

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

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*20th Anniversary Essays*  
**Tackling Inequality Through Social Innovation**  
By Hilary Pennington

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hyper-projectivity, such as community and policy forums, public debates, sources of hype (for example, around new ideas or technologies), and science fiction.<sup>8</sup> Opening up to possible alternative futures means that loonshots (crazy ideas) are not so readily dismissed, and attention is paid to what is happening at the fringes of a field or industry, or in the spaces in between fields, or to local anomalies. Looking for pockets of positive deviance and examples of real utopias can provide evidence that an alternative may work.

Consider how your organization may practically get at these sites. Where do you source your research, and is it providing breadth or only depth? How do you engage or access organizations that are working on new ideas or technologies? What is the role of feedback loops in considering what might have been? Can you use counterfactuals in your strategy-making processes? How do you visualize the system in which you operate, and do you have a sense of the interdependencies and the outer limits or breaking points? And importantly, who is doing the future-making, if not you?

**Legitimize an imagined future.** We need to be aware that some imagined futures are accepted as more credible than others and so, at an organizational or policy level, it is important to consider which stakeholders are involved in the future-making process and how this may assist in developing legitimacy. One should consider both internal and external stakeholders, and the capacity of digital platforms to broaden stakeholder engagement. Also consider the role of social proof when material proof is not available and how that may assist in building legitimacy: Does the proximity or endorsement of certain stakeholders generate legitimacy? The diversity of stakeholders is also an important consideration, especially in sustaining the emotional energy often needed to cultivate belief in an imagined future.

**Take action toward an alternative imagined future.** For organizations and policy makers, it's important to reflect backwards from an imagined future and identify desirable pathways to get to this imagined future. This enables the present to be interrogated and reveals what is stopping that future from being realized.<sup>9</sup> We can then ask: What would it take to scale these alternative futures?

If we take future-making more seriously as an organizational and policy practice, and don't leave it up to individual celebrities to tell us what the future will look like, it provides us with a powerful tool that may generate new ideas and forms of innovation that we desperately need to transform existing systems and radically rethink how we organize and govern for social impact. ●

## Notes

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# TACKLING INEQUALITY THROUGH SOCIAL INNOVATION

BY HILARY PENNINGTON

**T**wenty years ago this spring, in the very first issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, then-Ford Foundation president Susan Berresford called for sweeping social change to address systems that were "unfair, needless, or simply out of date."<sup>1</sup>

During the decades since, social innovators have delivered on much of Berresford's vision. Multilateral partnerships and widespread economic-development initiatives have cut global poverty in half.<sup>2</sup> An additional 82 million girls<sup>3</sup> across the Global South now attend school. Meanwhile, maternal deaths have decreased by more than 38 percent,<sup>4</sup> saving millions of lives.

At the same time, transformations in our markets, environments, cultures, and institutions have radically altered the way we live and work together. The proportion of people with internet access globally has quintupled.<sup>5</sup> And socially responsible investment in the United States has grown by more than \$12 trillion.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, for all that has changed, Berresford's challenge remains urgent. Far too often, for far too long, advancing innovation has been accompanied by unfair, needless, and widening inequality. Take, for example, poverty. Although the number of people living in extreme poverty has dramatically shrunk, the gap between rich and poor is widening around the globe.<sup>7</sup> Resources are increasingly consolidated in the hands of the few—primarily those who reside in the Global North.

As a result, hard-earned gains in global health and well-being are receding and the economic fallout of international conflict has thrust 345 million people into life-threatening food shortages.<sup>8</sup> My own field of philanthropy is not immune. Despite philanthropy's tremendous progress in devising new ways to deliver funding and identify grantees, the sector's resources remain concentrated in white-led organizations headquartered in the Global North.

Innovation alone, it is clear, cannot close the gaps between those with resources and those without—between those prioritized by international decision-making and funding and those left off the global agenda. For those of us who have spent our lives in social change and social impact, this is a monumental turning point.

As we celebrate the last two decades of SSIR—and look forward to the next two—we must



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double down on our commitment to ensure that innovation and equality are not at odds with each other, and we must support the individuals, institutions, and ideas that harness the former to pursue the latter.

Today, that commitment finds its fullest expression in three key, cross-sector reforms: holistic, intersectional approaches; solutions that take the long view of progress and reinforce civil society; and increased support and global attention to local leadership, particularly in the Global South. These reforms can help flip the dominant script in philanthropy and in other key sectors. And together, they carry the potential to revise social innovation for the better, so that emerging solutions can dismantle the structures propelling and sustaining inequality, rather than reproduce them.

