

CONNECTIVITY, CAPACITY and INFRASTRUCTURE for PLACE-BASED INNOVATION



CANADIAN FORUM for SOCIAL INNOVATION

2-4 June 2025, Halifax

the
la **COLLABORATIVE**



CANADIAN SCIENCE POLICY CENTRE
CENTRE SUR LES POLITIQUES
SCIENTIFIQUES CANADIENNES



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FOREWORD

The third edition of the Canadian Forum for Social Innovation convened in Halifax from June 2-4, 2025, at a moment of profound transition. Across Canada and beyond, communities are navigating overlapping crises—affordability, housing, climate, equity, and trust in institutions—while simultaneously holding deep aspirations for more just, resilient, and regenerative futures. The Forum was designed as a space to pause, connect, and think together about how we might better align connectivity, capacity, and infrastructure to enable place-based, mission-driven innovation.

These proceedings capture the collective intelligence that emerged from five catalyst roundtables and a series of structured deliberative workshops and reflect the substance of discussion. Participants from community organizations, governments, academia, philanthropy, and social innovation intermediaries engaged in candid dialogue about what is working, what is failing, and what must change if we are to move beyond incremental responses to systemic challenges. While perspectives varied, a unifying insight surfaced repeatedly: transformation depends not only on ideas or funding, but on the quality of relationships, trust, and shared sense-making across the ecosystem.

Connectivity—between sectors, disciplines, communities, and ways of knowing—was identified as both a persistent gap and a powerful lever. Participants emphasized the need to strengthen ecosystem intelligence, support mission-oriented research and practice, value lived and Indigenous knowledge, and create governance and funding structures capable of holding complexity and emergence. Just as importantly, the Forum surfaced tensions that remain unresolved: between trust-based and metric-driven accountability, top-down and bottom-up governance, incremental reform and systemic rebuilding. These tensions are not weaknesses; they are signals of a field actively grappling with the scale of change required.

This report is an invitation—to policymakers, funders, researchers, practitioners, and communities—to continue the work of listening, connecting, and acting together. The insights documented here reflect both urgency and hope: urgency in the face of growing inequities, and hope rooted in the belief that, through intentional collaboration and shared purpose, different futures remain possible.

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CATALYST ROUNDTABLE 1: WHAT DOES MISSION-DRIVEN INNOVATION LOOK LIKE?



2 June 2025

Panelists

- Danya Pastuszek (CEO, Tamarack Institute)
- Marie Lagacé (VP Partnerships and Strategic Engagement, Sillons Québec)
- Stefan Leslie (CEO, Research NS)
- Andrea Nemtin (CEO, Social Innovation Canada)
- Vinod Rajasekaran (CEO, Future of Good)

In the first catalyst roundtable, leaders from social innovation and nonprofit organizations came together to explore the question: what does mission-driven innovation look like? Panelists discussed how mission-driven innovation is defined, the barriers that limit its success, and potential solutions. Across perspectives, they emphasized the central role of ecosystem intelligence and connectivity in enabling mission-driven innovation to move from aspiration to impact.

Key Takeaways

Mission-driven innovation is constrained by limited capacity and weak connectivity, but these barriers are not insurmountable. Panelists identified clear priorities for addressing wicked problems:

- strengthening ecosystem intelligence, including through AI-enabled sense-making
- defining missions clearly

- increasing flexibility and collaboration between funders, researchers and communities
- deepening cross-sector and community connectivity
- building relationships with governing bodies, and
- cultivating belief in the possibility of change

Taken together, these insights point to a system in need of transformation—and to practical pathways for achieving it through intentional, connected, and mission-driven approaches.



Missions

Mission-driven innovation and social innovation significantly overlap and can both be understood as approaches for responding to complexity, crisis, and systemic challenges.

Missions help shape a world in which physical infrastructure reflects a vision, while ensuring access to the tools, talent, and resources needed to achieve this vision. This is most effective when communities themselves define the missions that matter most to them, supported by social innovation, place-based partnerships, and capacity building for changemakers.

While missions require policy alignment, institutional support, and enabling structures, social innovation provide mechanisms through which missions are implemented. As an approach, mission-driven innovation holds significant promise but also requires cultural, structural, and resource shifts. Social innovation is essential to changing how systems operate and how resources flow.

Missions are often viewed as top-down efforts led by governments to address complex societal challenges. However, missions do not need to follow this model. They can also emerge from

grassroots and community-led engagement, allowing solutions to be shaped by lived experience and local knowledge.

Ecosystem Intelligence and Connectivity

Mission-driven innovation and social innovation rely on similar assumptions and conditions for success. Connectivity and ecosystem intelligence are foundational to both.

Ecosystem intelligence and connectivity are critical determinants of whether a mission succeeds or fails. If policies in Canada are to promote mission approaches, grassroots readiness and strong connections across communities are essential as a foundation. Communities must be connected in order to articulate shared needs and visions, and solutions must draw on the collective intelligence that exists across the ecosystem.

Without connectivity, ecosystem intelligence cannot emerge. Intelligence is generated through relationships—between communities, organizations, researchers, and institutions. Mission-driven innovation therefore depends on strengthening these connections so insight can be shared, synthesized, and acted upon.

Mission-driven innovation can be understood as:

- Closely intertwined with social innovation, which enables implementation
- Emerging through community and stakeholder engagement
- Dependent on the relationship between ecosystem intelligence and connectivity

Barriers to Mission-Driven Innovation

The panel identified two primary barriers to mission-driven innovation in the current system: limits in capacity and a lack of connectivity.

Capacity Gap

Many community organizations in Canada are already operating beyond their limits and struggling to meet basic needs. From food banks to family services, organizations are increasingly unable to respond to growing demand. The rise of crowdfunding for essential items such as diapers illustrates the severity of these gaps.

Some panelists argued that the system needs a more sustainable model for social innovation, while others suggested that sustainability is insufficient in a rapidly changing world. They advocated instead for regenerative approaches that prioritize transformation over incremental fixes. Existing systems, they noted, were designed for a different era and are too strained to support transformational change. Weak ecosystem capacity in areas such as financing, governance, and impact measurement, just like existing gaps in governing bodies' structures, systems, and flexibility limit capacity to implement mission-driven innovation.

Low Connectivity

Beyond capacity constraints, implementation challenges stem from insufficient connectivity. The ecosystem lacks the dense, adaptive connections needed for projects to evolve in complex and changing contexts. As one panelist described it, the mycelium that keeps the system connected is missing.

As a result, valuable data and insights remain fragmented and fail to become actionable intelligence. The system often knows more about consumer behavior than about where food insecurity will be most severe. There is also limited interaction between sectors, with government not always accessing or integrating research and frontline insights. Rigid rules and regulations further inhibit change and implementation.

Removing Barriers

Using AI to Enable Sense-Making Across a Wider Scope

Sense-making was identified as a critical frontier for social change. AI-enabled sense-making can significantly increase connectivity by unlocking intelligence that already exists across the ecosystem, including frontline, academic, machine, and ancestral knowledge.

Sense-making helps identify what is working, what is not, why certain approaches gain traction, and where future challenges may emerge. Examples included AI models used to predict teen suicide rates and AI-enabled sensors used to prevent malaria outbreaks.

One example cited was the Future of Good's use of AI to query the survey data on nonprofit and charity workers that serves to produce the Changemaker Wellbeing Index, to better understand nonprofit workforce health. AI-enabled sense-making allows to explore key aspect of ecosystems dynamics – such as future talent needs or trends in food insecurity – and promotes the use of shared analytical infrastructure.

Mission-Oriented Research for Social Impact

In academic contexts, mission-driven research requires a clearly articulated purpose: it must also have a destination beyond the research process itself. Research proposals should explicitly answer: to what end? They must consider what outcome is being pursued, why it matters, and how success will be determined. If findings are to be embedded in society, they must be meaningful and relevant to their context.

Mission-oriented research differs from traditional research and requires distinct forms of support. These projects often unfold over long time horizons and require both funding stability and flexibility to adapt as conditions change. To foster mission-oriented research, funding bodies should allocate resources to creating environments that allow teams the autonomy to pursue outcomes, rather than serve as an agency for a funder who would define these goals.

Publicly funded research, in particular, has a responsibility to address challenges of broad social value and align with societal priorities expressed through funding decisions. Data challenges, however, remain significant. Without meaningful engagement with communities, data collection

risks being incomplete or harmful. Listening to lived experience, compensating community knowledge, and integrating these insights into sense-making systems are essential.

Funders must be willing to engage actively in coordination and collaboration. Ongoing communication between funders and teams is essential, as is embedding governance, monitoring, evaluation, and course correction into the project from the outset. Because outcomes cannot be fully predicted, the ability to pivot is a core feature of mission-driven work. This approach challenges traditional funding models and requires funders to work alongside research teams in pursuit of shared goals. It also requires a cultural shift in how research, accountability, and collaboration are understood.



Increasing Connectivity Between Sectors

Transforming systems requires breaking down rigid sector boundaries. Panelists highlighted examples of philanthropy, media, and other sectors questioning and expanding their traditional roles. In the context of missions, innovation depends on recognizing the unique assets each sector brings while critically examining outdated assumptions about their responsibilities. This new social contract embeds innovation across sectors, focusing less on labels and more on collective problem-solving.

