Co-Creation: The most impactful and sustainable interventions are developed by collaborating with customer-partners and your organization's broader ecosystem rather than designing solutions in isolation. Co-creation emphasizes human-centered design principles and the adoption of a customer-partner mindset that views those you serve as experts in their own experiences rather than passive recipients of your services. True co-creation means sharing power in the design process, not just soliciting feedback on your predetermined ideas.

Scale: As a changemaker, you need to know how to strategically expand an intervention's reach and deepen its impact to create lasting social change. You can choose between three primary scaling strategies—depth, reach, or replication—based on your organization's goals and capacity, the nature of the problem you're addressing, and the needs of the population you're serving. Effective scaling requires careful planning, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to maintaining quality as you grow.

IS THERE HOPE?

Even with these skills and frameworks, many individuals working to improve social problems find themselves feeling discouraged and overwhelmed. This reaction is understandable and, in some ways, reflects a genuine awareness of the complexity and scale of these challenges. The social impact world is indeed filled with frustrating mistakes, persistent inefficiencies, and well-intentioned efforts that fall short of their goals. Seemingly intractable issues across humanity, like inequality, poverty, climate change, conflict, and injustice, have persisted for generations. This poses an important question: when faced with such overwhelming challenges, is there really hope? Can individual efforts truly make a difference when the problems are so vast?

Yes, there is hope!

Your efforts make much more of a difference than you might think.

It's essential to reflect not only on the challenges we've examined

throughout this course but also on the remarkable progress humanity has made, often through the cumulative efforts of countless individuals who refused to accept the status quo. There is tremendous good in the world, and many aspects of life have dramatically improved over time through sustained social impact work.

Think about these examples: global poverty rates have declined significantly over the past few decades, with billions of people lifted out of extreme poverty. Access to education has expanded dramatically, with more children attending school than ever before in human history. Medical advancements have eradicated diseases and extended life expectancy. In ways that once seemed impossible, just a few generations ago, human rights have increased across many parts of the world. Environmental conservation efforts have restored species from extinction and purified waterways that were once considered dead.

These victories didn't happen by accident. They happened because people like you decided to act, to persist despite setbacks, to love the one, and to keep working toward a better future, even when progress seemed impossibly slow.

As individuals strive, one by one, to contribute to social impact work within their local communities, their efforts can have a meaningful impact. While the problems we face are undeniably great, so is our collective potential for creating positive change. When we work together with purpose and persistence, we can feel confident in our hope for a better future, knowing that each of us has a role to play in creating it.

WHAT WILL YOUR NEXT STEP BE?

Throughout this course, various social impact roles have been discussed, including nonprofit leadership, community organizing, social entrepreneurship, policy advocacy, corporate social responsibility, impact investing, and research. These diverse roles show that there are many pathways to contribute to positive social change, and each offers unique opportunities to make a difference.

Now is the time to consider: What role do you want to play in solving the social problems that matter most to you? Whether you're passionate about environmental justice, education reform, healthcare access, or another cause that calls to you, there are countless ways to engage and create lasting impact.

Your next step doesn't need to be world-changing. In fact, starting small and focused is generally more effective than attempting to solve everything at once. What matters is that you take action, move from learning to doing, and remain committed to the journey even when it gets difficult.

Here are some next steps you might consider:

Pursue further education: Consider taking an advanced class on social impact or a related topic like design thinking, program evaluation, systems thinking, or community organizing. Adding a social impact minor or concentration to your degree can deepen your knowledge and keep you connected to a community of like-minded peers. If your institution doesn't offer these courses, consider exploring additional online educational resources through platforms like Coursera, edX, or Acumen Academy, all of which offer free or low-cost courses taught by leading experts in the field.

Engage in research: If a specific social issue captured your interest during this course, explore it further through academic research, field studies, or community-based participatory research. Consider reaching out to faculty members who research topics related to your interests or seeking out research opportunities with organizations focusing on issues you care about.

Gain hands-on experience: Apply for internships, fellowships, or volunteer positions with social problem-solving organizations working on issues that align with your calling. Whether you're working directly in communities on the front lines of service delivery or behind the scenes in policy advocacy, fundraising, communications, or program evaluation, you'll gain invaluable skills and insights that no classroom can fully provide. Don't underestimate the value of volunteering. Many successful social impact careers begin with a few hours a week spent serving in a local organization.

Start an initiative: If you've identified a gap in your community or developed an innovative idea for addressing a social problem, consider launching a small initiative. You don't need to register a nonprofit or raise millions of dollars—you can start informally, test your ideas, learn from failures, and iterate based on feedback. Some of the most effective social innovations began as small experiments by passionate individuals who saw a need and acted.