## APPROACHING INNOVATION WITH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

To begin, we must center those most marginalized by inequality and approach innovation with an intersectional perspective. As experts, we understand the landscape of our fields—the potential roadblocks to success, the nascent opportunities for growth. At the same time, we may not always possess the equally critical knowledge that comes with firsthand experience.

Those directly affected by inequality and most proximate to its myriad consequences can diagnose the everyday effects of structural barriers and propose the most effective solutions to urgent needs. What's more, given the ways that discrimination and inequality are magnified at the intersections of race, gender, disability, class, and other marginalized identities, the individuals who hold those multiple identities are most adept in building the necessary partnerships and coalitions to bring about change by effectively organizing across communities.

In other words, complex, intersectional problems demand intersectional solutions. To disrupt inequality, social innovators must understand the way identity shapes our exposure to systemic harm and build on the strength that lies in resisting those harms. Take, for example, the uneven political and social impacts of new technologies, which have created opportunities, but have also amplified disinformation and divisions and ushered in biased algorithms and more expansive surveillance. A group of scholars, organizers, educators, advocates, and artists have developed Just Tech Fellowships to “rethink assumptions about who might imagine, design, build, and oversee the technologies that are shaping our future.”<sup>9</sup>

The inaugural cohort of Just Tech Fellows draw on their own experiences and expertise to reduce barriers to equipment access, maintenance, and customization for people with disabilities; analyze the impact of carceral technologies on Black students in public school systems; and map surveillance practices and technologies that target marginalized communities, among other efforts.

By centering the people who have directly experienced the faults and failures of our current systems, we can replace injustice with inclusion, and innovate more effectively at every turn.

## LEVERAGING INNOVATION FOR THE LONG TERM

We must also recognize that progress often provokes backlash—two steps forward, one step back. With this in mind, thoughtful social innovations, shaped with foresight and principle, can provide a stable foundation for civil society and a critical guardrail against democratic backsliding.

Consider social progress during the past two decades. Each subsequent “win” has come with its own equal and opposite contest. Today, democracies are faltering globally, leaving hard-won rights in peril. Democratic backsliding at this scale endangers equality everywhere. Allowing such backlash to continue is shortsighted, for healthy democracy is the crucial prerequisite to any lasting social change.

Social innovation has already provided some much-needed resistance against the global creep of authoritarianism. But most significant social innovations take between 20 and 30 years to become established. Our task is to “flip the script” in philanthropy from short-term grantmaking to long-term support and long-term strategy.

Long-term, cross-sector collaboration—from bolstering economic equality to supporting civic space—can provide wraparound support for democracies. At the Ford Foundation, we're building that collaborative infrastructure through programs like Weaving Resilience, an \$80 million initiative that supports robust civil society organizations across the Global South. Alongside our partners on the ground in eight regions, we've committed to sustained support for the organizations on the front lines of the fight for social justice, so they can defend the civic space they need to thrive.

Social innovators are uniquely positioned to convene new initiatives and facilitate these connections—already, they work in the intersections between sectors and areas of expertise. Their insights can shape innovations that look past easy victories to sustain our democracies for the long haul.

## ADVANCING INNOVATION WHERE IT MATTERS MOST

Taking the long view will require new funding strategies, partnerships, and, crucially, new leaders. To that end, we must support the strength, the visibility, the power, and the influence of ideas, individuals, and institutions from outside the dominant frames that shape and distort our world—be they whiteness, US exceptionalism, or centering the Global North at the expense of the Global South.

By looking beyond our own backyards, we can help build the strength, visibility, and power of local leaders across the world—particularly in the Global South, where countless innovative individuals and institutions are already laying the foundation for a more just and inclusive world.

We're inspired by organizations like WIEGO, a global research, policy, and advocacy network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, by making grants to organizations representing millions of domestic and home-based informal workers, street vendors, and waste pickers in more than 90 countries. These informal workers have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic but have been devastated by the lack of social and labor protections during the crisis. The initial \$25 million in funding from the Ford Foundation will help ensure informal workers have a seat at the table to have their voices, demands, and needs heard at the national and global levels. Already, their work has shaped international labor agendas in the highest halls of power.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, we're moved by grassroots organizations like The Access to Vaccines Coalition in Indonesia, which partnered with civil society, Indigenous communities, disability groups, and the government to fully vaccinate 80 percent of the total population. In every corner of the globe, in every sector, new leaders are confronting inequality in

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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# 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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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