Connectivity must also extend across scales—from local to global—and center community leadership. While many promising initiatives already exist, stronger links are needed between communities, researchers, and institutions. Communities hold solutions, but they must be adequately resourced to lead experimentation and maintain relationships. Trusted intermediary

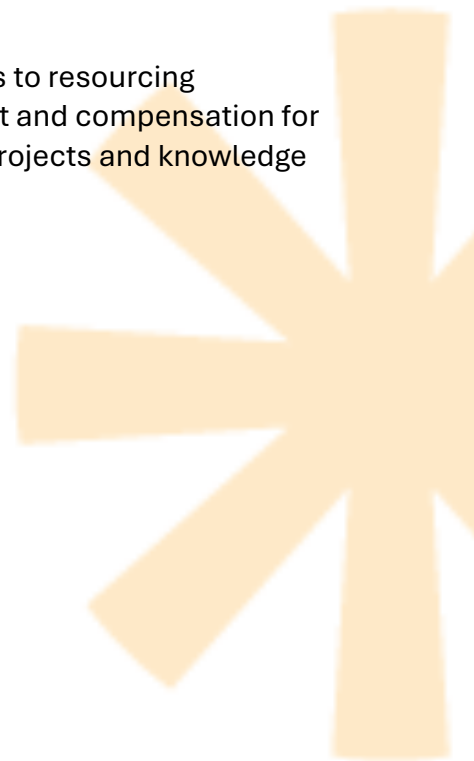
organizations play a critical role in sustaining these connections. Emerging structures such as Innovation Councils illustrate how these relationships can be supported, even in the absence of formal backing.

Mission-driven innovation requires that solutions are not only developed but also heard. Strong relationships with governing bodies are needed so policymakers understand both the data and the implications of proposed solutions. One way to foster these relationships is to ensure that social innovation practitioners have a seat at the table to connect communities, researchers, and policymakers. Because social innovation practitioners are often closest to implementation, their inclusion is an asset when it comes to shaping the policies, structures, and institutions needed to address complex challenges.

Shared Belief in the Possibility of Success

One panelist articulated a vision of success in which communities are in control of their reality, e.g. they own their assets, basic needs are met, and people live free from discrimination. Achieving such outcomes requires a shared belief that regenerative futures are possible. Even if these goals extend beyond a single generation, mission-driven innovation depends on holding ambitious, hopeful visions. Without belief in the possibility of success, efforts risk defaulting to incrementalism rather than transformation.

In addition, it was noted that there is a need for more equitable approaches to resourcing community-driven research, which would include both greater engagement and compensation for participatory research, as well as increased access to funds for research projects and knowledge mobilization originating in the Innovation Labs and Social sector



CATALYST ROUNDTABLE 2: HOW MIGHT WE UNLOCK THE CONNECTIVITY SPARKED BY SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS TO DRIVE CRITICAL SYSTEMS CHANGE?



2 June 2025

Panelists

- Diane Roussin (Project Director, Winnipeg Boldness Project)
- Jimmy Paquet-Cormier (Principal, Llio)
- Kjeld Mizpah Conyers-Steede (Founder, Future Civics)
- Nicole Norris (Director of Social Innovation, Georgian College)
- Paige Reeves (Senior Leaders of Research and Social Innovation, Action Lab)

The second catalyst roundtable convened five panelists to explore the question: How might we unlock the connectivity sparked by social innovation labs to drive critical systems change? Panelists began by defining social innovation labs and clarifying the roles they play within the broader social innovation ecosystem. The discussion then turned to the barriers labs face and potential pathways forward. Throughout, connectivity emerged as a central theme—particularly the relationships labs cultivate with communities, funders, and host institutions.

Key Takeaways

Social innovation labs are collaborative, experimental spaces that operate locally while remaining attentive to systems-level change. They play a vital role in building trust, strengthening community capacity, and generating solutions to complex challenges. Despite persistent barriers—particularly around funding and power—labs continue to demonstrate the value of experimentation, relationship-building, and co-creation. Moving forward will require greater trust in both communities and the process itself, as well as more inclusive and flexible approaches to financing social innovation work: this includes rewarding those that take unconventional approaches and inviting new practitioners into this space with funding options

What are Social Innovation Labs?

Social innovation labs are difficult to define precisely because they can exist in nearly any context. This flexibility also makes them challenging to explain or “sell,” as they do not follow a single model. Instead, labs draw on a shared methodology and set of tools that allow them to respond to the needs of a given context. As a result, there is ongoing debate about what exactly constitutes a social innovation lab. However, panelists emphasized that some level of coherence is necessary—especially when considering the role labs play in missions or complex problem-solving.

At their core, social innovation labs hold space for diverse changemakers to sense-make, generate, develop, and test portfolios of promising solutions to complex societal challenges. They operate in ways that are collaborative, experimental, iterative, and systems-oriented. Their purpose is not to produce quick fixes, but to focus on work that truly matters.

Social innovation labs are often misunderstood as social enterprise incubators or firms that operate on different type of business model that favors “social” outcomes rather than return on investments. Rather, labs are spaces for collective problem-solving intelligence. They bring together diverse groups to co-create solutions, pathways, policies, and, at times, enterprises that contribute to positive social change.

Collaboration as a Core Component of Social Innovation Labs

While social innovation labs take many forms and perform multiple functions, collaboration is a defining feature. Traditional problem-solving often involves convening experts or senior decision-makers, analyzing data, designing interventions, and implementing solutions with limited community involvement. When the people most affected are excluded from design, solutions frequently fail. While this approach may be appropriate in some situations, it is insufficient for addressing complex social challenges.

Social innovation labs instead rely on **collective intelligence**. They bring people into co-design processes and work alongside marginalized communities, integrating lived experience into problem-solving. Labs specialize in convening diverse groups to make sense of large volumes of information and to ensure efforts are focused on the right issues.

Labs also recognize that insight can emerge from anywhere within the system. By engaging funders, government partners, service providers, and community members together, labs create space for shared learning and richer understanding.

Experimentation and Iteration

Social innovation labs are part of a bigger family of intermediary organizations, including incubators and innovation hubs. What distinguishes labs is their capacity for rapid experimentation and iteration. Rather than implementing fully formed solutions, labs prototype components, test them, and revise based on what is learned. The ability to experiment, fail, and adapt makes labs particularly valuable. However, panelists noted that scaling successful experiments remains a persistent challenge. Moving from promising prototypes to real-world solutions or systemic pathways is often difficult.



Scaling does not always mean the mass diffusion of a product or solution that worked. It may involve influencing policy, shifting narratives, or fostering long-term cultural change. Early engagement with stakeholders—especially policymakers—is critical. If decision-makers only enter at the end of the process, they miss the learning, adaptations, and community-driven insights that shaped the work. Labs therefore create environments where people from diverse backgrounds participate in experimentation together and contribute to shaping new iterations of solutions.

Simultaneously Local and Systems-Focused

One limitation of some participatory approaches is that, while they center marginalized voices, they may lack a broader systems lens. Social innovation labs address this gap by working both locally and systemically. Panelists discussed 3 horizons of change. Horizon 1 focuses on immediate interventions and Horizon 2 on adaptive transition, while Horizon 3 seeks long-term transformation of systems, relationships, and ways of being. Social innovation labs can engage across all three horizons, including both urgent responses and visionary change.

A common tension arises when expectations for long-term transformation are paired with short-term resources. Rather than debating which horizon is most important, panelists emphasized that labs are uniquely positioned to work across them—provided expectations are aligned with capacity.

The Role of Social Innovation Labs in Critical Systems Change

Building Trust

Social innovation labs create environments where **trusting relationships** can develop, particularly with marginalized communities. One panelist described their lab experience as centered on “relationship, relationship, relationship,” emphasizing that relationship-building itself is a critical outcome. Though rarely funded directly, strong relationships enable deeper sense-making and faster engagement with complexity. Trust allows participants to navigate difficult conversations and work through disagreement. Without it, progress toward solutions becomes slower and more challenging.

Panelists also highlighted that Indigenous voices are the ones that, time and time again, have been locked out of the conversation, which stresses the importance of trust for healing and reconciliation. In many such contexts, deep listening, ceremony, and relational accountability can create the conditions necessary for collective healing and systems change.

Empowering Individuals

Many individuals and families—particularly in Indigenous communities—spend significant time and energy navigating systems meant to support them. In some cases, these systems cause harm rather than help. While social innovation labs can help build individual capacity, their greater value often lies in removing systemic barriers. Labs may use resources intended for individual interventions to instead help families navigate entrenched systems, offering highly personalized, family-centered support. As people increasingly reject standardized services in favor of customized approaches, labs provide models for responding to diverse needs. Customization, one panelist argued, can become the new standard.

Tapping into and Building the Capacity of Communities

Contrary to common assumptions, communities are often highly organized and innovative. Communities regularly mobilize around local challenges, build networks, and redefine how they

engage with government and the economy. Social innovation labs play a role in recognizing, supporting, and amplifying this existing capacity.

Labs help resource community-led work, foster co-ownership, and create spaces for generational dialogue. They also emphasize inclusive design—continually asking who is missing and how processes must adapt. This redistribution and rebalancing of power is one of the labs' most significant contributions. Labs build capacity not only for participants, but also for facilitators and host organizations, as approaches must evolve in response to who is at the table and what challenges are being addressed.



A major benefit of social innovation labs is their ability to center communities in defining the problem, not just the solution. Indigenous communities, in particular, are often excluded from this process, leading to ineffective and costly systems. Labs create space to slow down, resist oversimplification, and address root causes. While fast solutions may work in limited contexts, they often exacerbate complexity. Labs instead produce outcomes that are meaningful locally and relevant systemically, be it policies, services, or new relational models that enable collaboration and scaling.

Barriers to Success

Lack of Support for Experimental Work

Because labs are experimental by nature, they struggle within funding systems that require predefined outcomes and milestones. Co-creation is incompatible with preset endgoals, but

support from funders is difficult to garner without clear deliverables. Yet, most funders continue to expect that deliverables be identified from the start. Building support for work without guaranteed endpoints requires trust—trust in the process and in the people facilitating it.

Power Dynamics

While labs aim to convene all actors, power imbalances may nonetheless persist. One panelist shared an example where decision-making defaulted to those with capital and authority, resulting in community-identified solutions being deprioritized. Without intentional attention to power, labs risk reproducing the very inequities they seek to address.