Connect with others in the field: Seek out and conduct informational interviews with professionals who are already doing the work you aspire to do. Learn from their experiences, ask about their career path and the challenges they've faced, build your professional network, and seek mentorship from those whose work inspires you. Most people in the social impact field are generous with their time and wisdom when approached with genuine curiosity and respect.

Stay curious and involved: Continue learning about the issues that resonate with you by reading books and articles, listening to podcasts, attending lectures and conferences, and following organizations and thought leaders working on these problems. Always look for opportunities to act, whether on a local or global scale, and remain open to unexpected paths that may

emerge. Social impact work is dynamic and ever-evolving, and your willingness to keep learning and adapting will serve you well.

Advocate and use your voice: Share what you've learned with others, whether through conversations with friends and family, writing and social media, or formal advocacy efforts. Help others understand the social issues you care about, challenge misconceptions, and inspire action. Your voice matters and raising awareness is a form of impact.

DO GOOD. BETTER.

Now that you've laid the groundwork for understanding social impact, it's time to pursue your next steps. Social impact work is never easy, and you'll encounter setbacks and moments when you question whether your efforts matter. However, the possibilities of positive change are endless when we act with clear purpose, informed strategy, and unwavering persistence.

Remember this fundamental principle: each individual has the capacity to contribute to a brighter future, and that includes you. You are not expected to solve everything single-handedly. Instead, your efforts begin by producing small, purposeful changes in your corner of the world, loving the one person in front of you, and applying your unique gifts and perspective to the problems that move you most deeply.

Together with others who share your commitment to social impact work, you can continue striving to Do Good. Better. Utilize the knowledge and skills you've gained from this guidebook and continue on in your efforts, now with increased understanding, greater compassion, and a deeper commitment to making a difference.

Thank you for being part of this learning experience, for engaging with difficult topics, and for your willingness to envision and work toward a better world. Now, go out and create the change you wish to see. Start small, stay curious, love the one, and never underestimate the ripple effects your actions can create. The world needs people like you: people who care enough to learn, are brave enough to act, and are persistent enough to keep going even when change comes slowly.

REFLECTION AND COMMITMENT

Take a moment to write down your next concrete step. This doesn't include vague intentions like "make a difference" or "help people," but rather a specific action you'll take in the next 30 days. This might look like, "research three organizations working on education equity in my city," "schedule two informational interviews with people working in public health," "volunteer four hours this month at the local food bank," or "enroll in an advanced course on program evaluation for spring semester."

Write down your next move here:

Now, share this commitment with someone who will hold you accountable, such as a classmate, mentor, friend, or family member. Making your commitment public increases the likelihood you'll follow through.

Endnotes

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Who will you share this with? When will you complete this action by?

APPENDIX

Additional Resources

Extra Note Pages

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Fast Company Article
Ditch the Digital Notes: Handwriting is Way Better for Memorization and Speed

If you rely on digital notetaking, this article may change how you study. It explores how writing by hand can boost memory, focus, and understanding—all backed by science. It's a quick read that could improve how you learn and retain information.

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL IMPACT ROLES

Pearl Fu

Pearl Fu is an exemplary community organizer and active citizen. Read her Wikipedia article to learn how an everyday citizen uncovered and fostered a greater celebration of international diversity in her community.

Finding Your Community – James and Deborah Fallows

James and Deborah Fallows are American journalists and co-authors of Our-Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America. This forum address was delivered at Brigham Young University by the Fellows in February of 2022. In it they emphasize the strength of local community impact and highlight various impact rolls community members can fill to foster positive local change.

Our Towns: A Journey into the Heart of America – James and Deborah Fallows

This collection of articles titled "Our Towns" in The Atlantic details more of James and Deborah Fallows' work. Each article highlights a different community program or individual who has taken on a social impact role in communities all over the United States. The articles present a myriad of ways individuals can reduce suffering and increase flourishing in their own communities. Please note that accessing the entirety of each article may require a subscription to The Atlantic. Check if your institution offers a free subscription.

CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL IMPACT TERMS

OECD Social Impact Measurement

This official OECD definitions in the introduction explain impact as the positive or negative long-term effects of an intervention

and clarifies how outputs, outcomes, and impact connect in a results chain. It also includes evaluation as part of the measurement process.

CHAPTER 4: THE SOCIAL IMPACT CYCLE

The Social Impact Cycle

This resource from the Ballard Center introduces the Social Impact Cycle, a practical framework for creating lasting positive change. It outlines four overlapping phases—Love the Problem, Design the Change, Implement the Intervention, and Evaluate the Outcomes—and explains the purpose of each step.

