# The social innovation highway to ecosystem transformation

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Social entrepreneurs and other social innovators are a critical component of the collaborative efforts needed to solve society's most pressing problems – from climate change and income inequality to generational consequences impacting human lives and the planet.

Often deeply entrenched across multiple societies and systems, these problems require innovative solutions. That is why the Skoll Foundation's core approach continues to be investing in, connecting and championing social entrepreneurs and social innovation. We define social innovation as the quest to solve a societal problem – whether it be harmful impacts from climate change or lack of affordable, lifesaving health care – by applying an innovative or reimagined solution that effectively contributes to lasting systemic change.

Since our founding 25 years ago, the Skoll Foundation has supported thousands of social innovators and entrepreneurs and their social innovations. Much of this support came in the form of awards and grants to organizations and collaborative initiatives advancing social innovation around the globe.

Our commitment to social innovation remains steadfast while our strategy has evolved to better support social innovators of all kinds working to transform entire ecosystems. The need for social innovation – for new answers and fresh thinking on long-standing, persistent problems – continues to be ever-present.

Grounded in the definition of social entrepreneurship as set forth by Martin and Osberg (2007) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, the Skoll Foundation partners with social entrepreneurs to drive equilibrium change. Social entrepreneurs start by identifying a persistent, suboptimal status quo that disadvantages significant segments of society. They then work hard to shift that status quo toward a more equitable, just and peaceful equilibrium, leading to a better future for both the targeted group and society at large.

Through ongoing dialogue and partnership with our community of social entrepreneurs, we repeatedly heard that driving change at this ecosystem-level requires coordination and collaboration across communities, the private, public and philanthropic sectors, and with other civil society entities.

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As a result, our approach now includes a heightened emphasis on developing and supporting social innovators who pursue systems orchestration. We call those social innovators "systems orchestrators" – entities and individuals who understand how to connect disparate parts of an ecosystem and create spaces for coordination and collaboration around shared goals. Systems orchestrators direct and shape durable change across an ecosystem, often behind the scenes. As credible brokers, they connect and provide technical expertise to critical stakeholders across sectors to drive change at multiple levels. Importantly, their work builds bridges connecting community needs and solutions with existing power centers and decision-makers around policy, resource flows, narratives and other systemic leverage points.

In addition to a focus on supporting systems orchestrators, we have increased efforts to unlock and direct more resources to address urgent societal problems, not only by mobilizing all of the assets at the Foundation's disposal, but also by deepening and expanding partnerships across sectors, especially the public sector.

Recent events have heightened our sense of urgency and fomented what many are calling a "polycrisis": a global pandemic, increased political turmoil, reckonings with social injustice and violence, and a steady worsening of long-simmering problems, such as climate change and economic inequality. Like many others who support social change, we asked ourselves how we could best tackle accelerating problems when the resources at our disposal are limited. In response, we aim to leverage the totality of our assets to demonstrate the power, and help drive uptake, of proven social innovations that effectively address the accelerating problems we – both people and planet – are facing. This paper will highlight how the Skoll Foundation's approach has remained committed to social entrepreneurship, while also expanding to support the scaling and sustainability of social innovation through systems orchestration. We will share examples of how the Foundation supports social entrepreneurs and other social innovators that are also catalyzing change at the ecosystem level. We will also share what we have learned so far about the challenges that systems orchestrators face, and the avenues we have identified for addressing them.

Informed by what our network of social innovators told us they needed, our evolution has resulted in a deepening of the shared accountability we feel toward collective action with our vast network of innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders. The social innovators we work with understand that we are not just invested in their particular idea or approach, but also in changing the circumstances and contexts that could enable them to succeed. For example, we have expanded our network and alliances with government, bilateral and multilateral entities and leaders to unlock connection, resource and access to these critical stakeholders.

By working toward shared goals and engaging the many levers of change within a system, by adapting the Foundation's monitoring, learning and evaluation strategies to be more responsive to what our Skoll Social Innovation Awardees, grantees and partners are doing and learning, and by mobilizing as many assets and resources as possible to help drive impact, we are focused on doing what we can to ensure that innovative solutions are given every chance to succeed and benefit both the planet and as many people as possible.