Accessing knowledge can also be challenging, particularly when it is stuck behind institutional walls. In some cases, community knowledge—such as insights from elders—is held by universities and subject to restrictive governance processes, limiting its availability. This creates barriers to co-creation and reinforces inequities around who controls information.

Removing Barriers

Building Community Trust and Support

Addressing these barriers begins with leadership and governance that embrace risk and co-creation. Deep trust requires time, presence, and authenticity—showing up in communities, sharing meals, and engaging honestly. Co-creation requires comfort with uncertainty. Panelists emphasized the importance of trusting emergence, iteration, and patterns over time. While outcomes may be unclear at the outset, asking strong, well-designed questions provides a guiding direction and trusting the voice of community also helps keep the research on track.

Transparency around funding and financial constraints can further strengthen trust. Where possible, labs are exploring alternative financing models, including philanthropy and community-based funding, to increase autonomy. Approaches to funding, such as trust-based philanthropy enables labs to leave decision-making in the hands of communities. While accountability remains essential, funders need not dictate outcomes in advance. Impact can be demonstrated through community voices, not only through formal data. Families and communities provide crucial insight into whether change is meaningful and effective.

Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

When matching funds are required, labs can offer valuable in-kind support—such as innovation coaching, toolkits, or professional development. These reciprocal relationships enable labs to access resources while supporting organizational learning and capacity. Institutions that host or support labs often hold significant power and resources. As intermediaries, they can help remove barriers by challenging power imbalances and protecting equitable dialogue within lab spaces.

While views differed on the level of institutional involvement that might be appropriate, panelists agreed that resources must be used to support safe, inclusive environments and ensure equity-deserving communities are not marginalized in decision-making.

CATALYST ROUNDTABLE 3: WHAT DOES TALENT LOOK LIKE IN THE SOCIAL AND PUBLIC INNOVATION



ECOSYSTEMS?

3 June 2025

Panelists

- Brandon Meawasige (COO, Indspire)
- Charlene Marion (CEO, CEWIL)
- Ian Wereley (Executive Director, Canadian Association for Graduate Studies)
- Daren Okafo (Consulting Director, Collective Leadership Tamarack, Tamarack Institute)
- Cathy Barr (Strategic Advisor, Imagine Canada)
- Nathalie Blanchet (Community & Partner Engagement Professional/Educator)

For the third catalyst roundtable discussion, six panelists shared their insights on the question: What does talent look like in the social and public innovation ecosystems? The conversation centered on three core themes: defining talent in the social and public innovation space, identifying opportunities to foster that talent, and highlighting key considerations that must guide these efforts. Panelists emphasized that defining and developing talent in this space is not the responsibility of any single actor. Rather, it requires engagement across the entire ecosystem, including post-

secondary faculty and administrators, primary and secondary education systems, nonprofit and community organizations, government, and communities themselves. Fully realizing this talent will require extensive coordination and sustained collaboration across these sectors.

Key Takeaways

Reimagining talent in social and public innovation presents an opportunity for transformation rather than incremental reform, particularly within higher education. By embracing knowledge co-creation that is rooted in community, responsive to lived experience, and attentive to equity-seeking populations, we can build more relevant and impactful systems.

Panelists identified five key opportunities for fostering talent:

- Early exposure to social innovation beginning in primary and secondary education
- Experiential learning, work-integrated learning, and co-op opportunities in post-secondary education
- Expanded programs that support Indigenous talent development
- Encouraging graduate students to prioritize community over institutions
- A new graduate education strategy aligned with today's realities

They also highlighted critical considerations:

- The need for incentives to support participation
- Persistent systemic barriers to inclusion
- Capacity constraints facing nonprofit and community organizations
- The responsibility of government and post-secondary institutions to alleviate pressure on community partners

Together, these insights point toward a more collaborative, inclusive, and community-centered approach to building talent for social and public innovation.

Fostering the Talent We Need

Graduate education has traditionally been oriented toward training the next generation of academics. However, this model no longer reflects reality: approximately 80% of graduate students will not secure employment in academia. Instead, we must rethink how we prepare graduate students for careers in nonprofit organizations, government, and other public-serving roles. If our goal is to support public and social innovation, we must redefine what talent looks like and how it is cultivated.

Building the talent required for social and public innovation demands an ecosystem approach. Meaningful change must involve communities, nonprofit organizations, post-secondary institutions, and primary and secondary education systems working together.

Preparing children for a future in which required skills are rapidly evolving requires early and intentional intervention. Part of the solution lies in increasing access to social innovation for young people and marginalized groups from an early age. Despite the central role communities play in our collective wellbeing, the skills associated with the sort of innovation our communities need – the ability to harness complexity, change and systems - are not considered to be essential. One panelist suggested that they could be treated as a core skill for success, alongside literacy.



The sort of shift under consideration would require reimagining curricula starting in Junior Kindergarten. A coherent strategy must create conditions for success long before students enter post-secondary education. Increasing synergy across all levels of education and investing in early literacy and learning around complexity and systems are essential. Although breaking down entrenched silos is challenging, it is necessary. Developing talent for the future of society requires long-term, early-stage investment.

An Ability to Move between Academia and Community

Beyond scientific rigor, academic research offers valuable tools, including theoretical frameworks that support co-creation of knowledge. On the ground, however, social innovation is rooted in deep pragmatism focused on what works for a specific community in a specific context. When theory and practice appear to be in tension, the priority is to respond to community needs. While theory may inform the approach, solutions are ultimately grounded in practical realities.

The talent that must be fostered for such contexts should revolve around the ability to operate within these liminal spaces, between academia and practice. Effective practitioners in the often

ambiguous and evolving world of social innovation are comfortable navigating between these domains. They are at ease with messiness, and leave aside the need for fixed or crystallized objectives. While they must communicate effectively with funders and academic peers, they must also remain responsive to shifting community needs and contexts.

Social innovation requires what one panelist described as *committed generalists*: individuals who neither privilege theory over practice, nor vice versa, but instead move fluidly between the two. Although this balancing act is challenging, many practitioners outside academia maintain one foot in academic spaces and another in community or industry settings.

Beyond Formal Training

Social innovation practitioners typically operate in informal, practice-based spaces that are deeply rooted in historical and community knowledge. We must consider how these forms of embedded knowledge can be meaningfully integrated into innovation processes that also involve academic research. While formal training remains important, graduate education often neglects the development of practical skills and abilities, leaving students to acquire them independently.

One panelist shared an example from their work on increasing Indigenous participation in AI. When asked to bring Indigenous students into the AI space, they questioned what skills they should be looking for. Should it prioritize programmers and software engineers, or students rooted in philosophy, Indigenous languages, or traditional knowledge? Ultimately, the panelist concluded that a balance was needed: students required sufficient technical aptitude to succeed in the program.

Graduate students already demonstrate key competencies relevant to social innovation, including the ability to learn quickly, adapt to change, remain resilient, and think critically. Social innovation spaces require these skills alongside formal academic training.

Embedded Community Insights and Expertise

While we must train a new generation of social innovators for careers beyond academia, we must also acknowledge talent as something that already exists within the communities we serve. When addressing social issues, institutions often focus on creating enabling conditions and building relationships across community. However, the talent required to solve these challenges often resides with the people most directly affected by them.

Community actors frequently possess the skills necessary to address their own challenges, though these skills may require recognition, structure, or support to be fully mobilized. The historic example of the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia illustrates this well: workers in fishing community realized they were being exploited for the purpose of resource-extraction by an employer who owned their homes, schools and stores. With support from the Sisters of Saint Martha, these workers engaged in “kitchen table learning,” a form of popular adult education rooted in community needs and assets. While community members were fisherfolk during the fishing season, they had skills in construction or other trades and could teach one another these skills in the off-season to increase their autonomy. This example demonstrates that talent is embedded within communities, though it may require facilitation, curriculum development, or institutional support to flourish.

Academic researchers often assume that co-creation is a process that requires primarily academic expertise, engaging interest holders mainly as “end users”. However, properly defining a social problem requires articulating the embedded, direct knowledge of those who experience it directly. The ability to define the problem itself must be recognized as a critical aspect of talent for innovation and valued accordingly.



The articulation of embedded knowledge as part of co-creation is not only necessary for implementation or uptake; it is essential for ensuring that problems are defined accurately. Social problems are shaped by social realities, and stakeholder perspectives must be recognized as constitutive of expert knowledge. True co-design and co-creation involve the coming together of multiple forms of expertise, each valued equally.

Leveraging Experiential Learning

While close to 10% of Canada’s workforce is employed in the nonprofit sector, the undergraduate or college level course offering in social innovation or nonprofit leadership is limited. More intentional exposure is needed for students to consider these sectors as opening up viable career paths. Community-based experiential learning builds student capacity while allowing post-secondary institutions to give back to community partners. Such engagement should be foundational to institutional strategies, reinforcing the relevance and value of higher education.

Graduate education, in particular, requires expanded co-ops, internships, and field placements. One panelist even argued that experiential and work-integrated learning should be mandated as a core component of all graduate programs. Existing models—often borrowed from STEM—must also be adapted to better reflect the skills required in social sciences and humanities, particularly for nonprofit work.

Supporting Indigenous Talent

Across government, industry, and academia, there is strong interest in Indigenous inclusion—but participation often requires individuals to already be highly qualified or on a predetermined path. Organizations seeking to increase Indigenous representation tend to focus only on the existing supply of Indigenous students. For example, an initiative aimed at improving Indigenous representation in AI identified only four eligible computer science students on a national program, prompting deep reflection on whether such programs truly address systemic gaps.