Fall in Love with the Problem, Not the Solution by Uri Levine

This inspiring book comes from the entrepreneur Uri Levine—the person who coined the phrase "fall in love with the problem, not the solution." It encourages changemakers to really live with a problem before leaping to a solution. The author explains that when you spend time understanding the people behind the problems—their struggles, routines, and realities—you design solutions that truly fit their lives.

Partners In Health: Real Example of "Love the Problem" in Practice

Partners In Health (PIH) is a nonprofit that transformed global healthcare by first immersing itself in communities' realities. Dr. Paul Farmer didn't just visit communities—he lived with people, listened to them, and learned from them. That deep understanding reshaped how health systems were designed and delivered.

Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good by Ann Mei Chang

This book applies lean startup principles to the world of social impact, showing changemakers how to test ideas quickly, learn from real-world feedback, and pivot toward solutions that create far greater good. Chang emphasizes starting small, running rapid experiments, and measuring what truly matters—not just outputs, but meaningful outcomes for the people served. Through practical examples and tools, this book helps students see how disciplined innovation, humility, and constant learning can turn good intentions into scalable, evidence-based impact.

CHAPTER 6: COMPASSION

Finding the Road to Character – David Brooks

This forum address was given at Brigham Young University by David Brooks, an op-ed columnist for the New York Times. He offers insight into the importance of seeing each other deeply and the role of compassion in building strong communities.

Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion — Paul Bloom

Yale psychologist Paul Bloom challenges common assumptions about empathy, arguing that feeling others' emotions isn't always the best guide for moral decision-making. He suggests that empathy can be biased, limited in scope, and sometimes counterproductive when trying to create just or effective policies and advocates for rational compassion—using reason to achieve fairer outcomes.

If you're interested in exploring these ideas further, Bloom develops this argument in much greater depth in his book Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion, where he examines how empathy can mislead moral judgment and makes a sustained case for reasoned compassion as a more effective foundation for ethical decision-making and social impact work.

Understanding Empathy – Simon Sinek

In this video, leadership expert Simon Sinek explores how empathy functions in human relationships and organizational settings. Sinek explains that empathy goes beyond efficiency or productivity; it's about seeing the person behind the role and valuing their experience. By practicing empathy, leaders and teams build trust, better communication, and stronger cooperation. This resource reinforces why empathy matters in social impact work—not just for personal connection, but for effective collaboration and problem-solving.

Types of Empathy – SkillsYouNeed

This online resource explains empathy as both an emotional and cognitive skill, highlighting its different forms: understanding another's perspective, feeling what someone else feels, and taking compassionate action to help. This article connects empathy to emotional intelligence and interpersonal effectiveness, making it a valuable reference for students exploring how empathy supports social impact work and human-centered design.

CHAPTER 7: IDENTIFYING THE ONE

The Superwoman Project – Jessica J. Williams

An empowering online hub run by Jessica J. Williams dedicated to helping women step into leadership and leadership-minded roles. Through articles, podcasts, courses, and global events, it encourages confidence, negotiation skills, and community connection. Visiting the site promises inspiration, actionable strategies, and uplifting stories that support women in embracing and owning their unique power.

The Power of Proximity – Bryan Stevenson

In this moving talk, social justice leader Bryan Stevenson explains how proximity to human suffering changes hearts. He shares powerful stories showing that when we get physically and emotionally near others, especially those who are hurting or marginalized, we begin to see their humanity and act with compassion. The message is inspiring, eye-opening, and makes you rethink what it truly means to care.

CHAPTER 8: SCOPING THE ISSUE

Root Cause Analysis Explained: Definition, Examples, and Methods

This Tableau publication provides comprehensive guidance and systematic action steps for conducting root cause analysis within organizational contexts. The resource offers detailed methodologies for identifying critical contributing factors and effectively scoping problem parameters during the analytical process.

CHAPTER 9: SECONDARY RESEARCH

Ballard Brief

The Ballard Brief is a free, online research library and publication series from the Ballard Center for Social Impact at BYU Marriott. It features student-authored research briefs that synthesize existing knowledge on critical social issues, helping leaders, entrepreneurs, and volunteers understand complex problems and inform effective solutions. Each brief provides context, trends, and consequences to support nonprofit development, corporate social responsibility, and impactful volunteer engagement.

Journal of Nonprofit Innovation

The Journal of Nonprofit Innovation (JoNI) is an international, open-access, peer-reviewed journal that brings together academics and practitioners to connect research with nonprofit practice and highlight innovative solutions to community and global challenges.