## From social entrepreneurship and innovation to ecosystem transformation

While the Skoll Foundation continues to invest in social entrepreneurs and innovators who are developing novel or reimagined solutions for societal problems, it is clear that they need the support of a more holistic ecosystem approach to make a dent in these problems and keep pace with the rate at which they are accelerating.

For example, SELCO Foundation pursues sustainable energy access and reliable energy services for people who lack reliable access to the grid in India and beyond. When SELCO Foundation develops decentralized renewable energy solutions for last-mile health-care facilities, the innovation can only scale if multiple challenges are tackled simultaneously, such as local financing solutions, capacity and skills, and policies that enable sustainable

operations and maintenance. To address this interconnected set of challenges, SELCO Foundation takes an ecosystem approach.[1]

This approach is not unlike how we view the Foundation's philanthropic giving: the approximately $100 million that the Skoll Foundation disburses in grants each year is a small amount relative to other funders and relative to the scale of the problems we seek to address. To make an outsized impact, our support needs to be catalytic; it needs to generate value and impact beyond the funding and unlock additional support and resources. This is why we focus on social innovators. Unlike other innovation processes and cycles that can be motivated by profit maximization, social innovators seek to solve societal challenges that are deeply entrenched and often have persisted for years.

Across the Foundation's strategic priorities, we have invested not only in innovative solutions – such as individual community health worker models that have proven to save lives and extend the reach of health systems – but also in other efforts that form an "impact constellation" around those solutions. An impact constellation consists of organizations and individuals working collectively to change an ecosystem for the better.

Through radical collaboration and harmonizing strategies, these constellations create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts and help take proven solutions to the next level of scale and sustainability. In the community health example, Skoll-supported social entrepreneurs helped start the Community Heath Impact Coalition (CHIC), Financing Alliance for Health and the Africa Frontline First Initiative, efforts which are targeting different aspects of the challenge at the systems level, informed by proximate experience from social entrepreneurs. Together, this diverse group of social innovators is working to address underlying systemic barriers – policy, coordination and financing – that have kept community health systems from realizing their full potential.

Overall, the Skoll Foundation has broadened its investment approach to include more systems orchestrators and intermediaries, who provide support to proximate leaders within the Foundation's strategic priority areas. We elevate these systems orchestrators by funding them, connecting them to power centers, inviting in other funders and sharing their stories.

It is striking that many of the systems orchestrators that the Skoll Foundation is currently supporting, as a build-out of our investment in social entrepreneurship and innovation, work on structural and systemic problems that have long been documented but have been neglected or overlooked. SaveLIFE Foundation is one such example of a systems orchestrator. This innovative organization tackles the pernicious problem of automobile deaths through improvements to road safety and emergency care in India, leading to sustained, measurable improvements in infrastructure design, enforcement frameworks and access to quality care. Road accidents claim 1.35 million lives globally each year, primarily impacting low- and middle-income countries like India. Half of those who die in these accidents in India have treatable injuries. SaveLIFE's approach reduces the number and severity of road traffic injuries and deaths by combining data analysis, demonstration implementation and policy advocacy to strategically align stakeholders across India's public, private and social sectors. Their model uses data and technology to identify high-risk zones on dangerous roads, investigates crashes to establish the root causes and tests interventions to reduce road accidents and prevent fatalities. The organization collaborates with government partners who implement recommended road safety changes, including improvements in trauma care.

SaveLIFE complements their deep work with governments by ensuring that key learnings across their work help drive important national policy shifts, including India's Good Samaritan Law. Already, the organization's work has resulted in significant reductions in road accident fatalities on a growing list of highways in India: between 2017 and 2023, deaths from road accidents decreased by 58 percent on the Mumbai–Pune Expressway and a new policy banning trucks from traveling with protruding rods is estimated to have the potential to save 9,000 lives each year.