This approach neglects the talent potential present in rural and remote communities and fails to build early capacity or close preparedness gaps. To meaningfully address underrepresentation, interventions must focus on expanding the pipeline of Indigenous talent, not merely selecting from those already positioned to succeed. Efforts to build Indigenous talent must address systemic barriers and be responsive to the reality of Indigenous communities. Offering opportunities alone is insufficient. In rural or remote communities, participation may require families to forego critical support roles, such as caregiving or subsistence activities.

Inclusive strategies must address these realities by creating spaces that genuinely support Indigenous participation. Doing so could unlock one of the fastest-growing youth populations in the country as a critical talent pipeline.

Reforming Graduate Education

To adapt to new talent needs around innovation, graduate education must change. Program marketing often presents an unrealistic picture of guaranteed employment and fulfillment, masking the challenges many graduates face. Higher education is increasingly perceived as misaligned with job security, mental wellness, and meaningful employment. Traditional markers of success—prestigious schools, strong supervisors—are no longer sufficient. Students now seek flexible, shorter programs, micro-credentials, and part-time options that allow them to balance learning with life. As a result, talent development will become less linear and more cyclical, feeding back into communities and systems over time. This shift is central to the development of a new national graduate education strategy.

At the same time, graduate students often intuitively trust that the university or their supervisor knows what is best for them, but the reality is that graduate students are no longer able to rely solely on institutions and supervisors for funding, guidance, and belonging. Faculty burnout and institutional constraints mean that universities are often unable to provide the support students need. Instead, students must turn to broader networks: family, community, volunteer spaces,

extracurricular activities, and former colleagues. Trusting these networks empowers students to prioritize what is in their best interest, which may differ from enduring institutional expectations.

This shift is already reshaping academia. Declining domestic enrollment, reduced campus presence, and growing interest in impact-oriented programs reflect a broader loss of faith in traditional academic pathways. Rather than signaling failure, some panelists viewed this as a necessary evolution.



Tackling these issues requires incentives that motivate communities, students, faculty, and institutions. In graduate education, this could include adapting funding criteria to value impact, networks, and non-academic competencies. It can also be done by shifting or broadening the focus of rewards and incentives. The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, for example, has a prize for the top dissertation in Canada. While the research is important, 90% of the application from outstanding or exceptional graduate student demonstrate an extraordinary effort to become well-rounded and to have deep, mostly non-academic, networks with diverse competencies and skills. These students have a clear vision for their own future and role that puts less focus on academic outputs and more on the impact of their work.

While panelists agreed on the importance of impact, there was debate about whether it should supersede standard academic career considerations. These tensions reflect broader questions about how best to mobilize the ecosystem.

Systemic Barriers

Nonprofit and community organizations play a central role in fostering social innovation talent, yet they face significant constraints. Limited time, funding, and capacity often prevent meaningful participation in partnerships or initiatives.

The capacity of community organizations is chronically limited. Salaries in nonprofits are significantly lower than in other industries. With a workforce that is predominantly female and highly racialized, wage inequities are compounded. Burnout is widespread, with one in three nonprofit workers affected, a figure that has risen sharply since the pandemic. These conditions directly limit organizational capacity and must be acknowledged when designing partnerships or interventions.

High levels of staff turnover and burnout further reduce organizations' ability to engage in collaborative initiatives. One panelist shared an example of a paid, co-designed project to address digital skills gaps. Despite strong interest and compensation, none of the participating organizations completed the full testing phase due to staffing changes and urgent service demands. This highlights a critical reality: while institutions may operate across long-term horizons, many community organizations are focused on immediate survival.

While Canada has significant talent, nonprofit organizations often lack the resources to recruit and retain it. Salaries in the nonprofit sector—particularly in community nonprofits—are significantly lower than in industry. Community organizations compete with large corporations that dominate recruitment spaces and offer substantially higher compensation. In the context of labor shortages and skills gaps, it is essential to ask not just how talent is developed, but who ultimately benefits from it.

The Role of Government in Overcoming these Hurdles

Government can play a crucial role by providing a formal home for the social innovation sector, signaling its value and ensuring representation in decision-making. Horizontal policy alignment must be complemented by vertical alignment with communities. Including nonprofit and community organizations at policy tables allows governments to better understand and respond to lived realities.

The Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Overcoming these Hurdles

When developing experiential learning opportunities, post-secondary institutions must take responsibility for reducing the burden on nonprofit partners. Universities possess significant assets and resources that can be leveraged to support capacity-building. Moving from transactional to trust-based relationships requires institutions to actively lighten the load for community collaborators.

CATALYST ROUNDTABLE 4. BRIDGING THE GAP: STRENGTHENING PLACE-BASED CONNECTIVITY FOR SYSTEMIC INNOVATION



4 June 2025

Panelists

- Aleeya Velji (Founder and CEO, Enfin Impact)
- Geraldine Cahill (Principal, UpSocial)
- Tim Draimin (Chair of the Board, Social Innovation Canada)
- Vanessa Paesani (CEO, Pond-Deshpande Centre, UNB)

The conversation opened with a shared effort to define “missions” and anchoring the discussion in the core challenges faced by social innovators. In this context, missions were understood as clear, overarching policy objectives designed to address societal challenges within a defined timeframe.

As panelists examined the role of social innovation in designing and implementing mission-driven solutions, they identified persistent gaps—particularly between sectors that rarely collaborate or that approach problems using different logics and lenses. Panelists warned that allowing these gaps to widen could increase the risk of failure, i.e. outcomes that neither leverage the full intelligence of our ecosystem nor adequately serve the communities they are meant to benefit. Consequently, the conversation consistently returned to one central theme: connectivity. By strengthening connections across sectors and between missions themselves, we become better equipped to confront complex, interconnected problems.

Key Takeaways

Without place-based connectivity and intentional efforts to bridge gaps across community, nonprofit, academic, government, and private sectors, systemic innovation will remain out of reach. Panelists identified several priorities for social innovators to either close these gaps or prevent them from widening:

- Building from the ground up, anchoring innovation in community
- Establishing collaborative and participatory governance structures
- Speaking the language of impact across sectors
- Applying systems thinking to understand mission intersections
- Communicating simply to build cross-sector support
- Acting as systems mediators between community and government

Guided by these principles, we can begin to dismantle silos and fully unleash the intelligence of our ecosystem.

What Gap?

The Role of Social Innovation in Mission-Oriented Approaches to Prosperity

All sectors play a role in addressing the most pressing challenges facing Canadians today, yet approaches differ significantly. A major gap exists in how government, academia, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector define, prioritize, and operationalize missions and challenges. Until these differences are acknowledged and addressed, it will be difficult to meaningfully bridge the divide.

Prime Minister Carney's mandate letter (Spring 2025) outlines seven goals for the current government. Rather than issuing siloed mandates, these goals were intentionally framed to encourage cross-ministerial collaboration and engagement with government, civil society, and the private sector. The goals include:

- establishing a new economic and security relationship with the United States
- removing barriers to create a single Canadian economy
- improving housing affordability
- protecting Canadian sovereignty
- attracting global talent to strengthen the economy
- reducing government operating costs
- lowering the cost of living for Canadians

Panelists were asked what social innovation can contribute to achieving these goals—and how we might imagine, envision, and even dream of that contribution. Many of these wicked problems are already central to nonprofit work. However, one panelist posed a critical question: what would these missions look like if they were generated by communities rather than defined at the federal level?

What might a future look like in which government priorities emerge from community-defined needs?

While panelists agreed on the importance of having national missions, they identified a clear gap in how these missions are defined and approached. Using housing as an example, communities are often less concerned with metrics such as building a specific number of units, and more focused on deeper questions: How do we live well together? How do we ensure everyone has a home? What kind of community do we want to be? Although governments and communities may share a concern for affordability, the framing and pathways toward solutions often diverge significantly.



Breaking Down Knowledge Silos

Although Prime Minister Carney’s mandate calls for multi-sector collaboration, in practice these sectors remain fragmented and poorly connected. Differences in how missions are defined reflect a deeper, structural problem: siloed thinking.

Since World War II, government, business, community, and academia have largely operated within distinct silos, each developing its own identity, incentives, and modes of working. While progress has been made toward integration, significant barriers remain. Too often, organizations and sectors work in isolation, without engaging in systemic thinking or recognizing how their efforts intersect with broader societal goals.

This siloing can result in misalignment between organizational missions and societal missions—misalignment that must be addressed if collective impact is to be achieved. Breaking down these silos is not optional; it is essential if we are to meet the objectives of the society we are trying to build. If social innovators are to make meaningful progress on wicked problems, these gaps must be addressed. If left to widen, we risk losing our place at decision-making tables, seeing government

mandates move forward without meaningful community input, and failing to harness the collective intelligence of our ecosystem. Ultimately, this risks not just inefficiency, but outright failure to deliver effective solutions.

Tolerating silos creates barriers between government, academia, communities, nonprofits, and other sectors that, if widened, risks austerity and excluding key actors from decision-making processes that shape how they operate. For example, reduced government spending on operations may overlook the contributions that nonprofits or university-based social innovators could make in delivering outcomes more effectively.

Excluding social innovation actors from decision-making also means losing perspectives that emphasize change rather than amplification. Government missions often focus on economic outcomes and return on investment, asking primarily how funding is mobilized to drive results. While market-based insights are valuable, markets typically amplify existing trends rather than catalyze transformative change. Social innovation, by contrast, is fundamentally about change—creating new pathways and reshaping systems. To achieve meaningful change, these voices must be present at governing tables.

Likewise, knowledge silos pose a risk as they can lead to the implementation of initiatives that neither reflect community realities nor fully leverage ecosystem intelligence. Communities must be engaged in defining the problems we address to establish shared expectations and a sense of entitlement to meaningful change. Communities possess lived knowledge of societal challenges and are most directly affected by policy choices; their insights are indispensable. In turn, universities bring applied research capabilities and critical resources to mission-driven work. Without fully mobilizing the knowledge held within communities and academia, we constrain our collective capacity for success.

