

The Future is Collective: Advancing Collective Social Innovation to Address Society's Biggest Challenges

INSIGHT REPORT
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Contents

A letter from the field	3
Foreword	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	7
1 Values of collective social innovation	9
2 Impact of collective social innovation	12
3 Case studies of collective social innovation	17
4 Organizing for collective social innovation	23
5 Unleashing collective social innovation	28
Conclusion	31
Contributors	32
Endnotes	35

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A letter from the field

We are a community of innovators who believe in the power of collective action to drive transformational change.

Collective action happens when groups of people come together from across sectors and geographies to achieve a shared purpose. Collective action is not new – in fact, it is deeply rooted in many traditions of social change. Over time, however, dominant approaches to development have channelled funding and policy-making to programmes and initiatives led by single organizations and institutions. These mechanisms have led to fragmented efforts, often prioritizing linear approaches, discrete timelines and easily quantifiable measures of success while overlooking the complexity of social challenges.

In the interim, the world has become increasingly interconnected, exposing the limitations of these conventional approaches. As we rapidly approach 2030, many Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators remain far out of reach, while societal polarization has reached unprecedented levels. The escalating complexity of today's social challenges has sparked a growing interest in collective action, which anticipates and directly addresses this complexity and interconnectedness.

When the Schwab Foundation launched its new award category, "Collective Social Innovation", we realized this offered an exciting opportunity to reignite the importance of collective effort to address societal challenges. The first step of any collective action effort is to assemble a diversity of actors and hear from them directly. In October 2024, the Schwab Foundation generously hosted a Collective Action Convening, assembling the collective social innovation awardees and a number of other ecosystem actors to consider the landscape for collective action within the field of social innovation.

Over three days, we engaged in deep conversations with peers from around the world and across a wide spectrum of social issues. We also consulted funders, policy-makers and thought leaders who have explored the potential for collective action approaches. These conversations left us inspired and heartened! We felt a renewed commitment to growing our capacities as collective social innovators and an emboldened dedication to promoting these approaches more widely.

This report is our opening missive to the community of changemakers interested in learning more about the power of collective action and how it can be

harnessed in your own work. Inside, we share the combined learnings from our initiatives, as well as the ways in which engaged stakeholders can better support the work.

The challenges we face are vast, but so are the opportunities for change when we come together with a shared vision and purpose. We invite you to join us in building a future where collective action drives transformative progress. Together, we can create systems that are more just, equitable and sustainable for generations to come.

In solidarity,

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Foreword



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François Bonnici

Director, Schwab Foundation
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Head of Foundations,
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Today's social challenges are increasingly interconnected and complex. Arguably, we are facing a moment of “polycrisis”, where multiple global crises arise simultaneously and amplify each other. At the same time, social and political polarization is intensifying: a recent Pew Research Center survey revealed that a median of 65% of adults across 19 countries believe there are strong or very strong conflicts between people with different political affiliations in their country.¹

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, it is no longer feasible for single organizations to tackle systemic issues in isolation. Yet, societal stagnation and entrenched ideologies are making it less likely that people will work together across divides. In this pivotal moment for social change, social innovators are using their skills and effort to deploy new methods – as well as historical traditions – to create collective action to solve social challenges.

Since 1998, the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship has recognized 500 social entrepreneurs and innovators around the globe with proven models and systemic approaches to the world's greatest challenges. This community shines a light on the growing importance of social innovation in positive social change. Recognizing visionary leaders has been crucial in creating a platform alongside business and government leaders, but it has overlooked the more patient, less visible role of **collective social innovation** in complex social change.

While many social entrepreneurs have a long history of working in collaboration with others – often using

strong cultural traditions of collective methods as their guide – it became clear that we needed to acknowledge this body of work more explicitly.

In 2022, the Schwab Foundation Board decided to expand the award categories to celebrate those who expressly define and organize collective work as their core function. In the last two years, the Schwab Foundation has awarded the designation of Collective Social Innovator to 21 innovators representing 11 collective action initiatives. Many of these initiatives are distinct from scaling programmatic interventions with a range of practices best suited to achieving large-scale systemic change. These leaders have been proactive in sharing their learnings with us and each other, while expanding the conversation to include previous Schwab awardees also using collective social innovation strategies.

This journey has been exciting and fruitful, revealing a set of new perspectives and strategies for social entrepreneurship and innovation as a field. This report is a snapshot of the key learnings we have assembled on this journey together with our community. It is also a “call to action” for stakeholders – prospective partners, funders and policy-makers – who are seeking to better understand the power and potential of collective work.

Throughout this journey, we have been struck by the generosity of time and learnings from these social innovators. They truly walk the talk of trust, collaboration and emergence. We hope that, like us, you find inspiration and practical ways forward in their insightful strategies and impactful stories.

Executive summary

Collective social innovators are cross-sector leaders who lead, orchestrate or facilitate groups or networks of organizations addressing societal challenges.

This report shares insights and learnings from social innovators using collective social innovation approaches to address the world's most critical challenges. These innovators are exceptionally diverse, representing multiple geographies, themes, governance models and strategies. In spite of this diversity, they are united in their commitment to bringing together vast constituencies to create transformational change.