**Table 1**     SaveLIFE reduction in road accident deaths

| Roadway | % reduction in deaths |
| --- | ---: |
| Mumbai-Pune Expressway 2017 – 2023 | 58 |
| NH 48 (Old Mumbai-Pune Highway) 2018 – 2023 | 51 |
| Yamuna Expressway 2019 – 2023 | 40 |
| NH 30 (Jabalpur-Sleemanabad) 2021 – 2023 | 49 |
| NH 21 (Jaipur-Mahwa) 2021 – 2023 | 24 |
| NH19 (Maith– Panagarh) 2021 – 2023 | 24 |
| NH 19 (Etawah – Chakeri) 2021 – 2023 | 11 |
| NH 44 (Silk board – Attibele) 2021 – 2023 | 11 |
| NH 5 (Ludhiana – Firozpur) 2021 – 2023 | 10 |

Source: SaveLIFE Foundation.

Adding this focus on systems orchestrators such as SaveLIFE gives us a growing understanding of the ecosystems shaping our strategic priorities and issue areas, how they interconnect and what it takes to contribute to transformational social change. Central to this understanding is the importance of change occurring at multiple levels of a system. We seek out social innovations that are driving shifts in resource flows and policies (structural change), relationships and power dynamics (relational change), and mindsets and behaviors (transformative change) – an approach derived from the "Water of Systems Change" model.[2]

**Figure 1**     Six conditions of systems change
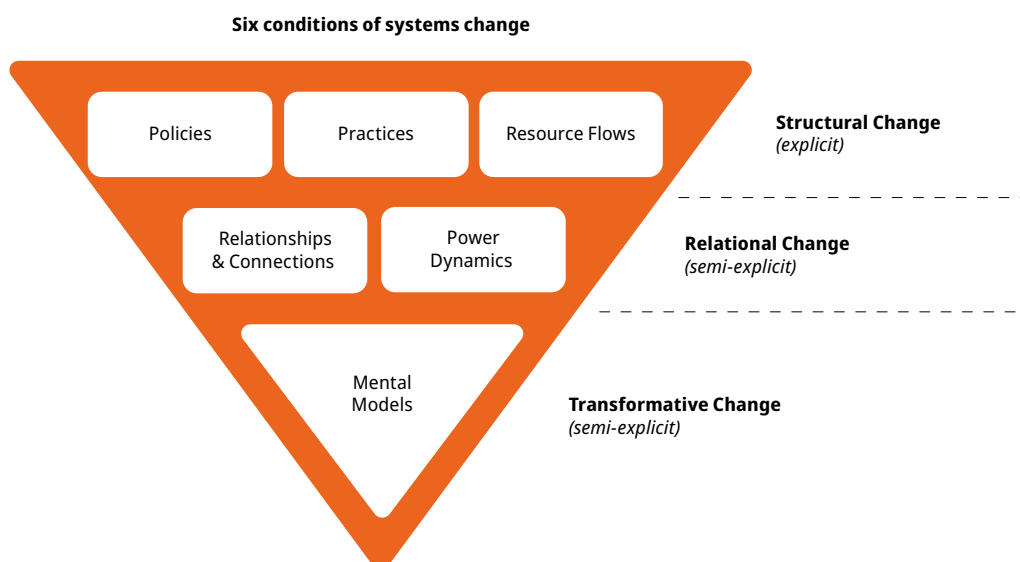


Source: Kania et al., 2018.

When applying this frame to issue spaces that we prioritize, such as protecting our planet from the worst impacts of climate change, we make sense of possible systemic change as illustrated in the following example on reducing deforestation:

1. Structural change level: Secured land tenure and carbon rights for Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLC) and expanded access to finance for forest-dependent communities.
2. Relational change level: Stronger coordination across climate and nature-focused organizations and IPLC voices elevated in policy and decision-making venues.
3. Transformative change level: Supportive narratives gaining traction around the importance of land rights in climate mitigation.