How Do We Bridge the Gap?

Government-led missions are typically bold and ambitious. They involve diverse stakeholders, span multiple sectors, and require long-term vision, coordination, and innovation. Mission-oriented approaches are designed to mobilize resources, align actors, and stimulate collaboration across systems to achieve defined outcomes. Policy frameworks for missions are also based on input from multiple sectors, often combine regulatory tools, financial incentives, research, and targeted investments.

Success is only possible if we can navigate—and close—the gaps identified above. Missions do not exist in isolation. Canada is facing not only a housing crisis, but an affordability crisis that intersects with climate change, equity and inclusion, and Indigenous land rights. Solutions will remain elusive unless we acknowledge these connections and intentionally dismantle silos. By linking arms across sectors, we can unlock collective intelligence, generate more innovative solutions, and ensure those solutions are implemented effectively.

Bridging these gaps requires intentionally dismantling silos and fostering meaningful collaboration across sectors. This demands shifts at individual, organizational, and systems levels, supported by

multi-sector collaboration platforms. Encouragingly, there are already promising examples, including 82 labs that create space for local, identity-based, and place-based collaboration.

However, this infrastructure must be embedded more deeply. What is needed is not just platforms, but an infrastructure of trusted relationships.



Building from the Ground Up

One approach is to start with communities and build upward. Communities are fully capable of generating solutions to their own challenges. In today's climate of uncertainty and fear, many communities are seeking greater agency and control over local ecosystems. While this may initially seem at odds with large-scale missions, there is significant innovation occurring in small towns and local systems—particularly through community finance and locally controlled capital.

From a systems theory perspective, localized, place-based innovation is essential. Change can cascade outward from these contexts, spreading horizontally to similar communities and vertically into higher levels of the system. With intentional design, local innovations can meaningfully contribute to national missions on affordability and beyond. Although this process requires sustained dialogue and buy-in, building from community outward is critical to long-term success.

Encouraging Collaborative Governance

Effective collaboration requires new approaches to governance. Panelists acknowledged that while collaborative governance is complex and still evolving, it is essential. Governance structures differ across private, academic, nonprofit, and community contexts, shaping how decisions are made. Understanding these differences is key to navigating collaboration effectively.

Collaborative governance must extend beyond institutions and connect them with communities engaged in place-based work. National mandates alone are insufficient; bottom-up innovation must occur in parallel. Trusting that change can emerge from both directions is reciprocally beneficial as it enables the construction of governance frameworks that align actors across the system.

Collaborative governance is essential for bridging gaps. When all relevant actors are included in governance structures, shared accountability emerges. One panelist highlighted the ubuntu model of funding as one example, in which communities both define funding priorities and hold recipients accountable. This model is grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

Indigenous governance systems also offer powerful lessons. On the Haldimand Tract—land taken from the Haudenosaunee—participatory governance is a lived practice. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s Five Arrows (or Five Nations) model forms a foundation of constitutional thinking in North America and exemplifies deeply embedded participatory governance.

Speaking the Language of Impact Metrics

Collaborative governance is only possible when sectors can engage in meaningful dialogue. Bridging gaps requires a shared language—particularly around impact. In a policy environment focused on reducing costs and increasing efficiency, social innovation must demonstrate relevance in terms others understand.

The housing affordability crisis illustrates this challenge. Significant funding has flowed through initiatives like the National Housing Strategy, which is time-bound and metric-driven. Labs have used this funding to bring communities into the conversation, but years later the sector must ask: what has been the impact? To answer this, community-level outcomes must be linked to broader indicators—connecting concepts like housing as a human right to unit-based targets. Demonstrating impact is not optional; failure to do so risks future funding and undermines long-term progress.

Addressing Complexity

The missions outlined in the current government mandate intersect deeply. Housing and affordability, while listed separately, are inextricably linked. Systems thinking helps illuminate these intersections and reveals how challenges are understood across contexts. Housing cannot be addressed in isolation from other wicked problems. Yet aligning diverse actors requires starting from shared values—such as the universal need for “home.” Framing the issue in terms of a need for a home rather than in terms of housing reshapes the narrative and opens space for relational, land-based perspectives.

While complexity is an intrinsic feature of societal challenges, communications must be simple. Without clarity, ideas will not travel across sectors. Social innovation is well-positioned to contribute not only to incremental change (horizon 2), but to transformative reimagining (horizon 3): envisioning futures that no longer depend on current systems and working backward to create them. But one panelist noted that social innovation often underestimates the importance of “selling” its work—telling compelling stories about impact to build alliances and momentum.

One metaphor likened social innovators to bakers: we may use innovative techniques and high-quality ingredients, but we do not need to explain every step of the process upfront. To shift resources and integrate social innovation into mainstream systems, it may be enough to say, “We can deliver!” and focus on illustrating the outcome of social innovation work over the process, and point to the specifics of the process itself later if needed.

Complexity is easier to tackle once trust is established. This approach has proven effective in Manitoba’s impact finance ecosystem, where simplifying narratives has attracted cross-sector support. Keeping communication simple remains one of the most powerful lessons.

Systems Mediation

Social innovation practitioners are well equipped to play the role of systems mediators, creating space for dialogue, co-creation, and conflict transformation across sectors. By combining an understanding of complexity with grounded practices rooted in land, culture, and community, social innovation can reshape how systems interact, protecting the integrity of community concerns while also appreciating policy imperatives. Universities, in particular, are well-positioned to embrace social innovation to take on this mediating role by amplifying community voices and convening diverse actors. When academia steps into this space, the broader social economy can provide complementary support. Systems mediation is a critical function for bridging persistent gaps.

CATALYST ROUNDTABLE 5: EVIDENCE, CAPACITY AND POLICY FOR ECOSYSTEM INTELLIGENCE



4 June 2025

Panelists

1. Mike Davis (CEO, Davis PIER)
2. Tara Lapointe (Vice-President Stakeholder Engagement, SSHRC)
3. Shahad Khalladi (Senior Policy Advisory, Government of Canada)
4. James Stauch (Skoll Centre, University of Oxford)
5. Eva Oloumi (Founder and Lead, Paradeigma)

The fifth and final catalyst roundtable examined the evidence, capacity, and policy conditions required to support ecosystem intelligence. The panel was intentionally designed to elevate voices that are not typically prominent in social innovation discussions, including those who advise policymakers and institutions on applying complexity and systems theory.

The discussion opened by emphasizing the need for a unified understanding of what we are collectively trying to achieve. Panelists then explored how social innovation research can evolve in its approach to evidence generation, how the persistent gap between evidence and policy might be narrowed, and what is required to strengthen ecosystem-wide capacity to absorb and apply knowledge.

Key Takeaways

Strengthening ecosystem intelligence requires coordinated changes in how we approach evidence, capacity, and policy. Panelists emphasized the need to align around a shared vision, grounded in community values and informed by a clear understanding of current conditions. To move forward, we must:

- Align on collective problem definitions and future visions
- Support mission-driven research through funding and training
- Make evidence accessible through jargon-free writing, knowledge translation, and open access
- Incentivize policy-relevant research
- Align solutions with policymaking realities
- Demonstrate value through incremental success
- Build science literacy and connective capacity
- Leverage individual and institutional power to strengthen the system

With these shifts, the ecosystem will be better equipped to mobilize intelligence, build trust, and tackle the wicked problems we face together.

Defining a Collective Goal

Social innovators aspire to work with communities to design solutions to wicked problems (Horizon 3)—solutions that imagine and help create radically better futures, where everyone has access to food, housing, and dignity. While there is broad agreement that issues like housing insecurity and food poverty demand action, panelists cautioned that shared concern alone is not enough to enable transformational change.

Shared visions are a cornerstone of ecosystem intelligence. Collaboration depends on *requisite variety*—the fact that each participant brings a distinct perspective. However, if six or seven people are asked to address the housing crisis, they will likely articulate six or seven different visions of what success looks like. Without alignment on an end state, innovation efforts risk fragmenting. For effective systemic innovation to occur, actors must converge around a shared vision of the future they are working toward.

Co-defining the problem is the essential first step. Too often, problems are described in ways that are accurate in some respects, but not actionable. Statements such as “women in Afghanistan do not have access to education” rightly describe an unacceptable condition, yet they do not, on their own, suggest a path forward.

Problems become actionable when current conditions are clearly contrasted with a desired future state. With respect to the previous example, a more actionable framing would describe a future in which women across Afghanistan, from early childhood through post-secondary education, have equitable access to education regardless of geography or socioeconomic status. The problem, then, becomes the gap between this vision and present realities. Social innovation must focus its energy on understanding and closing that gap.

Creating A Shared Vision of the Future

Once the distinction between current conditions, future vision, and the problem itself is clarified, collaborators must work toward alignment in understanding what they involve. Alignment doesn't mean that they need to see these in the same way. Even when people broadly agree on the nature of a challenge, each brings a partial understanding shaped by their position, experience, and worldview and recognizing that there are multiple perspectives on what the current conditions are is also part of aligning on the vision. This is not in itself an issue, but in practice, we rarely devote sufficient time to envisioning a shared future state. Without this collective vision, efforts remain misaligned, with actors unknowingly working toward different futures. These perspectives can be understood as facets of a prism—each valid, but incomplete on its own. The more perspectives we integrate, the clearer our collective understanding becomes.



Moving beyond surface-level agreement

Fostering alignment requires deeper grounding in values, worldviews, and narratives. Drawing on causal layered analysis and leverage points models, one panelist emphasized that transformative system change occurs at deep structural and cultural levels—not only through policies or programs. Using *The Iliad* as an illustrative example, the panelist argued that Achilles' transformation was driven not by the war itself, but by grief—the loss of his closest relationships. Likewise, social

innovation must engage with the stories people tell about themselves, their values, and their place in the world. Change becomes possible when innovation resonates with these deeper layers of meaning.