The Schwab Foundation defines collective social innovators as cross-sector leaders who lead, orchestrate or facilitate groups or networks of organizations tackling challenges that are too large for individual organizations. This definition highlights models surmounting social inequalities, incorporating the perspectives and representation of excluded and marginalized groups, as well as vulnerable ecosystems. Importantly, these approaches are distinct from scaling programmatic interventions and are well-suited to achieving large-scale systemic change.

While social innovators and entrepreneurs already have an impressive history of working in collaboration with others, the field of social innovation is quickly evolving – especially with the

application of new digital technologies – and many organizations now explicitly define collective work as their core function.

This report highlights key learnings to better understand the work of collective social innovation.

Collective social innovators operate with values that are uniquely suited to address complex, interconnected challenges. These values include:

- Bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, including local and proximate actors, to co-create solutions
- A commitment to systemic impact over short-term fixes, balancing deep listening with a bias toward action
- Maintaining flexibility by embracing failure and anticipating emergence
- Restoring the agency of those who are closest to issues
- Ensuring respect and balance in relationships between people and nature

↓ Image credit:
Shikshagraha, India



Collective social innovators create impacts that reverberate beyond single issues and organizations. These innovators “lay the foundations” for large-scale social impact, enabling organizations to scale impact even further. These foundational impacts include:

- Developing new narratives that enable diverse groups to work together
- Tapping into grassroots knowledge and talent to better identify and deliver social innovations
- Finding novel ways to value and manage collective resources
- Collecting and distributing expansive datasets to shape policy and decision-making
- Assembling and allocating financial resources efficiently and effectively

Collective social innovators organize themselves differently than traditional organizations. These innovators:

- Create **collective architectures** to mobilize vast constituencies
- Develop **collective pathways** that enable shared action with flexibility

- Conduct **collective activities** that amplify change efforts and ensure momentum for change
- Build **supportive infrastructures** that ensure adaptability and stability while bringing together multiple stakeholders

Finally, collective social innovators enable new relationships with and engagement from stakeholders. They enable:

- **Partners**, including the private sector, to reduce fragmentation, while tapping into a vast repository of ideas and participating in collective problem-solving
- **Funders and investors**, to build critical ecosystems that allow many organizations to flourish
- **Government and policy-makers**, to align interests, access critical data and achieve population-level scale

The Schwab Foundation invites you to consider how you might use these lessons to support collective action in your area of interest. Humanity's most unique skill is developing new ways to collaborate across ever-larger groups: the time to harness this talent to its full potential is now.



Image credit: Schwab Foundation Collective Action Convening 2024

Introduction

Collective approaches to addressing societal challenges – often enhanced by digital technologies – are critically needed in a world paralysed by polarization.

The world is facing several major transitions all at once. Rapid economic, technological, geopolitical, environmental and social changes are occurring simultaneously.² Responding to these changes through the individual work of isolated organizations and institutions is no longer adequate. Solutions will more likely be found at the intersections of sectors, disciplines and communities. Social innovators are at the forefront of these challenges, no longer innovating in just products, services and delivery models for social progress, but rather innovating with the ways in which people collaborate for change.

Humanity's superpower is collaboration

Despite the urgent need for collective innovation, collective approaches are not new. Many people – past, present and future – have initiated and sustained social change through collective approaches. Historian Yuval Noah Harari writes, “[Humans] rule the world not because we are so

wise, but because we are the only animals that can cooperate flexibly in large numbers.”³ The archetype of the lone innovator is, in fact, a relatively new one. Innovation is instead more likely to occur through changes accruing over time as communities and groups share information, build upon promising ideas and collaborate to solve problems.

Traditions of collective action have taken various forms throughout history, including community-based rituals, social movements, mutual assistance and resource sharing. Indigenous communities around the world have long practised collective action through ceremonies and communal efforts tied to land stewardship, cultural preservation and social harmony. Today, these cultural traditions have been both augmented and challenged by new technologies that allow people to connect in new ways, amplifying individual voices and creating shared platforms. Through such traditions, societies harness the power of unity to create change, resist oppression and develop resilience.



Collaboration across differences is becoming both increasingly necessary and increasingly difficult. To address the challenges we face, we need to work with ‘unlike others’, from diverse organizations, sectors and backgrounds, whether from down the street or across the globe. But our tendency, amplified by our politics, psychology and social media, to categorize others as right or wrong, good or bad, friends or enemies is making it harder for us to do what we need to do. Collective social innovators are pioneering ways to narrow this gap.

Adam Kahane, Director, Reos Partners; Schwab Foundation Social Innovation Thought Leader awardee 2022 and author of *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust*

Opportunities: Why highlight collective social innovation now?

While collective action is not new, the size and complexity of social challenges have grown immeasurably. Contemporary problems, with greater interdependence between geographies, cultures and disciplines, require innovation with forms of organizing that can incorporate diverse perspectives and bridge established institutions.

