

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

20th Anniversary Essays
Social Innovation That Leads to Liberation
By Michael McAfee

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creative, comprehensive ways. We ought to invest in and scale their work, rather than try to reinvent it.

Taken together, these three reforms will help us address the root causes of inequality in every sector, including philanthropy itself. And working in partnership, we can chart and follow a clear road map for change—for the next twenty years, and long after.

If the challenge of the past two decades has been to reckon with systems that are unfair, needless, and out-of-date, the challenge of our time is to replace them with systems that are more inclusive, more equitable, and built on an enduring foundation of justice for all. ●

Notes

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- 3 “Girls Education: The Path to Progress,” Global Partnership for Education, March 2021.
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- 5 Mas Roser, Hannah Ritchie & Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Internet,” Our World in Data.
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- 7 “Rising Inequality Affecting More Than Two-Thirds of the Globe, But it’s not Inevitable: New UN Report,” *UN News*, United Nations, January 21, 2020.
- 8 David Lawder, “IMF Says Ukraine War Prompts Worst Global Food Crisis Since at Least 2008,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2022.
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- 10 “Workers Take Fight for Social Protection to ILC,” WEIGO, July 2021.

SOCIAL INNOVATION THAT LEADS TO LIBERATION

BY MICHAEL MCAFEE

“Innovation without accountability is hubris and greed.” “[Innovation] has become an academic exercise.” “Continuously chasing the newest shiny object has distracted us from doing what we know works.”

That’s what I heard when I posed the question of what the biggest challenge is for social innovation to PolicyLink’s team of researchers, policy experts, and advocates at our recent staff meeting. There’s a reason why so many people in our sector are wary of the term “innovation,” and it’s not because they don’t have revolutionary ideas. It’s because the term has become too associated with the quick-fix, short-term approach often associated with Silicon Valley.

To be clear, the social sector has accomplished a great deal in the last twenty years. But as the world stares down several crises, the indisputable truth is that our current understanding of innovation—and who the innovators are—is no match for the magnitude of these challenges. If we don’t overhaul our approach, we’ll miss the opportunity to advance the solutions required to meet this moment and the moments to come.

Social innovation began as a way to advance social progress, but all too often it has now become a carnival of quick fixes. Attend any

social impact conference today and there is sure to be conversation about how we can solve all the world’s problems with some bold new idea. This Silicon Valley-brand of social innovation, one that reveres invention, has left us chasing short-term impact and distracted us from the humble, steady work of truly making our society livable for all people.

It’s similar to what Gil Scott-Heron sang about more than 50 years ago after the United States made the first moon landing in a time of rampant social and economic disparities: “I can’t pay no doctor bill, but Whitey’s on the moon.”¹ Expecting immediate results from new ideas and thinking that every social problem has a business model solution is actively hurting the populations we say we’re trying to serve. This approach forces any entity working for social change into a needlessly competitive environment that incentivizes short-termism.

Make no mistake about it, we urgently need to transform our social systems toward liberation. Nearly 100 million people in the United States—a third of our population—live in poverty, squeezed so thin that one medical bill, car accident, or late rent payment could result in a person or family losing everything.² When we say liberation, we’re talking about a future where everyone’s basic needs are met: essentials such as a well-paying job, clean water, a safe community, universal health care, and affordable housing.

Our sector can contribute to creating this future but only through accountability, humility, and honest conversation about what kind of innovation we truly support. That begins with understanding that the crumbling systems we have now are actually the result of meticulous and purposeful innovation over decades, with the goal of advancing the quality of life for some, at the expense of others. Today’s widespread inequality is not a design flaw; it’s a feature of American innovation.

Take our housing system. Our country knows how to innovate toward building a middle class, because we did it for white families during the entire 20th century through such innovations as the New Deal and the GI Bill. How to keep people housed isn’t a mystery to be solved—we did it when we invested billions of dollars in subsidizing certain communities through fixed long-term interest rates and federally guaranteed mortgages.

The other side of the housing coin is that many renters, disproportionately people of color, aren’t protected against eviction. All they get is an app to help them find an apartment without paying a broker fee. What if renters who experience the worst of our housing market had the funds to reimagine something different? What approaches might they come up with?

What future social innovations are we missing out on by undervaluing and under-resourcing the very communities that are leading change but also struggling to make ends meet each month? We’ve begun to do the work to understand why these structural inequities exist, but we can’t stop there. Often the



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solutions that we view as mundane are effective and innovative—they just require the people with power and influence to work together and allocate long-term, considerable resources toward these solutions.

The evidence of what can happen when we do this is clear. For example, a growing number of guaranteed-income programs created by collaborations between government, philanthropy, and business, are delivering tangible results, enabling people to pay their rent and support their families and communities.³ Another example is

President Biden's expanded (now expired) Child Tax Credit, which briefly kept nearly 61 million children out of poverty.⁴

To achieve these kinds of results we need to think differently. For example, to address our water crisis, PolicyLink's Indigenous partners in our Water Equity and Climate Resilience Caucus are creating solutions that meet the needs of people at least seven generations into the future. We need to support more of this kind of long-term, liberatory thinking, instead of the short-term thinking that creates smart faucets, to help ensure access to clean water for the millions of Americans currently without.

We are a nation of innovators; we know how to accomplish transformational results in the face of immense challenges. We've achieved powerful systems change before. Now we must achieve it for everyone.

Both short- and long-term thinking are essential to social innovation. We need to balance these approaches, while focusing on impact, to ensure that all people in America—particularly those who face the burdens of structural racism—participate in a flourishing multiracial democracy, prosper in an equitable economy, and live in a thriving community of opportunity.

The reality is that achieving long-term, transformative results for millions of people takes time and requires accountable collaboration among business, government, and civil society. This is what we need, and the good news is that a growing number of us across sectors are beginning to recognize this and are willing to support the social transformation our current crises demand.

As the late James Baldwin wrote in his book *Nobody Knows My Name*, "There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now." We are a nation of innovators, and our history proves that we know how to accomplish transformational results in the face of immense challenges. We've achieved powerful systems change before; now we must achieve it for everyone. Now is the time to get equity right for those who have been locked out of liberation. Our future depends on it. ●

Notes

- 1 Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," Small Talk at 125th and Lennox, 1970.
- 2 "100 Million and Counting: A Portrait of Economic Insecurity in the United States," PolicyLink, 2018.
- 3 Megan Greenwell, "Universal Basic Income Has Been Tested Repeatedly. It Works. Will America Ever Embrace It?" *Washington Post*, October 24, 2022.
- 4 Corey Turner, "The Expanded Child Tax Credit Briefly Slashed Child Poverty. Here's What Else it Did," *National Public Radio*, January 27, 2022.

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