Horizon 3 change is impossible without alignment on what that horizon actually looks like. Creating space for this shared cognitive work is essential. Without it, action proceeds without cohesion, and we risk acting without sight of where we are going.

Increasing the Flow of Knowledge Across Sectors

Ecosystems are interdependent and self-nourishing—but only when they can learn from themselves. This requires researchers who are equipped to work with communities as legitimate sources of intelligence. Systems mediation, facilitation, and collaboration are learned skills. While not all researchers need to engage directly with communities or policymakers, foundational training in community-engaged research and knowledge synthesis should be treated as a form of research literacy. Without these skills, researchers cannot participate meaningfully in social innovation, even when opportunities arise.

Despite the volume of research produced, evidence-informed policy remains the exception rather than the norm. One reason is that many academics lack insight into how policy systems function. Policymakers operate under intense time pressure and political accountability. Long-term, complex solutions—even when well-evidenced—may not align with these realities. Social innovation must learn to frame solutions in ways that are both rigorous and responsive to the conditions under which policy decisions are made. Without understanding timelines, constraints, and incentives within government, research outputs often fail to meet the needs of decision-makers.

Part of the challenge consists in updating the funding system to better support mission-driven research will help Canada produce the evidence and coordinated action needed for ecosystem intelligence, which also calls for better alignment between universities, industries, governments, and organizations around shared challenges. But, in this context, the question of the balance between mission oriented research and research “for knowledge’s sake” is important: Canada faces specific societal challenges that require a more focused, coordinated research system.

To strengthen ecosystem intelligence, social innovation-minded researchers must generate evidence that is relevant, usable, and timely. This requires institutional conditions that support applied, mission-oriented inquiry alongside foundational research. Academic research produces vast amounts of potentially valuable evidence, yet much of it remains inaccessible to those outside academia.

Communicating, Translating and Brokering Evidence

One key barrier is language. Academic writing often relies on specialized terminology that alienates practitioners and policymakers. Panelists noted that even when research is relevant, it may be incomprehensible to intended users. Improving accessibility requires researchers to develop skills in writing for non-specialized audiences and to be mindful of jargon.

When practitioners cannot understand the language being used, they are effectively excluded from conversations that their work and communities are meant to inform. The “publish or perish” culture of academia prioritizes novelty over usefulness. If research is to inform policy, incentives must evolve to value application, synthesis, and translation alongside traditional publication metrics. On the other hand, policymakers and practitioners need greater scientific literacy: when knowledge users lack familiarity with how evidence is generated and data interpreted, even the most relevant research may go unused. Science literacy must become a core component of professional development in government and the nonprofit sector.



Knowledge translators play a crucial role in bridging this divide. Programs such as SSHRC’s knowledge synthesis grants fund researchers to compile existing evidence on complex issues and support professional writers to translate that knowledge into plain language. Both roles are essential: subject-matter expertise to identify relevant evidence, and communication expertise to make it usable. Likewise, SSHRC’s open-access publishing requirements are another important step toward accessibility. Paywalls remain a significant barrier for grassroots organizations and non-academic actors. While access alone does not ensure usability, removing financial barriers is a necessary foundation for broader evidence uptake.

Articulating the Value of Social Innovation

Social innovation remains poorly understood by many decision-makers. Panelists noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, enormous effort was invested in biomedical and engineering solutions, while behavioral and social interventions—such as addressing vaccine hesitancy—were underutilized, not due to lack of evidence but lack of awareness that such research existed. Expanding understanding requires opening the social innovation space to those outside established academic and professional circles.

Demonstrating value often means focusing on outcomes rather than process purity and novelty. One panelist advocated for “radical incrementalism”—embracing small, practical wins as legitimate progress toward larger transformation. Incremental successes help build credibility, show relevance, and encourage uptake beyond the field.

Actively scanning the landscape, learning from parallel efforts, and forming connections are essential to ecosystem learning. Innovation rarely occurs in isolation; discovering similar work elsewhere should be expected and welcomed.

Trust Increases Ecosystem Connectivity

Even when strong evidence exists, ecosystems may fail to absorb it. An example illustrated how organizations working on housing solutions felt compelled to apologize for adopting mixed-income models, despite strong academic consensus that such models produce better outcomes. This disconnect highlights the need not only to produce knowledge, but to ensure ecosystems are capable of receiving and trusting it.

While trust in institutions may be low, trust in individuals—scientists, educators, neighbours—often remains strong. Ecosystem actors must build relationships, and use this relational power to build trust. Social innovation practitioners can play the role of orchestrators across, academia, policy, and the private sector. Maintaining this systems perspective requires sustained attention and intentionality amid daily operational pressures.



APPENDIX: SYNTHESIS OF DELIBERATIONS OUTCOMES

Introduction

The catalyst roundtable discussions provided high level input into structured, deliberative sense-making exercises designed to articulate the embedded knowledge needed to bolster strategy and policy for connectivity in mission-driven social innovation ecosystems. Three of the five parallel workshop sessions were dedicated to the purpose. Participants worked in small groups (working table) and facilitators documented discussions.

The three successive rounds of sense-making workshops fed into one another, with each session building on the previous one.

- Workshop 1 had participants work together to create a shared vision of what a connected and agile social innovation ecosystem would like in the year 2040.
- In workshop 2, participants worked to identify the levers and barriers to achieving that vision through archetypical story creation.
- Workshop 3 required participants to further examine pivotal moments in these stories to identify the conditions that made change possible, the actors involved, and the key actions necessary to achieve the future they envisioned in workshop 1.



WORKSHOP 1

In workshop 1, participants reflected on the vision and milestones proposed (see the [Roadmap for Canada's Innovation Ecosystem](#)) to imagine their version of a future in which social innovation has led to meaningful progress specifically around connectivity (see the section on Capacity and Infrastructure for Connectivity Across Innovation Ecosystems, p.48). Each participant was asked to create an individual vision sketch of this future and to narrate what it looked like, sounded like, and felt like. They then shared their sketches with their working table to define elements of convergence and divergence. Those most common were recorded.

Convergences

Despite the perceived challenges, participants articulated converging perceptions of what this envisioned future might look, sound, and feel like:

- Greater collaboration and integration across and within sectors, characterized by an increase in:
 - Interdisciplinary research
 - Co-designed projects
 - Knowledge sharing across sectors in accessible formats
 - Collaboration and communication between academic institutions and communities
- Individuals in these visions are described as happy, hopeful, and having reached their potential. They experience a sense of dignity and belonging within their communities and feel able to speak and be heard.
- Individuals are described as feeling both emotionally and physically safe, without fear or uncertainty about the future.

- There is greater diversity and representation, particularly of Indigenous voices, among those in positions of power. Innovations such as cross-language support facilitate the inclusion of a broader range of participants in decision-making processes.
- Inclusion is emphasized at all levels and across all spaces, with particular attention to children and youth, who play a central role in shaping future changes.
- Resources are readily available to social innovators, enabling proactive rather than reactive approaches.
- Reduced time pressure on researchers allows for relationship-building essential to research activities. Work is completed based on its substantive requirements rather than the constraints of funding timelines.
- There are tangible solutions to prevailing social challenges, such as housing instability and food and water insecurity. Communities and individuals are thriving rather than merely surviving.
- Organizations and individuals in positions of power are willing and able to take risks, resulting in large-scale, tangible changes that are transformational rather than incremental.
- Innovators focus on implementing solutions and preventing future problems.
- Community members have access to essential goods and services, including housing, preventative healthcare, and public transportation.
- There is an increased level of societal trust, built through mutual investment. Individuals express trust in research and scientific knowledge.
- There is collective agreement on societal direction that does not perpetuate the current status quo. Cooperation is prioritized over competition, fostering an environment of care.
- The system and the approaches employed within it are flexible and adaptable, with the capacity for change when required.
- Research serves community needs and is rewarded based on researchers' contributions to society rather than on traditional academic metrics alone.
- Power is redistributed with a vision for the future that is not just developed and realized by a governing body, but with both greater participation and representation in decision-making.
- Youth, for example, play a more prominent role in participatory governance.
- Businesses prioritize mission over profit, integrating social innovation as a central component of their operations.

Divergences

Discussion of divergences between individual vision sketches provided for an opportunity to identify deeper concerns around specific aspects of the change needed.

Metrics of Success

Participants expressed notable disagreement over how need and impact should be measured in a future society, revealing tension between trust-based approaches and formal metrics. Trust emerged repeatedly as a core value and signal of progress, particularly in relation to strengthening social connectivity and cooperation. However, groups varied in how far they believed trust alone could or should guide decision-making.

Within some discussions, participants challenged the sufficiency of trust-based investment, arguing instead for metric-driven reporting and evaluation to ensure accountability and transparency. Other groups emphasized that measurement and evaluation remain essential tools for advancing justice, demonstrating impact, and establishing legitimacy—particularly in relation to funding and resource allocation.

Overall, while there was broad consensus that trust is foundational to a more connected and functional future, participants disagreed on its role as a substitute versus a complement to quantitative metrics. The debate reflects a broader unresolved balance between relational accountability and standardized measurement in defining success and guiding action.

The Nature and Structure of Innovation Funding

Funding emerged as a central but contested element of the vision. While nearly all groups acknowledged money as influential, they diverged significantly in how they conceptualized its role, distribution, and long-term necessity.

Some groups regarded money as a primary source of power and influence, emphasizing the importance of fluid capital circulation across sectors and communities. In this view, innovation thrives when wealth moves dynamically rather than accumulating or stagnating within elite institutions or groups. Others imagined a future in which access to funding is so widespread that financial constraints effectively disappear, rendering traditional funding mechanisms—such as philanthropy and grant-making agencies—obsolete. Concepts like universal basic income were seen as structural interventions that could prevent wealth hoarding and ensure equitable access to resources.