This innovative work has grown in prominence, with many in the field of social innovation highlighting its importance. New terms have emerged for these approaches, including “systems

orchestration”, “field catalysing,” and “collectively-owned strategies”. Philanthropic leaders Don Gips, Tulaine Montgomery, Rohini Nilekani and Christiane Sultani recently wrote, “System orchestrators play a critical role in bringing about transformational social change by knitting together actors and institutions, providing backbone infrastructure, and mobilizing collective change efforts across ecosystems, sectors, and geographies.”⁴ Recent research from social impact advisers Bridgespan Group and Dalberg Catalyst also delves deeply into the work of supporting these collective actors.^{5,6}

Collective social innovation reinforces social cohesion and also allows innovators, funders, businesses and

“ When large constituencies work together, a whole host of activities become easier: using resources efficiently, amassing population-level datasets, sharing evidence-based practices, and passing effective policies.

policy-makers to pursue pragmatic goals. When large constituencies work together, a whole host of activities become easier: using resources efficiently, amassing population-level datasets, sharing evidence-based practices, and passing effective policies become financially feasible and practically possible. Collective social innovation is growing in importance for solving large-scale challenges, and it is important to understand and celebrate these approaches as they evolve to meet current needs.

Challenges: How can collective social innovation be supported more effectively?

Although collective social innovation holds much promise, there are some key barriers that are withholding potential partners, funders and policy-makers from engaging most effectively. These barriers include:

- Narratives about social entrepreneurship and innovation often feature heroic leaders and organizations, rather than the less-public work of building strong relationships and creating consensus.
- Collective social innovation architectures can appear complex and difficult to understand because they are built to mobilize vast constituencies.

- Legal and financing systems are set up for individual organizations, often requiring significant bureaucratic duplication for collective social innovators.
- Historical sector divisions result in the lack of platforms and pathways for businesses to engage with social innovators and enterprises.
- Finally, stakeholders are used to seeing impact attributed to single organizations and along programmatic timeframes rather than through collective approaches.

Mobilizing for collective social innovation

This report will “pull back the curtain” on collective approaches, showcasing the **values and impact** of these innovators, as well as the **collective architectures, collective pathways and collective activities** that drive collective social innovation. It will also detail the **supportive infrastructure** that enables collective work and discuss the ways that stakeholders can better position themselves to engage with collective social innovation.

Through these learnings, readers will gain a better understanding of how collective social innovators deliver impact. They will also be inspired to support this work more fully in driving social change in today’s increasingly interconnected global community.

BOX 1 Methodology

This report builds on the extensive insights gathered from approximately 40 participants at the Schwab Foundation Collective Action Convening, held from 2-4 October 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland. The research was supplemented with 17 in-depth interviews conducted in the preparation of 10 detailed case studies that profile collective social innovation, as well as targeted desktop research.

The case study interviews delved deeply into the history, principles, practices, methods and activities of collective social innovation, including (but not limited to):

- What were your motivations to pursue collective social innovation?
- What are you able to achieve collectively that you would not be able to achieve through a single organizational approach?

- How is your collective approach constructed in order to promote representation and participation?
- What values, principles and practices drive your collective work?
- What activities are critical to your work as a collective social innovator?
- What impacts has your collective approach achieved so far?
- How might funders and policy-makers support your work more effectively?

Interviews included collective social innovation leaders from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America. Case studies and this report have been reviewed by the Collective Social Innovation core team for accuracy.

↓ Image credit: Community Health Impact Coalition, Global



1

Values of collective social innovation

Collective social innovators operate with a specific set of values uniquely suited to address complex, interconnected challenges.



“ **Collective social innovators operate with a specific set of values that prioritize a multiplicity of actors, perspectives and solutions when addressing social issues.**

Collective social innovators, like all social entrepreneurs, exist to develop and implement innovative organizational models to address social and/or environmental challenges without profit as the primary purpose.⁷ However, collective social innovators also operate with a specific set of values that prioritize a multiplicity of actors, perspectives and solutions when addressing social issues. These values are uniquely suited, in particular, to address the types of complex, interconnected challenges that are growing in prevalence today.

Importantly, these collective values emphasize **process** as well as **outcomes**, ensuring that many voices – including those with lived experience of a social issue – are included in the development of solutions. This means that evidence-based technical approaches are often combined with deeply transformative relational approaches.

Positive outcomes are seen as legitimate **because** they involve all stakeholders, not merely as a sideshow but rather as the main event. This emphasis on representation and participation is not just idealistic but also pragmatic: solutions are ultimately more sustainable when they involve the key stakeholders who will be responsible for living with the outcomes that result.

The research revealed five key values that drive the work of collective social innovators:

Value 1: Bringing together a wide range of stakeholders to co-create solutions

The primary value that collective social innovators bring to their work is ensuring a broad range of stakeholders are involved with the work from inception by building collective structures for long-term participation. By integrating the goals and interests of various groups – including communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses and governments – collective social innovators develop processes for co-creation that are ultimately more sustainable and effective.

Far from a rubber-stamping exercise, collective social innovators create strong “containers” that incorporate diverse perspectives, expertise and resources when addressing complex challenges. This value also emphasizes inclusivity and shared ownership, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued in the problem-solving process. These processes ultimately encourage the development of mutual trust and the confidence that stakeholders are working in the interests of the broader group.

Value 2: A commitment to systemic impact over short-term fixes

Collective social innovators are committed to achieving transformational results at a broad scale, guided by a clear “north star” that provides shared purpose and strategic alignment. Importantly, rather than striving for total consensus among

all stakeholders, these innovators prioritize deep listening and comprehensive consultation. They recognize that achieving large-scale change requires navigating diverse perspectives while maintaining a bias for action and impact.

