

SOCIAL INNOVATION ON THE GROUND

ACCESSIBLE and EVIDENCE-BASED TOOLS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATORS

Executive Summary

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FOR
SOCIAL INNOVATORS*

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Introduction

In July 2015, Bow Valley College received a grant from the Community and College Social Innovation Fund, an initiative that links colleges with community partners to foster social innovation research and practice. The grant funded an applied research and knowledge mobilization initiative with the goal of providing practical, evidence-based support to those engaged in social innovation in Canada.

Project objectives include:

- Developing an evidence-based set of criteria for assessing social innovation, and identifying factors that promote and inhibit its success;
- Developing strategies and tools for planning and evaluating social innovation;
- Mobilizing knowledge in social innovation planning and evaluation that will enhance the ability of communities and colleges to successfully address local needs; and
- Promoting ongoing knowledge sharing among colleges involved in social innovation, and between colleges and the communities they serve.

This report summarizes the components of this project in relation to the above objectives. Meeting the first objective required the development and implementation of a multi-strategy research program based on questions that would yield the sought evidence. Research included a comprehensive literature search and review, a national survey, focus groups, and in depth case studies of three social innovation sites. A developmental approach taken allowed the researchers to use the findings from each method to inform the development of protocols and questions for subsequent methods. In turn, findings from this research informed the development of strategies and tools for planning and evaluating social innovation, as per the second objective. The third objective, knowledge mobilization, consisted of a number of strategies to ensure that both the knowledge gleaned and the strategies and tools created from the study will be utilized effectively across Canada. The final objective, regarding sharing of social innovation knowledge among colleges, has been implemented at different periods of the project and continues as of the completion of this report.

The Research Study

Research strategies for this study are outlined in Table 1. The first two strategies were aimed at refining knowledge of social innovation as understood by Canadian stakeholders. Guided by observations from the social innovation literature, we conducted a national survey and a series of focus groups using the nominal group technique (NGT). We then expanded on this knowledge by studying real life examples of social innovation, using a case study approach.

Table 1 summarizes the research strategies and participation related to the research strategies.

Table 1. Research Strategies

Research Strategy	Participation
Stakeholder Survey	104 responses
Nominal Group Technique (NGT)	20 participants across 3 NGT sessions
Case Studies	3 social innovation initiatives; 40 interview participants; 55 project documents

Stakeholder Survey

Researchers created a bilingual online survey focused on three basic questions: What are the key characteristics of social innovation; What are the factors that facilitate social innovation; and What are the barriers to social innovation?

Participant recruitment entailed a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling, to ensure that the survey reached participants with a range of roles in social innovation projects, including planners, directors, funders, advisors, and frontline staff. Findings from the survey are summarized below.

What are the key characteristics of social innovation?

Across survey respondents, there was greatest agreement that it is essential that social innovation “empowers individuals, communities, or society” ($M = 4.63$ on a 5-point scale). There was also broad agreement that social innovation “involves engaging the community” ($M = 4.41$) and “addresses societal-level issues” ($M = 4.20$). Most respondents agreed it was essential that social innovation results in “improvement to people’s quality of life” ($M = 4.36$) and “improvement at the community level” ($M = 4.19$).

Characteristics with the least agreement are that social innovation “involves a new idea or strategy” ($M = 3.33$), “is applied to a multiple settings or contexts” ($M = 3.19$), and “is integrated into higher levels of an organization or system” ($M = 3.50$). Similarly, we found comparatively low agreement that social innovation results in “economic growth” ($M = 2.78$) and “changes to policy or legislation” ($M = 3.21$).

What are the facilitators of social innovation?

Facilitating factors of greatest importance, according to survey respondents, were “trust between stakeholders” ($M = 4.70$), “a clear, shared vision among partners” ($M = 4.46$), and “visionary leadership” ($M = 4.31$). Importance was also placed on resources for “implementing the innovation” in terms of both finances ($M = 4.46$) and staff and expertise ($M = 4.37$).

Facilitators with lowest agreement were “connection(s) between the innovation and other initiatives” ($M = 3.65$), “social networks between players in stakeholder organizations” ($M = 3.73$), and “persuasive leadership” ($M = 3.82$). There was least agreement on the importance of resources for “applying the innovation to a new setting or context” in terms of both finances ($M = 3.93$) and staff and expertise ($M = 3.51$).

What are the barriers to social innovation?

The survey found that barriers of greatest significance were “resistant organizational culture” ($M = 4.41$), “resistance to change among key players” ($M = 4.38$), and a lack of “communication between partners” ($M = 4.35$). Again, there was high agreement around resources for “implementing the innovation”, with lack of financial resources ($M = 4.29$) and staff and expertise ($M = 4.28$) rated as the most significant resource barriers.