A more transformative vision went beyond redistributing monetary resources to redefining the meaning of capital itself. In these scenarios, human and social capital—skills, relationships, care, and collective well-being—supplant financial capital as the primary drivers of innovation and value creation. This shift implied a decoupling of productivity and survival, with at least one vision imagining a post-work society where labor is no longer essential for economic participation or security.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a shared recognition of funding as a decisive factor in shaping innovation outcomes, alongside profound disagreement about its ultimate role. The debates reflect broader tensions between reforming existing financial systems, removing money as a barrier through universal access, and fundamentally reconstituting the foundations of economic value. These divergences underscore that future approaches to innovation funding are inseparable from deeper societal choices about power, equity, and the purpose of economic activity.

Governance: Top-Down and/or Bottom-Up

Participants broadly agreed on the need for greater community involvement and participatory governance, particularly to ensure that diverse perspectives and local needs are represented. However, there was significant divergence in how such participation should be structured and institutionalized.

Some participants advocated for a fundamental shift toward bottom-up governance, envisioning systems where communities play a primary role in decision-making and agenda-setting. Others,

even within the same group, resisted a complete departure from existing hierarchies and instead proposed reimagined top-down systems that retain centralized authority while becoming more responsive and inclusive.

Several discussions explored hybrid governance models that blend top-down coordination with bottom-up input. In these perspectives, different levels of authority—such as municipal governments or city leadership—retain responsibility for action and implementation, while communities influence priorities and outcomes. This middle-ground approach reflects a pragmatic concern for capacity, accountability, and scale. Additionally, some participants emphasized the continued value of traditional leadership, including business and institutional leaders, arguing for collaboration rather than antagonism as a means of achieving systemic change.

Overall, while there was strong consensus on the importance of community-centered governance with diverse representation, participants did not converge on a vision of fully decentralized, bottom-up control. Instead, the discussions revealed ongoing tension between ideals of grassroots empowerment and the perceived necessity of structured leadership, suggesting that future governance models may evolve through negotiated combinations of both approaches rather than a singular paradigm shift.

The Role of Technology

Participants shared a broad aspiration for a future more closely aligned with nature and ecological balance, with some envisioning a shift from human-centered to land-centered frameworks. Within this context, technology emerged as a more contested and ambivalent force than other elements of the future vision.

Many groups approached technology with cautious restraint, emphasizing the need to limit its influence rather than allow it to dominate social systems. Concerns centered particularly on advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, which some participants feared could displace human judgment, erode social and human capital, and undermine relational forms of value. Several groups stressed that technology should remain subordinate to human governance, serving the needs of living systems rather than directing them. Relatedly, some envisioned futures with reduced reliance on social media, reflecting skepticism toward technologies perceived to fragment attention or social cohesion.

At the same time, other participants articulated a more conditional optimism about technology's potential. One group, in particular, highlighted the promise of “deep thinking” technologies—such as AI used responsibly and mindfully—to enhance social policy, improve research quality, and enable more sophisticated data analysis that identifies causality rather than mere correlation. Even within this more affirmative stance, however, participants remained alert to risks, noting that such tools could diminish individual critical thinking or exacerbate inequities if poorly governed.

Overall, the discussions reveal a shared belief that technology must be intentionally constrained and purpose-driven, rather than adopted uncritically. While participants differed in how expansive a role technology should play, there was broad agreement that its legitimacy in the future depends on alignment with human values, ecological well-being, and democratic oversight. The tension lies not between acceptance and rejection of technology, but between competing visions of whether it should play a supporting role or a transformative one in shaping social systems.

Have we Addressed the Main Societal Crises?

Participants offered differing perspectives on the anticipated status of wicked problems—such as pollution, poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity—by 2040. Some groups envisioned a future in which these challenges had largely been resolved, reflecting optimism about the effectiveness of systemic change. Others were more cautious, imagining not complete solutions but rather improved systems better equipped to address such problems over time.

Several groups emphasized the importance of adaptive governance mechanisms—including built-in course correction processes and structural interventions like universal basic income—rather than definitive problem elimination. While these participants did not assume that wicked problems would disappear entirely, they anticipated meaningful progress through more responsive and resilient systems. Across all groups, there was broad agreement on the desire for tangible improvements, but clear divergence on whether the future would represent an endpoint of resolution or an ongoing phase of iterative problem-solving.

Rebuild or Change?

A key point of divergence in participants' future visions concerned whether transformation should occur within existing systems or require a fundamental rebuilding of those systems. Some participants imagined futures that extend current trajectories, emphasizing reforms such as collaborative co-design, greater diversity and inclusion, and stronger community benefits from research—changes viewed as evolutions of practices already underway. Others, however, articulated visions that implied a more radical departure from the status quo, including the dissolution of traditional funding institutions or the creation of structurally new relationships between post-secondary education and external organizations.

Although this tension was most explicitly articulated within one group, it reflects a broader underlying divide across the discussions. Many proposed ideas remain anchored in present systems, but they vary significantly in how far they push beyond existing frameworks. Overall, the debate highlights uncertainty not about the need for change, but about its scale and depth—whether progress depends on incremental reform or systemic reconstruction.

WORKSHOP 2

Participants were then asked to co-create archetypal stories representing key dynamics between actor categories from the vision work completed in workshop 1 and map these stories to specific connectivity milestones. First, in small groups of two to four people, participants selected two or three convergent vision elements (and up to one divergent element) from workshop 1 to weave into the story map. Each story followed the same framework:

- **First:** outline the context of the story, the main characters and their aspirations
- **However:** list the obstacles, challenges or misalignments the character faces
- **But then:** the surprising shift(s) or insight(s) that opened the path to success for the character
- **And so:** the resolution of the story illustrating the transformed reality and the hero's success

Facing Obstacles

The sections ‘However’ and ‘But then’ were designed to feed into each other, with a new challenge introduced after each resolution (participants were asked for three sets of challenges and resolutions). Each group developed their own archetypal stories, but there were some similarities in the obstacles the characters of these stories faced as well as the pathways to success the characters found. These commonalities tend to reflect insights and experiences of barriers participants most often have found, or anticipate facing, in their current role and how they have resolved the issues, or would wish to resolve them.

External Factors

In many cases, the characters could not succeed, or an innovation could not proceed, because what the protagonist wanted or needed did not align with what the system could (or wanted to) support. Systemic barriers were particularly salient in the discussion. A working-class teenager faced with period poverty finds it difficult to develop a solution because, in part, of the stigma associated with discussing periods and a patriarchal and misogynistic environment in which issues specific to women are not considered as important or relevant. An attempt to improve graduation rates for Indigenous youth is met with opposition created by colonial frameworks and infrastructure that make access to education difficult (ie. poor transportation infrastructure to and from home).

Participants frequently identified government and university cultures as barriers within their narratives, while simultaneously emphasizing the necessity of engaging with these institutions. The tensions attributed to these entities most often stemmed from a perceived lack of flexibility, limited participation in dialogue, insufficient engagement with all relevant stakeholders, or an inability to recognize the value and contributions of the protagonist. In other cases, institutional priorities were viewed as misaligned with the visions articulated by the central actors. Participants also depicted individuals in positions of power as obstacles when existing authority structures were perceived to be threatened. In one group’s narrative, this dynamic extended to active resistance, with those in power deliberately undermining the efforts of the protagonist.

Several narratives also depicted protagonists as unable to access essential resources, with limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient time commonly identified as barriers. In some cases, these resources were simply unavailable; in others, protagonists were forced to make difficult trade-offs between competing needs. In such situations, the solution was clear and the protagonist remained willing and capable, but success was ultimately constrained by the absence of the necessary resources.

Internal Factors

A wide range of external factors may impede the advancement of well-conceived ideas, and these conditions often shape the internal obstacles faced by the characters. At the same time, it is important to recognize that individuals are frequently navigating complex and less visible conflicts that are nonetheless deeply rooted and consequential.

Protagonists in these narratives were frequently confronted with challenges related to individual circumstances or the internal dynamics of the actors involved. In one instance, a group described a protagonist experiencing a fear of isolation, while in another, the character was contending with personal trauma, a criminal history, and the absence of stable housing. In other cases, individuals lacked the specific skills or knowledge required to address the problems they faced. For example, one narrative described an Indigenous student who was uncertain about how to access funding or identify appropriate partners to address a community issue of interest.

When the focus shifted from individuals to small grassroots or nonprofit organizations, the barriers identified were similarly associated with internal organizational dynamics or the broader environments in which these organizations operated. One group, for instance, discussed a social innovation practitioner and highlighted the lack of accountability mechanisms and the limited availability of metrics for assessing the impact of social innovation. In another case, a nonprofit organization struggled to be understood by external actors due to a lack of focus, resulting in fragmented priorities and competing demands.

Notably, there was considerable overlap across groups in the choice of protagonist. Eight of the twenty-eight narratives featured a marginalized individual or group. While this selection may have reflected participants' familiarity with such contexts, it also provided a setting in which the limitations of the current system could be readily illustrated. Beyond shared themes related to internal and personal challenges, there were also clear similarities in the types of protagonists represented across the narratives.

Pathways to Success

Increased Connectivity

For many groups, protagonists overcame obstacles by moving beyond isolated knowledge silos and engaging in cross-sector dialogue. Common strategies included incorporating diverse and underrepresented perspectives, developing awareness of the broader ecosystem, and collaborating directly with others to co-design solutions. Notably, nearly all protagonists achieved success only after convening multiple voices and groups around a shared problem.