CHAPTER 10: MONOLITHIC THINKING

Wicked Problems – Stanford Social Innovation Review

This article from Stanford Social Innovation Review explains what wicked problems are: complex, evolving challenges with no clear endpoint or universal solution. It highlights how attempts to solve one aspect of a wicked problem can create new challenges—like climate change, systemic poverty, and other entrenched issues.

How Can We Use Systems Thinking to Find a Solution to the Problem of Poverty in Panama? – Cornell Policy Review

Cornell Policy Review shows how systems thinking turns the puzzle of poverty into an interconnected web of causes and effects—instead of treating it as one immovable block. By understanding feedback loops and relationships between education, employment, health, and policy, learners see how to break "big problems" into real, actionable parts.

CHAPTER 11: ECOSYSTEM MAPPING

Cultivate Your Ecosystem – Stanford Social Innovation Review

This Stanford Social Innovation Review article provides comprehensive analysis of ecosystem mapping methodologies and systematic approaches for identifying key stakeholders within complex organizational environments. The publication offers detailed frameworks for understanding and cultivating strategic relationships across multi-sector partnerships.

Collective Impact – Stanford Social Innovation Review

This Stanford Social Innovation Review publication examines the strategic advantages of collaborative approaches over individual organizational efforts,

providing theoretical foundations that complement ecosystem mapping methodologies. The article introduces collective impact organizations as specialized entities designed to facilitate inter-organizational collaboration and coordinate multi-sector partnerships.

CHAPTER 12: CUSTOMER-PARTNER ORIENTATION

Do Good. Better. Conference 2025 Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III Keynote Address Highlights

The work of Rev. Dr. Heber Brown and the Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN) is an incredible example of a customer-partner relationship. The BCFSN has utilized the existing resources within the African American community to create an expansive, independent, and dignified food security network. By empowering individuals and working with them as partners, the BCFSN has made a huge positive impact within the African American Community. The following video is the highlights from Rev. Dr. Brown's keynote address at the Ballard Center for Social Impact at BYU Marriott's 2025 Do Good. Better. Conference where he was honored as the 2025 social innovator of the year.

Learn more about the Black Church Food Security Network at its website here.

CHAPTER 13: INTERVENTIONS

Social Innovation: A Retrospective Perspective – PMC Article

This peer-reviewed article examines how social innovation has evolved and highlights that it is fundamentally about interventions that aim for systemic social improvement. It explains that social innovation isn't just one action but a process that integrates products, programs, and often policy change to address deep societal challenges.

CHAPTER 14: HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Impacting Through Human Centered Design – Evan Fried

In this TEDx talk, Evan Fried shares the story and process behind his STEM education project, which demonstrates the principles of human-centered design by engaging directly with the classroom environment,

interviewing users, and co-creating a magnetic levitation train exhibit. His iterative, empathy-driven approach illustrates the value of designing "with, not for" a community and highlights co-creation, prototyping, and responsive iteration. This example shows how human-centered design methods can be applied beyond product design to education, community programs, and other social initiatives.

CHAPTER 15: THEORY OF CHANGE

Theory of Change: UNDAF Companion Guidance

The United Nations Development Program has established comprehensive guidelines for developing and implementing theories of change within organizational contexts. This framework exemplifies how leading international organizations systematically integrate theory of change methodologies into their program design and evaluation processes.

CHAPTER 16: FUNDING AND LEGAL STRUCTURES

Which Legal Structure Is Right for My Social Enterprise?

Imagine an organization that both makes money and makes the world better—this guide shows how hybrid legal structures bring that idea to life. It explains how combining nonprofit and for-profit entities can help social ventures have both stable revenue and mission focus. The clear explanations help you see how legal choices influence funding, flexibility, and impact.

Benefit Corp & L3C Adoption: A Survey – Stanford Social Innovation Review

This real research article from Stanford Social Innovation Review shows that legal structures aren't just paperwork—they can be game-changers for doing good. It tells the story of how new hybrid forms like benefit corporations and L3Cs were created because passionate changemakers didn't fit into the old boxes of "nonprofit" or "for-profit."

Chapter 19: Donative nonprofit organizations – Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism and Reciprocity

This chapter from the Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism and Reciprocity analyzes how donation-based nonprofits work and why people give to them instead of giving directly

to individuals. It looks at how these organizations are structured, how they raise and use money, and what kinds of public goods they provide, using economic models to explain their behavior. This resource helps explain how legal rules (like the nondistribution constraint), donor behavior, and organizational choices interact, and why some nonprofits' funding models support mission-driven decisions while others create tensions or tradeoffs.

