Creating change: a social innovator's blueprint

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Over the past decades, I have met hundreds of social entrepreneurs from all over the world and spoken to them about their pioneering work and visions for the future. I have learned that no one person knows what is best for people and planet. Building a better world will require us to tap into our most ancient and valuable resource: each other.

Yet we don't. Instead, the past few years have been shaped by a polycrisis, exacerbated by individualistic decision-making. Despite the crisis, private wealth has tripled (Hetzner, 2022) while poverty and inequalities have increased (Sidik, 2022). Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) now seems to be "mission impossible." Based on the latest global Social Progress Index,[1] 66 countries have declined while 77 have stagnated, with only 32 seeing any meaningful progress. This follows a decade of steady growth.

If we take a pause and ask why this is happening, the answer is clear: different crises, which should have brought the world together, have instead torn us apart. We are seeing the rise of rampant individualism, excessive wealth accumulation and nationalism. I have asked myself on multiple occasions, why can't the world learn some lessons from the street children who were my first teachers, who inspired me through their ability to support each other and their trust in the goodness of people, despite being hurt by their families and us as society on multiple occasions.

In this paper, I will share my journey and learnings, beginning as a social entrepreneur and growing to be a social innovator. I will also discuss why I think it is imperative to build the Social Innovation Sector (Billimoria, 2024a) within the context of the People and Planet Economy (Billimoria, 2024b). Outlined below are the lessons I learned and some of the background thinking that brought me here.

Six lessons learned

1. Listen to the community and develop structures to suit their needs

In my first social enterprise, Childline, I started by listening to the street children. "*All chacha*s [uncles] and *didi*s [older sisters] care about is their 9–5 job. No one is there for us when we need them most at night. No one listens – will you?" This was the challenge given by the street children. Through listening, Childline emerged as a 24-hour service for street children with a national number, allowing children to call for help free of charge from any train station and from any city as they journeyed across the country. This was my first lesson as a social innovator: design solutions directly with the affected community members, rather than in a room thousands of miles away from the issue at hand. This has been a principle from which I have never strayed.

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2.   Develop the ecosystem

My experience with Childline also taught me this: to avoid children being beaten by the police, waiting until wounds got infested with worms and scrounging in garbage cans for food, an ecosystem needed to be developed. At Childline, we started training the police, leading community health outreach and creating a myriad of other services. Through this, I learned that service provision must be done in partnership with allied systems to ensure that we work together as a family. In the case of Childline, the police officer became a *chacha*, the nurse a *didi* and all ecosystem partners have *childline se dosti* (friendship bonds with Childline).

3.   Collaborate for change – the social franchise model/the brand add-on model

As Childline became more successful, I was asked to scale and replicate the model, as is often the case in the development sector. In school and university, we are taught "the bigger the better" – with corporate unicorns hailed as examples to follow. Social enterprises were supposed to follow this corporate model of hyper-capitalistic competition because those role models knew best. But I chose instead to follow the lead of those from the streets, where I had first learned to collaborate. Rather than creating a mega non-governmental organization (NGO), we created a movement for child protection which placed children's needs front and center. This strategy was far more successful than going it alone: in the last 25 years, Childline has listened and responded to over 96 million contacts.

4.   Prevention is the only sustainable solution

As Childline grew, the range of calls expanded from supporting street children to rescuing children from labor exploitation, addressing abuse in the home, handling school dropout cases, tackling child sexual exploitation and dealing with a myriad of other problems. So, the question in my mind was: how do we prevent this from happening in the first place? And, again, the answer came from a child: "I would never need to run away to work and face these types of challenges if there was food in the house and if my parents knew how to save financially," this child told me. This keen insight led to the birth of Aflatoun. Why not teach children to save resources, to learn about money and, most importantly, to believe in themselves? My personal learning was that changing one system is not enough – you need to change multiple systems to ensure the holistic well-being of a child. And, even then, the approach may still not be enough.