There was least agreement on the significance of “insufficient information about the future impacts of the innovation” as a barrier ($M = 3.46$), followed by absence of a “plan for evaluating the innovation” ($M = 3.70$). As with the facilitators, there was less agreement around resources for “applying the innovation to a new setting or context”, with lack of financial resources ($M = 3.52$) and staff and expertise ($M = 3.37$) scoring as the least significant resource barriers.

Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique (NGT) is a focus group strategy that provides a structured process for eliciting input and consensus from varied stakeholders. For this study, a facilitator introduced the topic and provided a working definition of social innovation to establish a shared understanding. This was followed by idea generation, where participants wrote responses to questions concerning the characteristics, barriers to, and facilitators of social innovation. Ideas were then grouped by participants into clusters based on similarity and ranked by importance.

As with the survey, a combination of purposeful and snowballing sampling was used to recruit 20 participants to take part in three, three-hour NGT sessions. Participants were recruited from organizations in Alberta—including employees of Bow Valley College. Findings from the NGTs are summarized.

What are the characteristics of social innovation?

Across NGT sessions, participant-generated ideas clustered mainly around the theme of outcomes—specifically, that social innovation is characterized by its aim to benefit people and society. Participants also indicated that social innovation must be community-centred, flexible, collaborative, and be driven by principles of equality and challenging existing power relations.

What are the facilitators of social innovation?

Start-up and ongoing resources (predominantly funding) was voted as the most important facilitator of social innovation between the three NGTs. Establishing need for the innovation was the second theme, including ideas related to case-making and the occurrence of a “crisis”, “pain point”, or “catalyst”. The themes of supportive organizational culture, leadership qualities, and community involvement were also prominent among participant ideas.

What are the barriers to social innovation?

The most prominent theme among barriers to social innovation relates to incongruences between the qualities of social innovation and those of modern organizational structures. This theme consists of ideas around top-down approaches to decision-making, bureaucracy, and organizational complacency. Lack of funding was the second most prevalent barrier, followed by insufficient capacity to realize objectives, aversion to risk, and prevailing attitudes that stifle innovation (such as prejudice and an over-emphasis on one’s own cultural perspective).

Case Studies

The final research strategy applied the general notions of social innovation gleaned from the survey and NGTs to case studies of three initiatives. Our goal was to select sites that were distinct in terms of scope, size, and objectives. Two social innovations were chosen from Alberta (home of the research team) and one from Ontario:

Site 1

A youth wellness initiative in rural Alberta, funded by the provincial government, with the purpose of providing mental health support to school-aged children and families.

Site 2

A service integration initiative in a large Alberta city, funded through non-profit organizations and a private donor. It intends to reduce barriers for adults facing issues affecting socioeconomic stability, such as employment, housing, and mental health.

Site 3

A suite of over projects with the objective of using technology to support the well-being of older adults. The initiative was based in an Ontario metropolitan area, led by a college research centre.

From the earlier research methods, it was evident that factors facilitating and factors posing barriers to social innovation were often mirror images of one another. This was confirmed in the case studies. Participant perspectives reveal a multi-layered view of social innovation, with characteristics outlined below.

Collaboration

The importance of effective communication and relationship building was stressed in a majority of interviews. Facilitating features were that communication be both regular and ongoing—where this was not achieved, the initiative faced barriers as a result. Face-to-face meetings where staff and leaders could share insights and feel heard were found to strengthen team connections; four participants felt their practice improved as a result of this communication.

Service Integration

Two of the initiatives involved integrating services of different organizations to serve a common population. Integration was characterized by in-depth planning and monitoring by leaders and the implementation of new systems and strategies to share information. Interestingly, numerous participants reported that a positive (though unexpected) outcome of service integration involved disclosure and examination of partners' own operations:

The collaboration has made us put a microscope to our own services. And make sure that we are as good as we possibly can be. It is like when guests come over to your house and you make sure your house is clean. That is essentially what [this initiative] is. [...] So, it's kind of cool what happened with these challenges. -Site 2

Partner Fit

In general, greater compatibility between a partner and the social innovation was seen as a facilitator, while lack of compatibility—whether perceived or due to structural differences between partners—was a barrier. Partner-project fit was reported to be something that staff and leaders could actively influence, by positioning their initiative as beneficial to potential partners.

Buy-in

Community buy-in was strongly associated with visibility of both the initiative and its staff.