One Skoll Foundation Awardee, MapBiomas, facilitates these multiple dimensions of systems change by providing comprehensive information on land cover and land use, with real-time insights and tools available for use by policymakers, the private sector and community and Indigenous leaders. Approximately 20 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture and land-use change, and tropical forests in Brazil (where MapBiomas' work first started), across the Americas, Southeast Asia and the Congo Basin represent both the greatest threat and opportunity for land-use emissions. If we do not reverse current deforestation and land-use changes, then we will lose crucial carbon sinks and life-sustaining biodiversity. Reducing these emissions and increasing carbon storage in this sector is critical to neutralizing global emissions by mid-century and achieving the Paris Agreement target of limiting global temperature rise to below 2 degrees Celsius.

Traditional approaches to the mapping of and taking appropriate action on land use are slow and prohibitively expensive at the scale required, which can result in uninformed actions or a lack of action altogether. MapBiomas brings together local regional networks – made up of environmental research institutions, startups, non-governmental organizations and other parties – combining their efforts and expertise to produce joint products and create the most comprehensive information possible on land cover and land use with real-time insights.

By combining leading practices in remote sensing, machine learning and local land use expertise with globally available satellite images, the MapBiomas network can create 35 years' worth of land use maps in less time and using less budget than it takes to create a single year of maps by traditional methods. All this information is then published openly and freely, alongside tools that allow different users to understand the data and take tangible action to prevent deforestation and promote carbon sink land use practices. With this type of information, MapBiomas enables coordinated, data-based decisions on the part of government, businesses, civil society and agriculture, while at the same time equipping advocates to ensure that the land rights of Indigenous people and local communities are protected.

## Social innovation and ecosystem transformation: what's next

Our experience translating solutions into system-wide impact reminds us that pursuing systems change requires us to be more flexible and adaptable as a philanthropic platform. Multiple levers need to be pursued, as there is rarely a single solution that will result in systemic change. Progression is not linear, and systems are constantly changing. As a result, solutions and the supporting ecosystem need to be dynamic. Operating with such dynamism and uncertainty is a complex endeavor, which is why doing this work requires alignment of learning and impact goals.

To guide us through this type of work, Skoll has built and vetted an evaluation and learning approach grounded in the work of our social innovators and equitable evaluation models. This approach starts with understanding the desired outcomes within each strategic priority and building a robust learning and evaluation agenda to monitor ecosystem insights and portfolio progress toward those desired outcomes. Feedback from social innovators and ecosystem partners allows us to test and refine our hypotheses on how our resources can be deployed to maximize impact.

Our learning approach acknowledges that some desired outcomes may take decades to achieve, so we track near-term signals of progress along the journey. This allows us to be nimble in our learning agenda and mirror the nimbleness with which social innovators operate. They may have a clear view of what they are working toward but the pathways to get there vary and in some cases are unknowable at the outset. For example, an organization trying to unlock a transformative public resource shift toward health may seize a policy shift window that was not present at the start of the year. Pursuing this opportunity may take the place of another planned priority. Flexible funding and a learning orientation allow us to engage with such a social innovator with curiosity to understand what is driving this shift and follow the trajectory of their efforts. With a more rigid evaluation approach, we might consider such efforts as a distraction from previously stated targets. Pivots like this are part of the work of ecosystem transformation.

To be a learning organization and navigate the complexity of this work requires an increased focus on change management and aligning stakeholders and partners around what it will take to make our efforts even more impactful as we collectively pursue a better status quo.

The Foundation continues to actively explore several areas related to transformation journeys that start with social innovators and culminate in ecosystems that function better for disadvantaged or under-resourced groups. We are currently tracking the following aspects:

– How we can better invest in and champion social entrepreneurs, while at the same time connecting them with systems orchestrators.
– How we can increase focus on strategic priorities while maintaining an interconnected systems view.
– What it will take to get more partners and funders (philanthropic, public, private and others) to play a part in this journey. Our investment in social innovation has always been premised on the understanding that no single entity can solve societal problems alone. It is not enough to be a catalytic funder. Our most pressing societal problems demand that we all work in collaboration with each other and that we all hold close the goal of system-wide transformation.