5.   Collaborate to change the system

My next lesson was to realize that organizations cannot create systemic change alone. As Aflatoun expanded to over 100 countries, I reached yet another glass ceiling: governments were not willing to work with a non-profit to change policies. This gave birth to Child and Youth Finance International (CYFI) – a partnership between central bankers, ministries of finance and education, non-profits, multilaterals, the G20, corporates, academia and schools, and, most importantly, the children themselves: an approach we called "collaborative systems change." Collaborative systems change can be big or small, or somewhere in between. It works at different system scales, from the community level to the national, international and inter-sectoral level. Our strong belief was that the problem required a different approach: in the form of an honest broker. As an honest broker, CYFI convened this disparate group of actors – both large and small – with the intention of enabling financial and educational systems that work for children and youth. To do this, we followed the "5Cs." We convened by bringing in all voices, regardless of power or size, and provided shared spaces for understanding and collaboration. We connected people and organizations working in complementary ways and provided resources to guide and inspire those trying to reach their goal. We co-created the overall strategy and celebrated not only milestones achieved but the process itself through events and awards ceremonies. And, finally, we calibrated progress by supporting initiatives to research and measure the impact of change efforts so that local adaptations could maximize their impact and learn from one another. As CYFI helped to change policies in more than 70 countries, and shut down once its mission was accomplished, I had an important realization: *broader* systems change can only be achieved through true collaboration

across all actors in the ecosystem, not just those in a particular area or topic. Therefore, real systems change has to be based on principles and relational change.

6.   Build collective power

As CYFI successfully came to a close, I became aware of a lack of coordination and collaboration among the most important agents of change: social innovators (Billimoria, 2024c). To achieve collaborative systems change, we need change agents. These are the social innovators who can be found across all sectors and include social entrepreneurs. This concept will be explained further below. To bring social innovators together, I co-founded Catalyst 2030, which is the embodiment of all my learnings. It taught me about the power of our collective voice. The power to collectively accelerate change. Co-founded by over 100 award-winning social entrepreneurs and key ecosystem partners, this movement has grown rapidly. What started as a WhatsApp group has since evolved into a global movement and is now working toward building the Social Innovation Sector.

A seventh lesson in the making

Throughout this journey – from social entrepreneur to social innovator – I've ultimately realized that, in order to shift systems, we need to build the infrastructure to support social innovators.

As a social entrepreneur, my passion led me to start a social enterprise. But I learned that building a social enterprise is not enough. To create true impact – and, ultimately, build an economy that works for both the people and the planet – we need individuals from all walks of life. We need to bring everyone together to shape the vision collectively: the communities with whom we work, our teams, policymakers, donors, academics and corporates. We need people with one thing in common: an urgent desire for accelerated impact to create a more sustainable, equitable and resilient future that can be truly regenerative for all. What we need is a collective fundamental shift in our mental paradigms that enables us to move away from polarizing "*isms*" to what really matters – the people and the planet.

What is the People and Planet Economy?

In recent years, I have begun to think in terms of the "People and Planet Economy" (PPE). To me, the PPE (Billimoria, 2024d) is a values- and principles-based economy which focuses on creating solutions and changing systems to protect people and the planet. The PPE's key objective is to ensure the holistic well-being, happiness and quality of life for people on a thriving planet, free of exploitation. To achieve this, the PPE places values at the heart of economic progress, rather than productivity and profit. At its core are values from indigenous cultures and ancient principles. It is an inclusive concept, which builds on many previous conceptual frameworks. Most importantly, it is a concept that my street children understand, as it builds on the values of the streets – caring and sharing.

The true success of the PPE is that it is powered by social innovators – the *chacha*s and *didi*s in Indian street lingo.