Furthermore, collective social innovators achieve their impact by addressing root causes rather than just symptoms. By keeping their focus on systemic change, they ensure that their work leads to long-term, sustainable improvements rather than temporary fixes. This approach requires them to create solutions that are deeply embedded in communities, ensuring sustainability over time.

Value 3: Maintaining flexibility by anticipating emergence and learning from failure

Collective social innovators also emphasize two interrelated values: anticipating emergence and learning from failure. When these two values are combined, they create a productive flexibility, where strategies and solutions emerge as the learning process unfolds and as local contexts require. Anticipating emergence requires openness to change and the ability to shift strategies as the situation evolves. Collective social innovators avoid rigidity by embracing localized approaches tailored to specific contexts. This balance nurtures creativity and empowers communities to contribute unique perspectives and solutions within the framework of the collective aim.

The collective social innovators profiled in this report are, without exception, extraordinarily ambitious and committed to positive outcomes. To realize these aspirations, collective social innovators encourage their networks to experiment with innovative ideas, take calculated risks, learn from each other’s successes and failures, and adapt to unexpected outcomes.

Value 4: Restoring the agency of those closest to the issues

Collective social innovators also work to ensure that those closest to the issues are included in the process to drive meaningful and sustainable change. By including individuals and communities directly impacted by challenges, this value recognizes that lived experiences offer insights that are critically important for crafting effective solutions.

Importantly, this value means that solutions developed in one context may look very different from solutions derived in another. Rather than driving towards single solutions, restoring agency requires collective social innovators to build “connective tissue” across actors and geographies by creating spaces to regularly share and learn from a portfolio of solutions.⁸ Restoration of agency also promotes dignity, builds capacity and strengthens resilience, ensuring that interventions are not only relevant but also culturally and contextually appropriate.

Value 5: Ensuring respect and balance in relationships between people and nature

Finally, collective social innovators recognize that the well-being of humanity is inextricably linked to the health of interpersonal relationships as well as the health of the planet. This value takes innovators beyond technical solutions that deliver one-dimensional development outcomes and moves them towards innovations that honour the interconnectedness of people and the planet. By prioritizing harmony over exploitation, collective social innovators seek holistic

approaches that cultivate community belonging and ecological balance.

This commitment to balance means that collective social innovators acknowledge the “double-edged sword” of economic growth and environmental degradation on vulnerable communities. Collective social innovators strive to amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples and local communities who have long served as stewards of natural resources. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern science, they craft strategies that respect cultural heritage and prioritize long-term sustainability.



Indigenous Peoples have a different worldview. People in the modern world may have plenty of wealth, but it's all material wealth. It is spiritual wealth that we need more of. The Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance has a commitment to protect the entire bioregion that we consider sacred; we are providing a service to humanity. Let's come together to create frameworks for the kind of harmonious and regenerative development we want.

Uyunkar Domingo Peas Nampichkai, President of the Board of Directors, Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance (Cuencas Sagradas Amazonicas)

FIGURE 1 The five shared values of collective social innovators



2

Impact of collective social innovation

Collective social innovators “lay the foundations” for large-scale social impact, which then enables organizations to scale impact even further.