Near the end [of the project] it wasn't so much of a cry to all of a sudden get people connected with existing supports. They had always been doing that and I think that was from coming and sitting at the table with the community partners that they were not working in a silo. They were working as a partner within the community. -Site 1

Frontline staff associated their level of commitment to a social innovation with their belief in its overall vision or goal. Stress and workload were identified as barriers to buy-in among staff.

Expectation Setting

When you are looking at social innovation, the whole idea behind it is, 'you can do it'. Not, 'no, this won't work'. And we didn't spend a lot of time talking about the no's.

-Site 2

The notion of shared understandings between staff, leaders, and partners arose throughout the case studies. Lack of shared understanding was reported to lead to false assumptions and communication breakdowns, creating barriers to implementation. At each site, agreement was facilitated by the presence of a designated individual, such as a leader or an external party, responsible for guiding discussion.

Adaptation of Work

Partner hesitation or resistance to change slowed the progress of all three initiatives. Barriers to change for frontline staff included stress and duplication of work brought about by the social innovation.

Flexibility in project design was a facilitator. Freedom to make changes to an initiative during implementation allowed partner and staff concerns to be addressed as they emerged.

Funding

Leaders spoke most frequently about funding. Alignment between the social innovation and broader societal and funder trends was reported to facilitate project sustainability. Participants also focused on conditions of funding as enabling (e.g., paying for dedicated space and staff) or restrictive (e.g., adherence to strict timelines, stipulations on hiring):

If it were easy to have a faculty member get a course release or get involved in a project I think we would have had many more people. But the problem is ... you would have to plan it out 2 or 3 months in advance and when you are working with industry partners, their needs change so quickly that it was sometimes very difficult. -Site3

Uncertainty around ongoing funding was a prominent finding for one site, reported to have resulted in considerable staff turnover and the leader's attention being diverted from project implementation.

Leadership

Participants' observations of project leadership were nearly all positive. Qualities of effective leadership included demonstrated passion, enthusiasm, and dedication to the initiative.

Opportunity for capacity building was a key facilitator of staff and partner commitment. Leaders encouraged capacity building by delivering training to staff and modeling personal qualities and collaborative behaviours.

External Realities

Factors beyond the influence of the three initiatives were most often referred to as impeding social innovation. Examples include changes within partner organizations (e.g., high-level turnover, restructuring) and sectoral barriers such as misalignment between school and business timelines. A successful mitigating strategy was open communication among partners with respect to organizational changes and barriers.

Evaluation

One site undertook its own program evaluation, enabled by budget flexibility to hire an external evaluator. There were no indications that evaluations were conducted for the other sites. All sites submitted project reports to funders. Working relationships with funders were generally reported to be positive; however, some expressed disappointment with a lack of feedback on reports.

Conclusions

At the onset of this study, we set out to learn about the perspectives of those “on the ground”—that is to say, in various roles in social innovation initiatives. The distinction between what is written by scholars and the perceptions of those directly involved in planning and implementation is one of the key contributions of this study. When we see how important, for example, it is for frontline staff to receive ongoing communication from those in other areas of the hierarchy—while having ability to provide input and feedback—we are reminded that the most innovative projects rely on people who feel good about their roles and work to make a project successful.

Two key, related conclusions stick out, seen repeatedly across data collection methods and from participants and stakeholders in a variety of roles: the crucial importance of early planning and of recognizing the perspective of frontline staff.

Importance of early planning

It seems quite evident, from frontline participants on up to senior leadership, that much of what was most important to the success of a social innovation initiative was especially important at the earliest stages of the project. Similarly, most key barriers were often triggered or can otherwise be traced to early planning and project development. This is especially true for factors that were within control of social innovation staff and leaders (as opposed to environmental factors or those related to external funding).

This is not to suggest that projects past the planning stage are destined to success or hardship. Participants from case study Site 1, for example, acknowledged early difficulties stemming from role confusion between key players, and acted successfully to remedy this—to the ultimate benefit of the clients and community all parties were striving to serve. Ongoing planning and development is a feature of social innovation. It is never too late to mitigate a barrier or leverage a facilitating factor, provided the project is flexible enough to bend when and where needed.

Importance of the frontline experience and perspective

We must also conclude—evidenced both by a dearth of data in the initial phase of research and the volume of data from the case studies—that understanding the perspectives of frontline staff is crucial to understanding social innovation. Through our survey, we found that frontline staff were a difficult population to reach. This may be attributable partly to distribution networks not connecting the survey to staff, and a prohibitive workload of client-facing staff. In any case, frontline staff are largely silent figures in the social innovation literature, which is often written by and for academics, policy makers, and senior leadership.

Frontline staff are critical group to understand, as case studies demonstrate that members of this group often hold views that conflict with those of their managers and senior leadership. Best practices for planning social innovation can be undone when these strategies are not effectively and consistently communicated among all key personnel—or when any one group is not sufficiently involved in planning, including feedback for ongoing project development.