Figure 1   **PPE and its relationship with other conceptual frameworks**
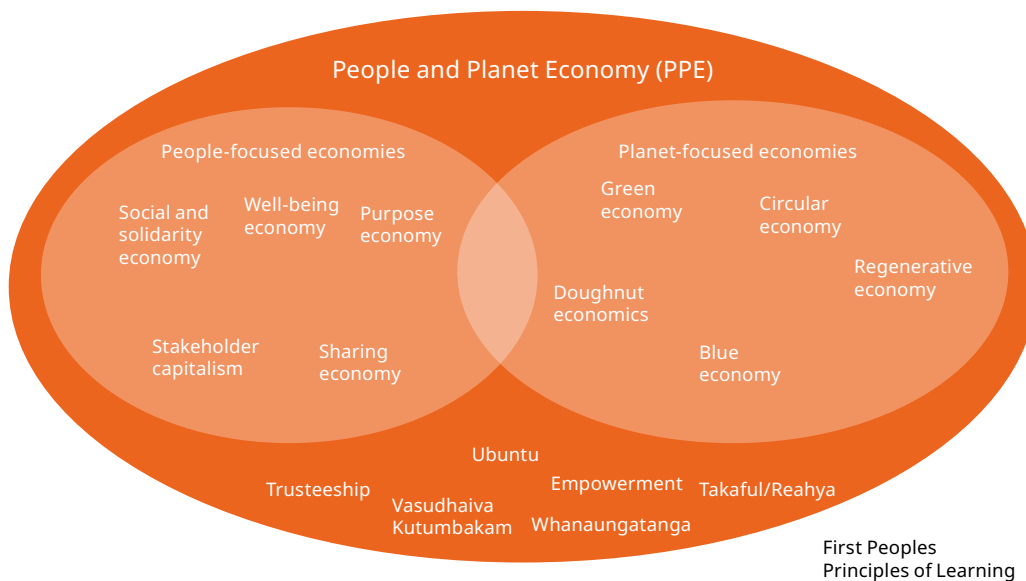
Who are social innovators?

Social innovators include individuals who are taking concrete action or building implementable solutions toward creating positive impact or change for the people or the planet. They are not confined to those who are founding or working in social enterprises; rather, they exist in all sectors, locations and types of organization. They are frontline pioneers who are shifting old economic and extractive market-based models and co-creating innovative solutions with the community and key stakeholders. Importantly, they are doing this while focusing on changing systems (instead of addressing individual issues piecemeal) and taking action to create opportunities that allow others to become catalysts of change.

What do social innovators do?

The answer to this question is actually quite simple. We see a problem, we listen, we learn, we co-create solutions to solve the problem and then we try to change systems in order to ensure that the solution is sustainable. To give an example from Catalyst 2030,[2] as social innovators we realized that our funding systems were broken and that, in terms of the issues that mattered, we did not have a seat at the table. So, we joined forces to work toward changing that system. We went about it very systematically – first, by speaking to our community and to donors and collectively co-authoring the *Embracing Complexity* report (Ashoka et al., 2020) to outline the key changes that we needed to support us in our work. Then we co-created the donor self-assessment tool,[3] presented awards to model donors, provided peer-to-peer learning groups for donors to shift mindsets and bring about change. And we do see shifts in donor behaviors. So, to summarize, we identified the problem, listened, co-created key principles, offered a solution and we are working collaboratively to change the landscape.

What do social innovators need to be successful?

To best support the work of social innovators in their objective of ensuring that the PPE is protected and able to thrive, we need to build the requisite infrastructure. I call this the Social Innovation Sector (SIS).

Currently, there is no formal "container" (overarching framework) for the sector and no formal terminology. This has resulted in uncoordinated and fragmented efforts, with

social innovators mainly working independently and therefore unable to maximize their impact. Governments and funders are unable to coordinate support due to fragmented terminologies and the lack of formal definitions for who and what they are trying to support. Thus, just as a plumbing system is critical to allow a house to function, a formalized SIS, with a unified language to describe this "container", is necessary to facilitate unified efforts toward forging a stronger PPE.

The SIS can be defined as a "sector" because of both its breadth and depth. The term sector implies the wide, cross-cutting inclusivity of different types of stakeholders across the "traditional" siloes of public, private and civil society sectors. Yet, at the same time, sector implies a depth of localized community-centric engagement and tailored solution-oriented action toward bringing about impactful change.

It cuts across traditionally defined sector actors, including those within the private, public and civil society sectors. Once the SIS becomes a formalized and institutionalized layer of support through government policies and financing mechanisms, it functions as a formal "container" that houses all the activities and individuals that are dedicated to improving the quality of life for every individual in the world – ultimately contributing to the prosperity of people and the planet.