Success was rarely portrayed as occurring in isolation; instead, it emerged through collective forums such as multi-sector summits and conferences, community events and roundtables that enabled individuals to align around common issues, community support networks, or councils of leaders. As one group observed, when sufficient expertise is brought together, there is no need for any single institution or organization to possess comprehensive expertise independently. Connectivity featured prominently across nearly all discussions, highlighting the necessity of collective action among diverse actors to overcome significant barriers. Approaches that more effectively engaged community members were particularly prevalent in these narratives.

Willing to Take Risks and Experiment

The characters in many of these stories displayed a willingness to take risks that ultimately worked in their favour. In the first workshop, participants noted that in their vision of the future for 2040,

organizations and individuals would be more willing to take risks, resulting in transformational change rather than quick fixes. Some of the stories created in this workshop explicitly illustrate this point. In one case, an individual, exercising her freedom of speech, speaks out against her university and is fired. This action results in extensive protests, media attention, inter-university working groups, and, eventually, policy change. In another example, advocates for a health service model created a conference that brought community partners together in an effort to attract the attention of leadership. This initiative drew the attention of both competing stakeholders and, eventually, the government, which enforced cooperation among all parties.

In addition, one group noted that both a willingness to take risks and a willingness to experiment are important for avoiding stagnation. Through experimentation, creativity and openness can be fostered, and attention can be directed toward emerging opportunities, diverse perspectives, and potential collaborators. While experimentation does not appear explicitly in many of the stories, participants nonetheless identified both risk-taking and experimentation as important characteristics of those who bring about change.

Delivering

In many cases, the outcomes of these stories were tangible and measurable. Four groups ended their stories with the creation of new policies. Others concluded with the construction of a new pedestrian section of a bridge; the establishment of new community organizations and a company; the development of a new curriculum; the creation of new funds; the addition of new housing units; or the introduction of new government positions. This is of little surprise, given that one area of convergence from the first workshop was participants' shared vision of an ideal future centered on actionable solutions. Groups that created or identified a specific individual or a small organization at the beginning of their stories were often able to demonstrate how the actions of these actors directly resulted in change.

Shifting Mindsets

Another common outcome of the stories presented in this workshop was a shift in how actors approached problems or, in some cases, a broader shift within society. Several groups highlighted the growing importance placed on communication and inter- and intra-sector alignment. One group, in particular, described an increase in resistance and rebellion that challenged the status quo and ultimately led to radical transformation. As identified by one group, when people or sectors change how they think about approaching a problem, it becomes easier for similar initiatives to emerge in the future. This, in turn, supports the development of sustainable solutions that endure beyond the involvement of any single actor in the story.

Milestones

After the story mapping exercise, the participants were asked to identify which of eighteen milestones relevant to connectivity their story fit in. (See [Roadmap](#) for context and full vision)

36	Collaboration between federal, provincial and municipal policies support concerted action for “place-based” innovation for community-level prosperity.
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37	Universities and colleges are anchor institutions that support place-based innovation and capacity development in all zones of impact.
38	Stakeholders' clear understanding of their mutual and reciprocal roles in innovation is leading to new types of equity-focused knowledge partnerships.
39	Federal, provincial and municipal governments use concerted, principled horizontal and multi-level frameworks, guidelines and policies to streamline cooperation and bolster innovation in all zones of impact.
40	Canada has the infrastructure to support agile, equitable, evidence-based response to challenges and opportunities in all zones of impact.
41	Innovation infrastructure is a place to accommodate complexity and emergence in innovation ecosystems across all zones of impact.
42	Research infrastructures support and create spaces for Indigenous involvement that make practice genuinely inclusive and equitable.
43	Innovation infrastructure extends to intersectoral platforms for innovation partnerships and collective action.
44	Innovation partnerships involving higher education institutions rest on asset-based approaches to collaboration and equitably co-created co-governance models that fully value non-academic expertise in all zones of impact.
45	Communities benefit from asset-based, reciprocal relationships with higher education institutions, and they share talent and knowledge to support place-based research and innovation.
46	Innovation infrastructure is structured to increase the multidirectional flow of talent and knowledge between higher education institutions and communities and support cross-sectoral collaborations in all zones of impact.
47	Actors whose role is to streamline access to talent and knowledge/expertise (e.g. knowledge mobilization, tech transfer, work placement) offer services and resources tailored to needs in every zone of impact.
48	Indigenous and other ways of knowing are valued and Indigenous communities have self-determination when it comes to innovation infrastructure
49	The human and financial costs of connectivity are explicitly factored into infrastructural project development, grant funding and investment for all innovation partners in all zones of impact.
50	Public and private funding, resources and frameworks are available to build capacity for inclusivity, equity and decolonisation in innovation partnerships in all zones of impact.
51	Infrastructure in all zones of impact supports interdisciplinarity and inclusive

	collaboration at all stages of innovation processes, from design to implementation.
52	Connectivity and resource flow between government and social, cultural, environmental and economic stakeholders rest on high levels of capacity to conceptualise systems dynamics and complexity in each zone of impact.
53	Design-, ideas- and living lab approaches to systems dynamics and complexity enable place-based innovation and sociotechnical transitions.

Many of the groups selected multiple milestones and the results were tallied to identify those that came up the most during this exercise (see Table 1 below)

The groups aligned on many of the milestones; however, the most frequently cited was **Milestone 50**: public and private funding, resources, and frameworks are available to build capacity for inclusivity, equity, and decolonisation in innovation partnerships across all zones of impact. As noted above, a lack of resources was a common obstacle faced by the characters in these stories, making it unsurprising that this milestone strongly resonated with participants.

By contrast, no groups selected **Milestone 44**. While this interpretation is necessarily conjectural, one possible explanation is that not all groups chose stories set within higher education institutions. Among those that did, the focus tended to be on what individual actors did or could do, rather than on the development of co-governance structures.

Milestone	Number of Groups that Selected that Milestone	Milestone	Number of Groups that Selected that Milestone
50	12	39	6
49	10	40	6
36	9	45	5
38	9	46	5
43	9	47	5
52	9	51	4
41	8	37	1
48	8	42	1
53	8	44	0

Table 1. Milestones the groups selected in Workshop 2

WORKSHOP 3

For the final workshop, the goal was to revisit the stories focusing specifically on key actions and resources, assessing current progress, and clarifying ownership of next steps. In Workshop 2, participants had described how an actor might have encountered barriers and experienced shifts or

insights that enabled success. In the final workshop, participants selected one or more of these shifts or insights and identified the resources and assets, underlying conditions, and key actions or critical decisions required for them to occur. They then assessed whether these elements were already in place, partially implemented or piloted, or not yet present, and identified the actors responsible for each key action or decision.

For the final component of the workshop, participants identified the roles of various actors in realizing the key actions and decisions they had identified based on a series of question prompts:

- Who has the authority to initiate this action?
- Who has the resources to sustain it?
- Who has the capacity to deliver it?
- Who has the motivation to champion it?
- Who holds the key knowledge to orient it?
- Who holds the legitimacy to represent it?

They also thought about the next steps they could immediately action the following week to help in realizing these goals.

Participants tended to conclude that government is best positioned to initiate and sustain action, given its authority and resources. In contrast, community members were seen as highly motivated champions who hold essential local knowledge to guide effective action. Social Innovation Canada, the Canadian Forum for Social Innovation, and social innovation practitioners were also identified as key knowledge holders with the capacity to deliver action. There was little consensus on who holds the legitimacy to represent these actions, likely because participants found it difficult to distinguish legitimacy from formal authority.

These findings align with themes from all three workshops. While government was sometimes viewed as a barrier in workshop narratives, participants consistently emphasized the need to work with government, particularly through cross-sector collaboration. At the same time, participants repeatedly called for greater community involvement in governance and co-design, recognizing communities' motivation and contextual expertise. The discussion also served as a call to action for social innovation organizations and practitioners to step forward, given their shared knowledge, motivation, and capacity.

Actions starting next Monday focused on practical, near-term steps:

- Strengthening networks by maintaining connections with forum participants, exploring collaboration, and mapping the social innovation ecosystem.
- Building advocacy and awareness within participants' organizations and communities to support co-governance.
- Seeking funding, including approaching philanthropists and researching grants.
- Improving knowledge sharing, with an emphasis on using accessible, consistent language to support clearer communication and knowledge translation.

Participants identified concrete ways they could immediately advance collaboration, funding readiness, and inclusivity in their work.

Conclusion

Participants aspired to a shared, coherent vision for a future social innovation ecosystem centered on connectivity, inclusion, and collaboration. They converged on the need for cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration, accessible knowledge sharing, and stronger relationships between communities, government, academia, and practitioners. A desirable future was described as one where individuals and communities feel safe, dignified, empowered, and represented, with particular emphasis on Indigenous participation and youth leadership. Participants highlighted the importance of trust, flexible systems, and risk-taking, alongside tangible outcomes such as new policies, infrastructure, funding models, and community services.

Lack of funding and other resources are significant barriers to the work we do in social innovation. To secure these resources, we need to be bold about our demands, be willing to take risks, and coordinate with others in the network to build and secure options.

Individuals and small organizations can be the movers and shakers in a network. The seemingly small steps that we can take towards these goals tomorrow may result in transformational change later. But we need to be willing and make conscious decisions that forward these goals.

Key tensions emerged around how success should be measured (trust-based vs. metric-driven accountability), the role and structure of funding (reforming existing systems versus redefining or moving beyond monetary capital), and governance models (bottom-up, top-down, or hybrid approaches). Technology was viewed cautiously, with broad agreement that it should be purpose-driven and human- and land-centered.

Government was widely seen as holding the authority and resources to initiate and sustain action, while communities were identified as motivated champions with critical local knowledge. Social innovation organizations and practitioners were recognized as key enablers. Immediate priorities focused on strengthening networks, securing funding, improving communication, and advancing inclusive co-governance.

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