One thing we have discovered in increasing and sharpening our focus on an ecosystem approach is that systems orchestration is not a new concept that shows up only in certain sectors and systems. No matter what field you are in, what problem you are trying to solve, there are already people, organizations and coalitions filling this crucial systems orchestration role. We encourage those working on social change to find these systems orchestrators, partner with them and connect them with the resources they need to do more.

## Barriers and supports for systems change

It is clear that systems orchestrators can accelerate solutions and impact, but it is not enough simply to applaud their efforts: they need sustained support of all kinds to bring about these monumental shifts.

In 2022, the Bridgespan Group surveyed about 100 organizations that were specifically focused on systems orchestration – what the Foundation calls "systems orchestrators" and what Bridgespan refers to as "field catalysts." The organizations and leaders surveyed for the project worked across a wide variety of issues, including health equity, gender-based violence, climate change and education.

The survey confirmed that their work could be accelerated with the right support from funders. It showed that field catalysts are persistently underfunded, with most needing to raise between half to twice their current budget, while remaining lean. Still, because these organizations consistently punch far above their weight, 87 percent of field catalysts believe they would achieve their systems-change goals within just two decades if provided with the necessary resources and consistent support. This held true even for leaders of

color, who have historically received the lowest amounts of funding. Such confidence is grounded in field catalysts' intimate understanding of how to set intermediate goals and adapt strategies to achieve lasting long-term social change.

**Figure 2**   Challenges faced by systems orchestrators (n = 87, top six responses illustrated)
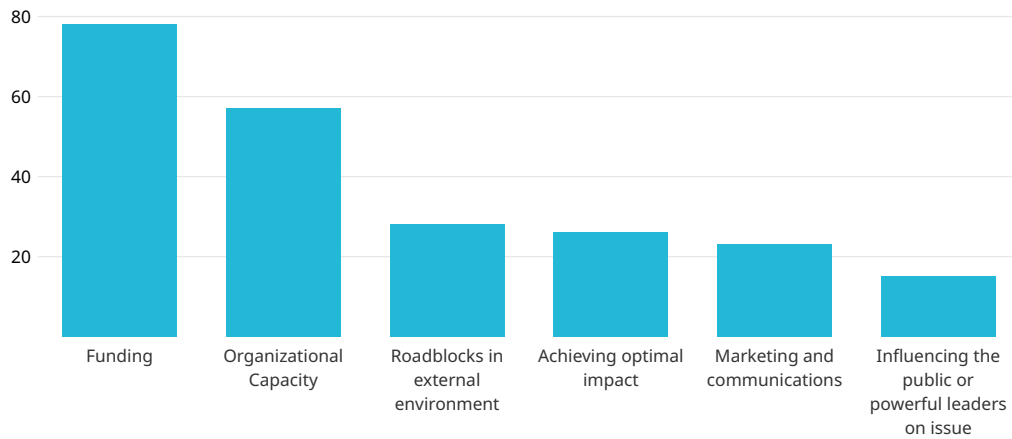


Source: Farnham et al., 2023, p. 13.

Beyond funding, systems orchestrators cannot succeed without the connections and collaboration that allow them to knit together shifts in culture, policy, technology and other areas. To succeed, it is essential that innovators in a system come forward and connect with those orchestrators. Each organization, scientist, policymaker and businessperson has unique talents and resources that could make a difference in advancing the work of an ecosystem approach to change – and all it takes is stepping forward to take part. Furthermore, policies that create an enabling environment for ecosystem transformation require financing, and cross-sectoral collaboration is essential in advancing ecosystem approaches at the scale necessary to maximize the opportunity we see with proven social innovations.[3]

As a platform for social innovation, the Skoll Foundation has learned a great deal from our 25 years of operation about what makes social entrepreneurs and social innovators effective. Our deepened emphasis on systems orchestration has brought into focus the role they play in accelerating ecosystem transformation. We look forward to continuing to ramp up support for social entrepreneurs and social innovators in different ways, partnering with those who can support, scale and be a part of the collective action needed to address our most pressing challenges.

## Endnotes

1   SELCO Foundation, n.d.

2   Kania et al., 2018.

3   World Economic Forum, 2024.

# References

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