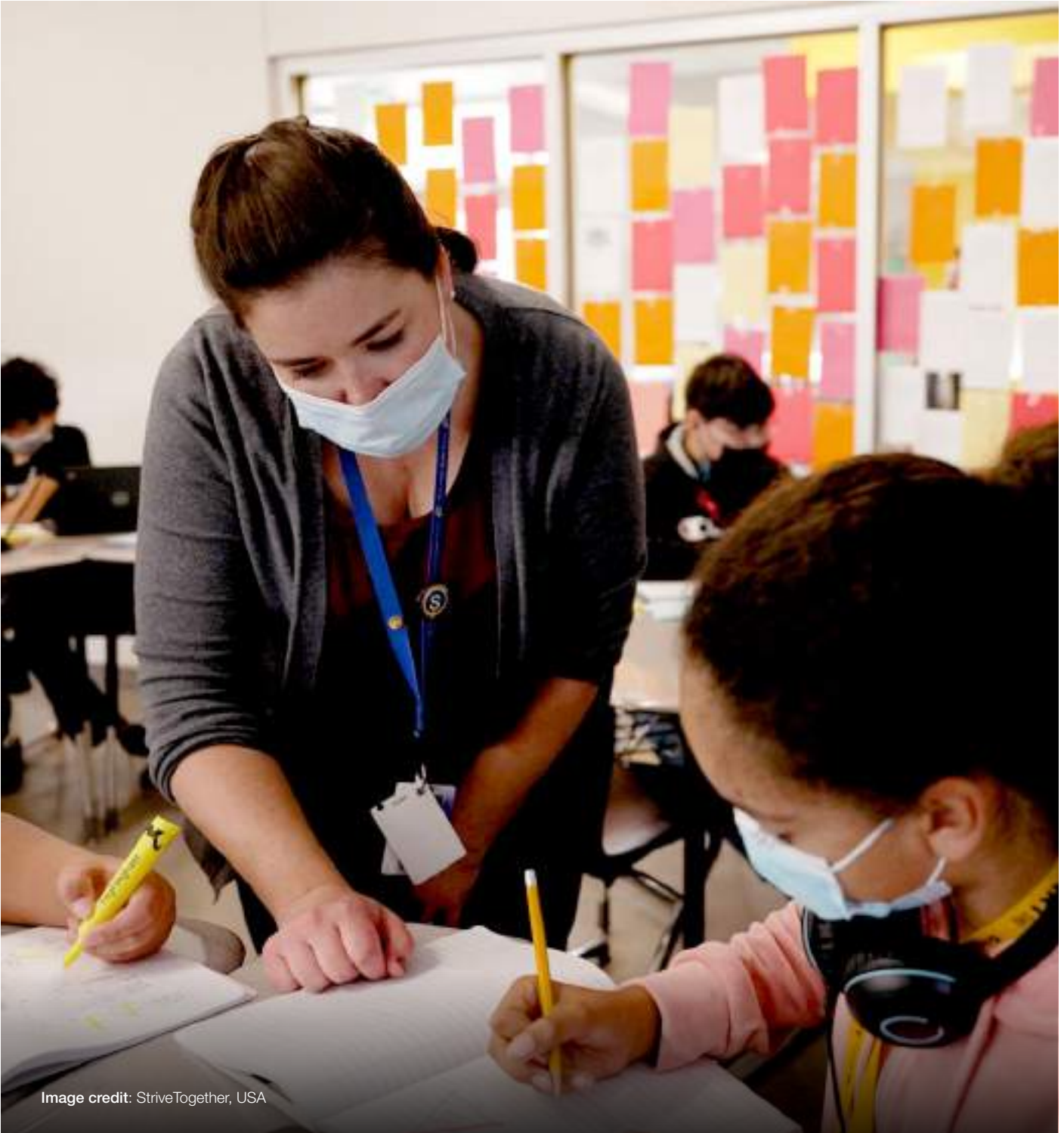


Image credit: StriveTogether, USA

The Schwab Foundation's 2020 impact report, profiling two decades of impact from the foundation's community, revealed that most social innovators in the network are partnering with other organizations to scale their collective impact.⁹ Collective social innovators are taking this a step further, making collaboration **the** key innovation in their strategies and approaches.

Importantly, through this research, the Schwab Foundation has discovered that collective social innovation produces impacts that reverberate beyond single issues and organizations. These impacts are often difficult to see because they aren't easily captured in numbers of people benefitting, or quantities of products and services delivered.

Rather, the work of collective social innovation "lays the foundations" for large-scale and systemic social impact, which is then used by existing and new groups to scale impact even further. These foundational impacts include:

Impact 1: Developing shared narratives that enable diverse groups to work together

When groups have not historically worked together, they arrive at problem-solving with different ways of seeing issues and, often, competing agendas for their work together. Collective social innovators describe a key impact of their work as shared narratives that enable groups to work together across differences, align their roles and activities, and sustain their work over long timeframes. These shared narratives provide a way for many stakeholders to find "common cause" while still allowing for flexibility in goals and approaches.

For example, → **Community Solutions** is working in nearly 250 communities worldwide to solve homelessness. A key impact of their work is shifting the dominant belief that homelessness is intractable to a new narrative that homelessness is, in fact, **solvable**, when place-based partners come together to implement shared metrics and strategies. Similarly, → **StreetNet International** brings together street vendors, market traders and informal economy workers across the globe around a new narrative about informal workers, emphasizing their vital contributions to local economies and their right to decent work conditions.



Ensuring that everyone has a safe place to live has become as complex a task as managing air traffic, yet we have none of the coordinating systems in place to make sure that housing is provided for those who need it. In this situation, in the absence of a mechanism for collaboration, we see that nothing necessarily adds up to what we all want, which is everyone in a safe home. It doesn't have to be this way. Places like Houston and Miami and Minneapolis and Detroit and dozens of other communities are finding solutions because they're thinking differently about this problem. They are rigorously coordinating the work of all of the actors in their system, [building] housing systems that prevent and end homelessness.

Rosanne Haggerty, President, Community Solutions, in Haggerty, R. (2024). *A new vision for ending homelessness in the US*. TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/rosanne_haggerty_a_new_vision_for_ending_homelessness_in_the_us.



Image credit: Community Solutions, USA

Impact 2: Tapping into grassroots knowledge to better identify and deliver social innovations

Another barrier to social innovation is the fact that too many organizations delivering services and solutions are geographically and culturally distant from the communities they seek to serve. This means that critical knowledge from grassroots actors is often overlooked or underutilized. Collective social innovators take the time and patience to develop participatory architectures that enable local, embedded innovators to be part of the change process.

A notable example is → **Shikshagraha**, a people's education movement that is dedicated to improving public schools in India. Through multistakeholder collectives and district- and community-level sub-collectives, Shikshagraha is able to harness the ideas and participation of tens of thousands of school leaders to deliver micro-improvements across more than 15 Indian states and union territories. Another example is → **Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement**, a network of 180 local collaboratives across 500 municipalities in Canada who are deploying localized, unique approaches to end poverty across the country.



