

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

20th Anniversary Essays
Marking 20 Years
By Paul Brest

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A N N I V E R S A R Y

In the spring of 2003 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* published its inaugural issue. Now, twenty years later, we are celebrating our vicennial issue. To mark the occasion, we asked some of the world's leading researchers, thinkers, and practitioners, all of whom have previously written for *SSIR*, to contribute their thoughts about the challenges that lie ahead and how the field of social innovation should evolve to meet them. We are excited to bring you the results, a fascinating collection of essays on a wide variety of topics that is certain to provoke your thinking. We hope that you enjoy reading them.

MARKING 20 YEARS

BY PAUL BREST

It's conventional on an organization's major birthday to harken back to its birth—in this case *Stanford Social Innovation Review's* origin as a publication of the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. But there's another important date in *SSIR's* youth: the year 2010. It was then that the Business School determined that a publication focused on social innovation no longer fit with its strategic plan and, in effect, left it on the church steps for adoption—in this case, on the steps of Stanford's president's office.

SSIR had already made a name for itself nationally, and the university president was not enthusiastic about the prospect of it becoming, say, The Harvard or Yale Social Innovation Review. But where to rehome the publication? The Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society (PACS) had been founded only a few years earlier and showed great promise of promoting research and teaching in those fields. With support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, *SSIR* was acquired by PACS and has been an integral part of that center and a proud part of Stanford ever since.

Who reads *SSIR*? The staff and board members of nonprofit organizations account for about half of its readership, with the remainder divided among philanthropies, businesses, consulting firms, academia, and government. *SSIR's* print circulation is about 11,000 copies; online, close to a quarter-million people visit its website monthly, and it has more than 90,000 subscribers to its weekly e-newsletter.

In its early years, the large majority of *SSIR's* readers came from the United States. Today, it is one of the few publications in the social innovation field that is truly global. Almost half of the people who read *SSIR* online come from outside the United States. And in recent years it has launched six local-language editions, produced by partners in Japan, South Korea, China, Mexico (for Spanish-speaking Central and Latin America), Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates (for the Arabic-speaking world).

In addition to publishing the print and online journal, *SSIR* produces three annual conferences, with a total attendance of more than 3,000 people. This past year, its three-day-long Nonprofit Management Institute addressed the key question—How do we encourage greater cooperation and collaboration in an increasingly divisive

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world?—with a particular focus on the role of civil society institutions in finding common ground. Its upcoming Frontiers of Social Innovation conference focuses on the role of social innovation in helping to sustain democracy at a time when democratic political institutions are under threat in many parts of the world, including the United States. And last year's Data on Purpose conference focused on the emerging field of public interest technology, which advocates that technology should be designed, deployed, and regulated in ways that are responsible and equitable.

Let me turn to the content of *SSIR*, which is what ultimately matters the most. *SSIR* aspires to be a global forum for new ideas, practices, and solutions in social innovation across all sectors and to bridge theory, research, and practice. One sign of *SSIR's* success in achieving that mission is the number of important and lasting ideas and practices to which it has given birth. Let me mention three.

The article "The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle," published in 2009, argued that philanthropic donors' tendency to fund particular projects with minimal provision of overhead expenses, rather than provide unrestricted support, creates a vicious cycle that deprives nonprofits of the necessary infrastructure to survive and serve their beneficiaries. The article spawned deeper analysis of the problem and has had a discernible effect on philanthropic practice.

"Collective Impact," published in 2011, argued that large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination rather than the isolated intervention of individual organizations. It highlights a coordinated effort by private and corporate foundations, city government officials, school district representatives, universities and community colleges, and education-related nonprofit and advocacy groups to improve education in Cincinnati. "Collective Impact, 10 Years Later," a series of articles published in 2021, describes the success of the movement it launched.

"Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries," published in 2013, emphasizes the importance of listening to the experi-

ences of the people who benefit from social programs. Although the value of the perspectives of these "lived experts" may seem obvious in retrospect, many nonprofit organizations and philanthropies paid them little attention. The article catalyzed a movement and provided the basis for today's emerging practices of trust-based and participatory philanthropy.