At Catalyst 2030, in our attempt to build the sector, we have initiated some actions:

–   We co-published the "New Allies" report (Ashoka et al., 2021), which outlines how social innovators work hand in hand with other players to provide a testing ground for collaborative solutions. This was followed by the *New Allies Handbook* (Catalyst 2030 et al., 2021), which offers a practical guide for civil servants wishing to partner with social innovators to implement solutions.
–   We then launched *Legal Reform as a Catalyst for Social Enterprise* (Morrison & Foerster LLP, 2021) with the Lex Mundi Foundation to provide an insight into the global policy landscape for social innovation and the best practices which needed to be followed to develop the SIS.
–   Next, we completed the guidebook *Turning Wheels* (Catalyst 2030, 2023), which highlights how social innovators' proximity to and strong understanding of local communities aids the effectiveness of their work. Through all of these reports, we have highlighted the fact that proximate (local) leaders can be key allies for governments in bringing about the necessary structural changes and working to change the policies, practices, power dynamics, social norms or mindsets that currently hinder progress. They apply participative, people-centric ways of developing solutions to deliver innovative approaches, which can complement governments' macro-level perspectives and offer financial benefits for societies.
–   Finally, we started working with governments through a multilateral lens and supported them in launching Government Champions of Social Innovation and Impact, [4]a network of social innovators within governments, mandated to further develop the social innovation sector.

But this is just the start. To develop the infrastructure which will allow social innovators to thrive will take time.

What are the next steps?

To create a "container," or the process for establishing the infrastructure to ensure we have a people- and planet-centered economy, we need to listen to our communities, to my street children, and work with them to create the solutions and change the systems.

Outlined below are three of the key systems-change actions which will place communities at the center of decision-making and are critical to ensuring that people and planet thrive:

1.   Creating formalized government institutional support: Building on the work already done, we need to focus on creating formalized support from government by

establishing a Ministry of Social Innovation, which can become a one-stop shop and centralized agency capable of supporting social innovators and promoting the growth of the sector within the country. In addition, the ministry will be able to work with and coordinate social innovation priorities across all other government institutions. The Minister of Social Innovation, or equivalent role, will also be capable of ensuring that social innovators are given a seat at the decision-making table so that all government priorities are aligned with the needs and voices of local communities.

2. Scaling the work of social innovators by leveraging artificial intelligence (AI): Developing an "Information Highway" for social innovation is also critical. The Information Highway will map primary and secondary data sources: areas in most need of intervention to achieve the SDGs; communities' perceptions of their needs in the areas identified; possible solutions by innovators in the vicinity; matching needs with solutions and determining funding flows. This will enable targeted, community needs-based interventions. The Information Highway thus serves as the foundational infrastructure necessary for the social innovators to thrive and create truly impactful change within their respective local communities.

3. Redirecting financing streams toward SIS creation: Achieving the SDGs and protecting the people and the planet requires innovative thinking to redistribute financing from the exploitation to the protection of people and the planet. We believe that efforts to protect the PPE and formalize the SIS should be financed via equitable channels that acknowledge the disproportionate contribution of specific stakeholders in harming the people and the planet. Two critical suggestions are (1) the Luxury Consumption Levy (LCL) and (2) the One Cent Rule for Digital Payments. The LCL aims to direct revenue through a levy on luxury goods purchased globally by the world's wealthiest population segment, purchases which are often made across international borders and in international waters, leading to tax avoidance and an unequal distribution of economic benefits. The One Cent Rule for Digital Payments would aim to collect 1 cent on every digital payment made. Thus, the populations and sectors that put the environment under strain would become responsible for financing efforts that ultimately enable the people and planet to thrive.

The sector, as it currently stands, is akin to a house that was built a long time ago on rudimentary foundations and is very well-decorated. The house is functional and provides a level of dignity and support for those who live and work inside it. However, a closer examination of the house reveals the lack of critical foundations, including consistent electricity, adequate heating and working plumbing infrastructure. The house still functions but the critical foundations that enable its inhabitants to truly thrive are absent.

In conclusion, if we place people and the planet at the center of all decisions, tap into our collective wisdom and strengths, inspire social innovators across sectors and listen to the communities we serve, then the SDGs will surely be achievable by 2050. But the work must start now. We must take tangible actions toward co-creating the SIS and building the necessary infrastructure for community-oriented social innovators to thrive and do what they do best: transforming barriers into opportunities (Billimoria, 2024e) to protect both the people and the planet.

Notes

1 See https://www.socialprogress.org/2024-social-progress-index.

2 See https://catalyst2030.net.

3 See https://systemschangephilanthropy.org/self-assessment.

4 See https://catalyst2030.net/government-champions-of-social-innovation-and-impact.

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