In the social change space, we are people on a mission. That makes many of us feel a sense of urgency – and rightly so; we start seeking quick solutions, quick actions because we want the problems to be solved quickly. But collective action demands the opposite. Diverse sets of people need to come together for shared meaning-making of the problem, for co-creating the solutions, and this takes time. It cannot be forced or rushed. True alignment on problems and purpose requires patience, and spaces for dialogue and trust building. This means we need to compromise speed in the short-term ... slowing down at the start to go faster in the long run – to build something truly effective and sustainable for tomorrow.

Khushboo Awasthi Kumari, Evangelist and Designer, Shikshagraha, India, in TheCSRUniverse. (2024). *Shikshāgraha: Transforming India's School Education*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=id-OllrGmg8>.



Image credit: Shikshagraha, India

“ Communities have been managing resources collectively for millennia; collective innovators can revive these methods and find new ones to expand the available approaches further.

Impact 3: Finding novel ways to value and manage collective resources

Collective social innovators also promote impact by identifying new ways to manage collective resources, which is critical as the world enters a period in which its natural and social resources are under threat. Too frequently, development experts and policy-makers rely upon just two means of distributing common goods: the market or government regulation. However, communities have been managing resources collectively for millennia; collective social innovators can revive these methods and find new ones to expand the available approaches further.

The → **Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance** is the world's largest Indigenous alliance committed

to protecting the environment, bringing together 30 Indigenous nations that have never before worked collaboratively. Together, these nations have developed a Bioregional Plan to protect 86 million acres of bio-culturally rich rainforests that are critical to maintaining the earth's hydrological cycle. This plan relies upon a return to managing natural resources in balance with the Indigenous ethos of *buen vivir*. Similarly, the → **vartaLeap Coalition** is promoting a new way of valuing India's youth population – the largest in the world – encouraging employers, governments and education systems to see the young population as more than just an economic dividend and instead as a means of transforming “self and society” through nourishing “inside-out” youth leadership.



Image credit: Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance, Ecuador

Impact 4: Collecting and distributing expansive datasets to shape policy and decision-making

Economic, development and environmental goals are often challenged by the lack of data to promote informed decision-making and evidence-based policy. Collective social innovators are solving this issue, overcoming data collection hurdles and assembling vast datasets that can be harnessed for good.

→ **MapBiomias** is a collaborative initiative working in over 20 geographic and thematic areas to use

advanced technology and data to monitor land use and cover changes in tropical forests worldwide. Using their platform, it is now possible to quantify land use changes over a 39-year period with a level of precision and speed that would have been unfeasible and prohibitively expensive in the past. In another example, → **StriveTogether** works closely with 70 place-based partnerships across the USA to assemble detailed, disaggregated data on “cradle-to-career” outcomes, enabling municipalities to understand and address the bottlenecks to economic opportunity with targeted, evidence-based initiatives.



Our objective as a network is to guarantee that there is capacity to produce land cover/use change maps in every tropical country. In our case, the network is the goal, because it's not possible to produce such detailed and meaningful maps if it's not through a network of local organizations and experts. No single person or organization has the capacity to do every part, so we need to have several organizations complete this complex product. With this capacity, people in each country and region are actually applying the same logic and learnings to solving other problems and developing other projects beyond MapBiomias, responding to local demands with the same technology.

Tasso Azevedo, Co-Founder and General Coordinator, MapBiomias



Image credit: MapBiomias, Brazil

Impact 5: Assembling and allocating financial resources efficiently and effectively

Finally, collective social innovators play a crucial role in assembling and allocating financial resources efficiently and effectively to address pressing societal challenges. In most instances, single organizations and institutions simply cannot grow to the size and scale necessary to deploy large amounts of funding across populations. International NGOs rely upon an unwieldy and inefficient system of subgrants to local partners that prevents a significant amount of funding from reaching local communities.¹⁰

Collective social innovation offers a different approach, providing mechanisms to reach large

numbers of groups that can channel funds to multiple levels, including national governments, place-based partnerships and local communities. The → **Financing Alliance for Health** is bringing together governments, donors, private-sector companies and communities to assemble and deploy an unprecedented amount of funding – more than \$650 million – for primary and community healthcare systems in Africa.

→ **ProjectTogether** also works to aggregate funding by bringing together both government and private sector funders to pool funds supporting collective action projects. In 2024, ProjectTogether pooled €4.5 million in funds for initiatives supporting democracy, refugee integration, and sustainable nutrition and agriculture.



We are closing the \$4.4 billion annual funding gap for community health services as we increase health access for more than 50% of the African population. How do we do this? By building bridges. Political, financial and partnership bridges. We are bringing communities to the table with governments on the health policy process – we are bringing together communities, private sector, public sector, philanthropy to design financing instruments that work for the continent. We are building intersectoral bridges between climate and health and finance as we advocate for proximal leadership within the context.

Angela Gichaga, Chief Executive Officer, Financing Alliance for Health in Financing Alliance for Health. (2024). *2024 Schwab Foundation Social Innovators of the Year - Dr. Angela Gichaga's Acceptance Speech*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Apg7txiDzE>.

↓ Image credit:
Financing Alliance
for Health, Kenya



3

Case studies of collective social innovation

These 10 case studies highlight a selection of organizations pursuing collective social innovation, addressing diverse impact themes.