CHAPTER 17: SCALING SOCIAL IMPACT

Scaling Social Impact – Case at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business

This resource from Duke's Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship helps students understand what it really means to "scale" an impact idea. Instead of treating scale as just "getting bigger," it breaks down different pathways—replication, partnerships, policy influence, open-sourcing models—and explores when each makes sense. Through clear frameworks and real-world examples, it helps learners think strategically about how a promising intervention can reach more people or change underlying systems without losing its core mission.

Scaling Social Enterprises – Babson College Working Paper (PDF)

This paper from Babson College examines how successful social enterprises expand their impact over time. It highlights patterns in leadership, partnerships, funding, and operations that support sustainable growth, as well as the tradeoffs organizations face while scaling. Students can use this resource to compare growth strategies, reflect on what "success" means for their own ideas, and see how scaling involves both values and design choices, not just numbers.

Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Be Accelerated – Geoff Mulgan (PDF)

This foundational report from Geoff Mulgan lays out what social innovation means in practice and why it is essential for tackling today's most pressing social challenges. It traces how new ideas, models, and institutions emerge, explains the conditions that help them spread, and offers practical guidance on how governments, nonprofits, businesses, and funders can intentionally accelerate social innovation instead of leaving it to chance. Placed in the Scaling Social Impact chapter, this resource helps students see "scaling" not just as getting bigger but as deliberately

designing environments, partnerships, and strategies that allow promising innovations to diffuse, deepen, and reshape systems over time.

CHAPTER 18: OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES, AND IMPACT

Impact Measurement – Council Fire

This page defines impact measurement as the process of going beyond counting activities (outputs) to tracking real change (outcomes) and determining what portion of that change actually happened because of the intervention (impact). It explains why measuring impact matters for nonprofits and social programs.

CHAPTER 19: OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

New Frontiers for Evaluation in a Fast-Changing World – IDEAS Global

This chapter introduces students to modern approaches to evaluation that move beyond rigid checklists and simple before-and-after comparisons. It explains why today's complex problems—like climate change, inequality, or fragile governance—often require adaptive, real-time learning rather than one-off assessments. The resource offers examples of innovative evaluation designs and encourages readers to see evaluation not as a bureaucratic requirement, but as a powerful tool for learning, course-correction, and amplifying impact over time.

CHAPTER 21: ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization by Peter Senge

This foundational book introduces the idea of the "learning organization" and explains five key disciplines—systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning. Senge uses stories and practical examples to show how organizations can continually adapt, experiment, and improve instead of getting stuck in old patterns. It presents organizational learning as an everyday practice of questioning assumptions, noticing patterns, and working together to create meaningful, long-term change.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook by Peter Senge

This companion to The Fifth Discipline turns big ideas into concrete tools,

exercises, and real-world cases that readers can apply in their own teams and organizations. It includes step-by-step activities for building shared vision, surfacing mental models, and practicing systems thinking in meetings, projects, and strategy work. The field book functions as a practical "how-to" guide for making organizational learning tangible, offering simple practices that can be used in projects, workshops, and day-to-day management.

Leadership and the New Science by Margaret J. Wheatley

Wheatley draws on ideas from modern science—such as chaos theory, quantum physics, and self-organizing systems—to rethink how leadership and organizations actually function. Instead of emphasizing rigid hierarchy and control, she highlights relationships, networks, and emergence as the real drivers of learning and change. The book invites readers to see organizations as living systems, clarifying why openness, curiosity, and ongoing learning matter more than fixed plans in complex environments.

Organizational Learning: Creating, Retaining, and Transferring Knowledge by Linda Argote

Argote offers a clear, research-based overview of how organizations generate knowledge, store it, and share it over time. She examines the roles of people, routines, tools, and structures in either supporting or blocking learning, using examples from multiple sectors to illustrate key concepts. This work explains why some lessons fade while others stick and provides a strong conceptual foundation for designing organizations that remember, adapt, and improve their performance and impact.

CHAPTER 22: CONCLUSION

Idealist.org

Idealist.org serves as a comprehensive employment platform specifically focused on social impact organizations and nonprofit career opportunities. This resource provides practitioners with access to current job postings across diverse impact-focused sectors and organizational contexts.

Stanford Social Innovation Review

The Stanford Social Innovation Review functions as a premier publication for contemporary research and thought leadership in the social impact field. This platform offers ongoing access to cutting-edge scholarship, case studies, and strategic frameworks for continued professional development.

NOTES

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