We therefore wanted our project to produce tools for frontline staff and new or novice social innovators. While some of the existing resources for social innovation are useful to staff, there are few that take this group as their target audience.

Recommendations

While many findings of this study can be offered as recommendations, to do so risks repeating the obvious. However, strategies for mitigating barriers that emerged through our research could contribute to greater success in innovation. These strategies include, but are not limited to:

Collaboration and Communication

When planning social innovation projects, it is highly recommended to structure time, place, and methods for early and ongoing communication. Further, we recommend that sessions be coordinated featuring a wide array of stakeholders for the relevant social issue(s). Where possible, sessions must be facilitated by an impartial actor, responsible for guiding the group through openly discussion to agreement on fundamental elements of the social innovation, such as the problem identification, goals, objectives, and roles. Ideally, such sessions would continue at regular intervals throughout the social innovation to ensure shared understandings and equality of input.

Meaningful Involvement of Frontline Staff

It is essential that open lines of communication occur not just between organizations, but within them. To this end, it is recommended that social innovations use multiple strategies for communication and feedback that take into account the perspectives, experiences, and needs of those who implement social innovations. Open communication encourages consistency of messaging and intent between leadership and staff, allowing all parties to be heard. The importance of ensuring that communication is not just top-down, but also bottom-up and lateral, cannot be overstated.

Service Integration and Partner Fit

Many social innovations require organizations to partner in ways where services and roles overlap or integrate to reach a common goal. Making such partnerships work requires ensuring that each organization has both the will and the ability to work jointly. Often technical details, such as hours of operation or parameters of job descriptions, can impede effective integration. Therefore, before “signing on” as partners, it is highly recommended that parties take a microscopic look at how the partnership will work, iron out details, and develop clear contracts that outline responsibilities. Next, it is essential to communicate these to every person and department involved in the partnership.

Adaptation of Work

When good ideas for innovation result in more work—or changes in ways people work—it is vital to forecast and assess the costs paid in terms of time, stress, and overall commitment to the initiative. Acknowledgement of costs, openness to ideas for how to minimize them, and ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of adaptations are extremely important.

Funding

Funding, of course, is a major factor in the success of a project. It therefore behooves planners and directors of social innovation initiatives to ensure a realistic budget and think carefully about whether the project can manage with the resources that are in hand or promised. Passion, enthusiasm, and optimism must be balanced by a cold calculation of the likelihood of sufficient ongoing resources.

Leadership

The recommendation that simply follows from everything documented above is that a project leader needs to have the ability to implement the above recommendations, and more. If one had to prioritize the recommendations for project leadership, based on this study, it would be that leaders keep at top of mind the needs of social innovators “on the ground”—the frontline staff who implement what the planners plan and the directors direct.

Strategies and Tool for Social Innovators

In keeping with the findings and recommendations of this study—in particular the awareness of the challenges and needs of people working on the front lines of social innovation—the final step of this project was development of a resource targeted at this under-represented group focusing on planning and development of social innovation. Further rationale for this decision derives from the fact that, although a number of excellent resources are currently available for social innovators, most are geared to more visionary and leadership roles. We thought that a social innovation resource for frontline staff and novice social innovators would address an important gap while also giving frontline staff an opportunity to learn to be leaders in social innovation.

To that end, a learning module comprised of three units was created. The units can be offered as part of a college curriculum, as a continuing education course, as a professional development opportunity for innovation staff, or simply for individuals who are interested in learning the “how to” of social innovation.

The three units are entitled:

UNIT ONE Building Effective Social Innovation Ideas

UNIT TWO Project Planning

UNIT THREE Successfully Communicating and Building Relationships

The contents of the units build upon findings from the research and seek to address its conclusions. Units were designed by members of the research team along with curriculum development expert from Bow Valley College’s Teaching & Learning Enhancement unit.

Knowledge Mobilization

The research team, partners, and collaborators are now in the process of mobilizing study findings and project outputs to social innovation stakeholders and potential end users. In keeping with study objectives to promote ongoing knowledge sharing among colleges, the research has been presented at both the 2017 and 2018 Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) Applied Research Symposium, followed by a workshop at the 2018 CICan Annual Conference where participants received hands-on experience using the educational module and provided input on how these tools could best be mobilized in the college system.

Knowledge mobilization continues with the educational module available on the Bow Valley College website and soon to be distributed with support from collaborators and the Canadian social innovation community. In addition to planned publications, the research team is exploring a regional conference to highlight this and other social innovation initiatives across Alberta.



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