Image credit: StreetNet International, Global

Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance

Protecting 86 million acres of bio-culturally rich rainforests on behalf of the planet



Year founded: **2017**

Headquartered: Ecuador

Regions represented: **86** million acres across Ecuador and Peru

Groups assembled: **30** Indigenous nations

Organizations involved: **28** member organizations of which 25 are Indigenous-led

Constituents represented: **700,000** Indigenous People residing in the bioregion

The Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance (ASHA) is an Indigenous-led coalition that brings together 30 Indigenous nations representing 700,000 Indigenous People residing in the headwaters of the Amazon River. Prior to ASHA's formation, these nations were fragmented by national borders and exploitation by multinational companies. This initiative marks the first time in history that such a large number of Indigenous nations have come together for a single cause.

ASHA conducts regeneration and reforestation projects, advocacy against extractive industries, legal action in support of Indigenous sovereignty, and education to promote economic activities and environmental leadership. ASHA and its constituencies are currently in the process of enacting its Bioregional Plan, which calls for a series of pathways that will protect the Amazon as a vital organ of the planet's biosphere.

Community Solutions

Creating a future in which homelessness is solvable, not inevitable



Year founded: **2011**

Headquartered: New York, New York, USA

Regions represented: USA, Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, UK

Groups assembled: **142 communities in the USA; 103 international communities** in five countries

Organizations involved: **Approximately 3,800 organizations** (communities assemble 5-30 organizations each)

Constituents represented: Communities each represent hundreds of clients, staff, board members, funders and volunteers

Community Solutions is a non-profit organization leading the Built for Zero network to create a lasting end to homelessness. The organization works with communities to go beyond managing homelessness to solving the problem, ensuring that when people do experience homelessness, it is rare, brief and non-recurring. To realize this vision, communities within the Built for Zero network follow a shared methodology towards

ending homelessness in their place-based communities. Community Solutions' network currently includes 142 communities in the USA and 103 international communities in five countries. Since 2011, 44 communities have measurably reduced homelessness, and 15 communities have made homelessness rare and brief for veterans and/or individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

Financing Alliance for Health

Strengthening and sustaining community health systems through multistakeholder partnerships



Year founded:	2016	Groups assembled:	22 national and sub-national governments
Headquartered:	Nairobi, Kenya	Organizations involved:	FAH convenes governments, donors, private sector companies and communities to address systemic financing challenges to scaling primary and community health programmes
Regions represented:	16 countries Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe	Constituents represented:	450,000+ community health workers have been recognized in policy and practice through FAH's efforts

The Financing Alliance for Health (FAH) is an Africa-based, African-led entity that convenes governments, donors, private sector companies and communities to address systemic financing challenges to scaling primary and community health programmes at country, regional and global levels. FAH bridges the worlds of health and finance to enable new

and additional investments in health systems with primary and community health at their core. Since its inception, FAH has mobilized close to \$660 million towards primary and community health efforts. Additionally, FAH has supported the recognition and institutionalization of more than 450,000 community health workers (CHWs).

MapBiomass

Producing free, open and interactive land use maps for tropical forests worldwide



Year founded:	2015	Groups assembled:	20+ geographic and thematic initiatives comprised of independent local organizations
Headquartered:	MapBiomass is fully distributed with no central headquarters. The Executive Secretariat of the network is coordinated by the Brazilian branch	Organizations involved:	~100 organizations are members of the MapBiomass network
Regions represented:	15 countries and territories (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Indonesia, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, Amazonia, Bosque Atlantico, Chaco, Pampa)	Constituents represented:	500,000+ users access MapBiomass annually, from governments, financial institutions, agricultural companies and NGOs

MapBiomass was founded in 2015 as a collaborative initiative in Brazil to use advanced technology and data to monitor land use and cover changes across the country. Today, MapBiomass supports over 20 geographic and thematic initiatives across the world, producing maps with precision and speed that would have been unfeasible and prohibitively expensive in the past. By integrating satellite imagery, machine learning (ML), cloud computing and

contributions from universities, civil society and technology start-ups, MapBiomass initiatives provide detailed annual reports on deforestation, agricultural expansion and other transformations in natural landscapes. Its comprehensive datasets are crucial for understanding the impacts of human activities on ecosystems and provide an essential tool for policy-makers, researchers and environmental advocates.

ProjectTogether

Creating a new “operating model” for social change



Year founded: 2015

Headquartered: Berlin, Germany

Regions represented: Germany, as well as a pilot initiative in Switzerland

Groups assembled: 10 thematic “missions” bring together stakeholders from government, public administration, corporates and civil society

Organizations involved: 3,000 organizations are involved in the ProjectTogether community

Constituents represented: ~100,000 people are or have been involved in one or more missions and the broader ProjectTogether community

ProjectTogether is based on the idea that society needs a new “operating model” to work collaboratively to solve society’s most pressing challenges. ProjectTogether started in 2015 as a grassroots social incubator, and, in 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ProjectTogether co-organized #WirVsVirus mobilizing citizens, business and government to develop solutions for challenges arising from the pandemic. This virtual hackathon brought together 28,361 citizens and generated 1,498 solutions

in just 48 hours. ProjectTogether has since codified a new “operating model” for mobilizing cross-sector alliances, bringing together hundreds of actors to address significant social challenges. Today, ProjectTogether has applied this approach to 10 themes – including the shortage of skilled workers and green jobs, arrival processes for refugees and migrants, the circular economy, regenerative agriculture and food systems, and more – while mobilizing more than 100,000 citizens in 2,500 organizations.