SSIR not only introduces new ideas and practices, but the publication also takes a critical eye to



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established ones. The article “Microfinance Misses Its Mark,” which examined the shortcomings of microfinance, was published in 2007, just one year after Grameen Bank and its founder Muhammad Yunus had received the Nobel Peace Prize for helping popularize microfinance. More recently, *SSIR* has published articles that take a critical look at socially responsible practices in business, such as “Sustainability Assurance as Greenwashing,” published in 2022.

I could add many more examples of articles that have had an impact on the field of social innovation, but I’ll conclude with a personal note. As an academic who prides himself on his writing, I have always submitted articles to *SSIR* that were as close to finished as I could get them. They were inevitably returned to me with editorial suggestions that made them much better, and especially that made them more accessible to the journal’s many different audiences.

The unusual care and craft that *SSIR*’s editors put into every article is only one of the reasons for the journal’s preeminence. And as a reader, I look forward to the publication of each new issue of *SSIR* with excitement, knowing that I will deepen my knowledge of areas that I have studied and inform me about ideas and even fields that were totally unknown to me. Over the next 20 years *SSIR* will continue to grow and expand in ways that I can’t predict. But I am confident that as it does so it will remain true to its mission of being a place where people engaged in social innovation from around the world and across all parts of society come to exchange new ideas, practices, and lessons learned. ●

USING RADICAL RE-IMAGINATION TO CREATE A VISION FOR OUR FUTURE

BY ANA MARIE ARGILAGOS & HILDA VEGA

Close your eyes, breathe, and imagine the world 10, 20, or even 30 years from now. What do you see? Admittedly, when we did this, it was hard not to imagine a dystopian planet ruined by our lack of care for our ecosystems and for each other. It’s easy to get trapped into this vision of the future after reading one too many novels or seeing one too many movies showing a community of multiracial folk scrambling to find their place in a world of scarcity and competition.

We had to give ourselves some grace to move past the obvious limitations of that vision, and we invite you to do so as well. Instead, let’s take *un pasito pa'lante* (a little step forward) and dream of a remarkable, multi-racial world where all people’s needs are met, and think of this not as a utopian vision, but as an acceptable and very real possibility.

Consider the world portrayed in the movie *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, where director Ryan Coogler presents us with a vision of

what is possible when we decenter our narratives from white-, male-, hetero-centric viewpoints and stop looking at each other as villains in our own stories but rather as accomplices committed to preserving and protecting each other and the power we hold as individual communities and collectively.

Stories like *Wakanda Forever* demonstrate the level of violence that colonization, conquest, and genocide have caused throughout generations—and how we can overcome them. It challenges us to see Talokan, the underwater kingdom rooted in Indigenous Mayan and Aztec cultures, as a possibility despite the barriers the fictional community faced to survive.

When we think about the future of technology and social innovation, we need to do so through an alternative lens, just like in *Wakanda Forever*, and believe in a future where everyone has the talent, vision, and access to build projects that are sustainable and beneficial to all. We need to visualize a world rooted in abundance that rejects the idea that Blackness and Indigeneity must continue to be considered nonexistent in the Americas.

This shift in vision is as much about understanding the role power and class play in shaping society as it is about understanding the role structural discrimination has played in creating our racialized or ethnic identities. Because in the end, as many dystopian narratives point out, our challenges are about who controls resources and how that power is contested by organized communities.

Creating a new vision is just the start. We also must ask ourselves what this fictional speculation about our futures means for

us today, especially those of us in positions to influence philanthropic resources for communities of color. To start, it means that we must seize the opportunity to intentionally build spaces in our communities and the organizations we serve to define a future that is by, for, and about all of us, one in which the progress and liberation of one community is inextricably linked to the rights, safety, and well-being of others, but especially those of Black and Indigenous communities.

It is our responsibility to be proactive about centering those intersecting narratives and debunk the myth that innovation and creativity come only from those who can access or understand the latest technology or benefit from proximity to centers of innovation and power. Our *vibranium*, the shared energy held by Wakan-dans and Talokanils, is in how we go about creating the interconnected world we are trying



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