

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Editor's Note
The Mother of Invention
By Eric Nee

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Mother of Invention

The proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” has been a part of Western culture for centuries. That’s because it neatly summarizes something that has been proven to be true: that when faced with a difficult problem, people can be amazingly creative at devising new solutions.

We have seen this repeatedly the last 18 months as nonprofits, governments, and businesses around the world have changed how they operate to overcome the impact of COVID-19. We have published numerous articles about some of these efforts: grassroots organizations helping to get their neighbors vaccinated; food banks rapidly scaling up to meet unprecedented demand; schools and teachers moving from in-person to virtual learning.

Many of these efforts involved adopting already known approaches, such as funders changing their grantmaking to provide general operating support rather than proj-

ect funding. Doing this is often not a trivial task, but it doesn’t require creating a truly new idea or process. Some of the efforts that organizations undertook, though, did result in truly new ways of tackling social problems. And that is the subject of the cover story in this Fall 2021 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, titled “Open Social Innovation.”

The article (written by SSIR’s Academic Editor Johanna Mair and Johannes Kepler University Linz Professor Thomas Gegenhuber) examines a massive hackathon in Germany of about 28,000 participants tasked with finding solutions to problems created by the pandemic. That is an impressive number of people, and to be able to operate at that scale required some novel adaptations to the hackathon. But that wasn’t the innovation.

What was new was that the hackathon involved individuals and organizations from *all* parts of society (government, business, nonprofits, individual citizens, etc.), who were actively involved in the *entire* cycle of

creating and scaling up solutions: identifying problems to solve, creating solutions, prioritizing them, and then implementing and scaling up the solutions. This could only be done because all of the stakeholders who were needed to solve the problems were involved.

The authors call this approach “open social innovation.” It’s “open” because the entire process was open to all. Enlisting a wide variety of people increased the odds that smarter people would work on the problem and that new ideas would emerge because of the cross-fertilization that comes from diversity. And bringing organizations from all parts of society into the process increased the odds that the ultimate solutions would be embraced and fully implemented.

As the authors write: “Building a coalition and prioritizing collective action over individual action might slow the social innovation process, but this collective process amplifies the likelihood of success in the long term. Forging and growing relationships among like-minded innovators and also with institutional stakeholders can transform practices and catalyze systemic change.”

While open social innovation is not a panacea, the approach is useful for tackling some social problems, and there are many aspects of the approach that one can learn from and possibly incorporate into one’s own work.—**ERIC NEE**

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

ERIC NEE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

JOHANNA MAIR
ACADEMIC EDITOR

MICHAEL GORDON VOSS
PUBLISHER

DEPUTY EDITOR, PRINT **David V. Johnson**
DEPUTY EDITOR, DIGITAL **M. Amedeo Tumolillo**
EDITORS **Aaron Bady, Marcie Bianco**
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **Jennifer Morgan**
ART DIRECTION **David Herbick Design**
SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL PRODUCTION EDITOR **Barbara Wheeler-Bride**
COPY EDITORS **Elissa Rabellino, Annie Tucker**
PROOFREADER **Dominik Sklarzyk**

PUBLISHING AND MARKETING MANAGER **Brian Karo**
PUBLISHING AND MARKETING MANAGER **Shayani Bose**
MARKETING COORDINATOR **Christie Honore**
ADVERTISING **Jeremy Davenport, Involved Media**
SPONSORSHIP **Cynthia Lapporte, Oak Media**
WEBSITE DESIGNERS **Arsenal, Hop Studios**
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR **Yulia Strokova**

SSIR ACADEMIC ADVISORY COUNCIL

Paola Perez-Aleman, McGill University; Josh Cohen, Stanford University; Alnoor Ebrahim, Tufts University; Marshall Ganz, Harvard University; Chip Heath, Stanford University; Andrew Hoffman, University of Michigan; Dean Karlan, Yale University; Anita McGahan, University of Toronto; Lynn Meskell, Stanford University; Len Ortolano, Stanford University; Francie Ostrower, University of Texas; Anne Claire Pache, ESSEC Business School; Woody Powell, Stanford University; Rob Reich, Stanford University

STANFORD CENTER ON PHILANTHROPY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

FACULTY CODIRECTORS **Woody Powell, Rob Reich, Robb Willer**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **Carla Eckhardt**
PACS TEAM **Erinn Andrews, Haifa Badi-Uz-Zaman, Lucy Bernholz, Sawako Sonoyama Clarin, Kathryn Davis, Davey Kim, Lisa Kohara, Elyse Lee, Rebecca LaPena, Heather Lord, Nithya Magal, Joe Mernyk, Isabel Nogueira, Toussaint Nothias, Rosa Orozco, Djurdja Jovanovic Padejski, Chrystal Redekopp, Christian Seelos, Rebecca Shamash, Priya Shanker, Yi Zhao**

STANFORD CENTER ON PHILANTHROPY AND CIVIL SOCIETY ADVISORY BOARD

CHAIRMAN **Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen**
MEMBERS **Herbert A. Allen III, Laura Arnold, Roy Bahat, Ted Janus, Kathy Kwan, Xin Liu, Carter McClelland, Felipe Medina, Kim Meredith, Jeff Raikes (ex officio), David Siegel, Liz Simons, Darren Walker, Yilan Zhao**

Stanford Social Innovation Review (ISSN 1542-7099) is published quarterly by the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, a program at Stanford University's School of Humanities and Sciences: 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, CA 94305-6042. Phone: (650) 724-3309, Fax: (650) 725-9316.

Subscription Prices (One Year) Personal, \$54.95 U.S./Canada and \$69.95 international for print and digital, \$39.95 for digital only. Institutional, starting at \$300.

Subscriber Services *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, PO Box 426, Congers, NY 10920-0306. Call 888-488-6596 (toll free) or 845-450-5202 (outside U.S.). info@ssir.org

Article proposals, advertising, and reprints go to ssir.org

Postmaster Send address changes to *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Member Services, PO Box 426, Congers, NY 10920-0306. Volume 19, Number 4, Fall 2021. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society are part of Stanford University's tax-exempt status as a Section 501(c)(3) "public charity." Confirming documentation is available upon request.

Stanford Social Innovation Review was established in 2003 by the Center for Social Innovation at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. The founding publisher is Perla Ni. The former academic editors are Stephen R. Barley, James A. Phillips Jr., Robert Scott, David Brady, and Chip Heath.

