

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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## *Canada Supplement* **Fighting Social Exclusion, One Encounter at a Time**

By Nadia Duguay & Agnès Lorgueilleux

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# Fighting Social Exclusion, One Encounter at a Time

BY NADIA DUGUAY & AGNÈS LORGUEILLEUX

**March 2, 2017, 6:30 p.m.:** At -20° Fahrenheit, it's a frigid winter evening in Montreal. Understandably, James doesn't feel like being outside, but he and Kevin are on duty with the van. They are a common sight as they criss-cross downtown in search of solitary souls. Unfortunately, homelessness doesn't take a break, even when it's bitterly cold. Tonight, many have gone "underground" and taken refuge in metro stations, so the two park and follow them there on foot.

At 7:50 p.m., they find George at the Bonaventure Metro Station. They talk with him, and George says, "I remember when I was at school, 15 years ago, and a teacher gave me a book but I never finished it. I'm still mad at myself for that today. The author was Ily something." Kevin takes a book out of his trunk and says, "Elie Wiesel? Was it this book, perhaps?"

At that moment, everything changes. An open, straightforward, real, and tangible exchange has become possible. A childhood memory, the joy of reading and discovery, and the pleasure of an unexpected connection are all linked. The world has changed for the better in one small way.

Welcome to Exeko's world, where social innovation is paired not only with inclusion and participation but also with poetry and philosophy. Exeko seeks to trigger such encounters, encouraging people to take the time to listen and create a space where we can discover who we are and seek answers together about what we know and don't know about the world.

**T**o build a resilient, inclusive, and innovative society, Canada will need to ensure that all of its citizens have opportunities to develop key skills, places where they can be heard, and the tools and spaces needed for social transformation. Yet the reasons for exclusion in all its forms (social, cultural, and intellectual), and the best ways to combat it, are not clearly understood. That's

why, since 2006, our organization, Exeko, has been pursuing two objectives—social inclusion and intellectual emancipation—to promote full citizenship, respect for human dignity, and diversity.

We specifically focus on valuing excluded speech in the public, institutional, and political spheres, and we hope that others might find this approach and our experience helpful for their own work.

## SUPPORTING CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL INCLUSION

Those who are the most excluded in our societies—the poor, members of indigenous groups, and others—are not only materially and institutionally but also culturally and intellectually marginalized. Their voices and thoughts are completely and legitimately heard in only a very few places. This type of exclusion is both a source and an effect of multiple forms of discrimination.

That is why we believe that encouraging artistic and intellectual creativity is an important part of an inclusive and emancipatory social transformation. We support this process through various means, including an "intellectual food truck" that has criss-crossed Montréal for five years, delivering books and art material and promoting discussions. We also run critical-thinking workshops at homeless centers and programs for artists-in-residence to cocreate artwork with citizens in the streets, such as murals, choreography, and poetry. We pursue research on exclusion and marginalization in which excluded citizens are co-researchers and not subjects; and we have created three social innovation labs: the Inclusive Culture Lab, the Inclusive Knowledge Lab, and the Inclusive Speech Lab. Finally, we operate a program called Libre-library, which offers a network of permanent libraries and mobile micro-libraries to hundreds of people experiencing homelessness. In 2017, 14 day centers and shelters in Montreal are hosting libre-libraries to promote accessibility and cocreation of knowledge. In addition to these

libre-libraries, we run two mobile libraries: Bibliocyclette and the idAction Van.

## BUILDING INCLUSIVITY THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

As underlined in Montreal's 2017 social development policy, most institutions in our society are recognizing that they need to shift their actions to become more inclusive. But we would ask: How can we take care of the special needs of those who suffer from social exclusion and marginalization if we fail to work with all citizens? Exeko is helping institutions from a variety of sectors to tackle this issue and aim at social change in a more targeted manner, deploying our activities to reach citizens who experience social exclusion but also to attract the attention of nonmarginalized citizens and cultural and political institutions. As of this writing, Exeko is working with more than 400 partners and collaborators who share this goal.

We believe that our activities and research are particularly relevant in an era of globalization in which issues are becoming more and more complex and many citizens feel excluded from political and social dialogue, even when it directly affects them. Our field experience reveals that marginalized communities feel this exclusion from the conversation especially keenly. Our society currently lacks not only a space for citizen expression but also an education system that provides us with key skills that would allow us to see ourselves as actors of change.

Art, culture, and philosophy can be important vectors for radical change, but not without an environment of sincere knowledge sharing. Therefore, far-reaching civic education must become part of the solution as well. That is why Exeko's programs are all based on critical and cultural literacy, cooperation, social analysis, and the ability to create and innovate. If we want to create a world that is more welcoming to all, we must profoundly transform the social norms that govern it, rethink the world by reorganizing what we know about it, and reflect above and beyond what we already know.

We must directly confront the hierarchy that supports predetermined roles. We must re-enchant the world by reinvesting in our ability to recognize, in a spirit of diversity, the possibility of a society in which we are all comfortable being learners—one where there are no preconceived notions of who should be teacher and who student, and one where no people are afraid of losing their own power when others do well. ❌

NADIA DUGUAY is cofounder and codirector at Exeko.

AGNÈS LORGUEILLEUX is innovation manager at Exeko.

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