Shikshagraha

Mobilizing a people’s education movement dedicated to improving 1 million public schools in India



Year founded: Mantra4Change was founded in 2013 and ShikshaLokam was founded in 2017. Collective action began through Punjab Education Collective in 2019 (a statewide collective), then Shikshagraha in 2023 (a nationwide collective)

Headquartered: Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Regions represented: India (nationwide)

Groups assembled: 3 missions engaging system leaders, social entrepreneurs, young people and women leaders in communities (state, district and community-level sub-collectives)

Organizations involved: ~75 organizations are currently represented in the collectives

Constituents represented: 40 million children and 300,000 education leaders across 100 districts by 2027

Shikshagraha is a nationwide movement in India ensuring that every child completes their education in a community-led, locally empowered public school system that values and enhances their potential. The collective promotes simple but powerful “micro-improvements” – ideas that build on what already exists in schools and classrooms through a process of continuous improvement. The movement began in the

state of Punjab, where, in four years, micro-improvements led by schools themselves lifted Punjab’s state results from the lower half of all 28 states to now ranking first in the entire country. Encouraged by these results, two more statewide collectives were set up in 2022. Building on these efforts, Shikshagraha aims to reach 1 million public schools, impacting over 150 million school-age children in India.

StreetNet International

Strengthening the rights of street vendors, market vendors, hawkers and cross-border traders as the backbone of local economies



Year founded: 2002

Headquartered: Durban, South Africa

Regions represented: 55 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe

Groups assembled: 62 membership-based affiliate organizations, which have at least 500 individual members

Organizations involved: Affiliate organizations are national, regional and city-based alliances, as well as trade unions, composed of many membership-based organizations and individuals

Constituents represented: 916,015 members who are street/market vendors, informal traders, cross-border traders and hawkers

StreetNet International is an autonomous and democratic alliance representing street vendors, market vendors, hawkers and cross-border traders around the world. Street vendors play a significant role in the worldwide economy, providing essential goods and services at affordable prices, particularly in the Global South. Yet, as informal workers, these vendors face numerous challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, harassment from authorities, risk of eviction and unfair taxation. In just over two decades, the organization

has grown to incorporate 62 affiliate members in 55 countries on four continents, representing 916,015 informal economy workers worldwide. StreetNet also collaborates with other informal workers' organizations, including WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing). Today, StreetNet has strengthened the leadership and organizing skills of its member organizations while successfully advocating for policies that recognize and protect street vendors at local and national levels worldwide.

StriveTogether

Building civic infrastructure to put more young people on the path to economic mobility



Year founded: 2011

Headquartered: Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Regions represented: USA (29 states)

Groups assembled: ~70 place-based partnerships

Organizations involved: ~7,000 organizations are assembled in these partnerships

Constituents represented: 14 million young people collectively reached by partnerships across the US

StriveTogether expands economic mobility for youth by improving cradle-to-career outcomes through a network of "place-based partnerships": initiatives that connect non-profit organizations, businesses, schools, philanthropy and more. Place-based partnerships use quantitative and qualitative data to uncover the root causes of inequitable and depressed outcomes for youth and families. They then identify successful practices to address those root causes and scale

them to achieve broader policy change. StriveTogether has worked with network members to codify its methodology, which has been rigorously evaluated to show its efficacy. Today, StriveTogether brings together 70 partnerships in 29 states representing an estimated 7,000 organizations that collectively reach nearly 14 million young people across the USA.

Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement

Ending poverty in all of its forms



Year founded: **2002**

Headquartered: Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Regions represented: Tamarack's primary focus is Canada, with relationships in the USA, the United Kingdom, Europe, New Zealand and Australia

Groups assembled: **180** local collaboratives working across 500 municipalities

Organizations involved: **39,000** changemakers from thousands of organizations across the world (with a majority in Canada)

Constituents represented: Local collaboratives are working in communities representing approximately 60% of people living in Canada (24 million of 40 million citizens)

Tamarack supports individuals and communities to change systems to end poverty, create sustainable and equitable climate transitions, inspire a sense of belonging and community, and improve opportunities with and for youth. Tamarack began in the 1990s and then grew in 2002 when 13 cities in Canada committed to embarking on a 10-year journey to explore a collaborative, cross-sector approach to poverty reduction. When this effort exceeded its goals, the network began to grow rapidly, with Tamarack

applying its proven approach to three additional issue areas: belonging, climate transitions and youth futures. Each of these issue areas has grown into a network of local collaboratives bringing together different sectors and individuals to implement large-scale change initiatives in their cities. A total of 39,000 changemakers around the world belong to Tamarack's learning network and use Tamarack's resources, consulting and coaching services to collaborate on community-driven outcomes.

vartaLeap Coalition

Nurturing inside-out youth leadership in India



Year founded: **2019**

Headquartered: New Delhi, National Capital Territory, India

Regions represented: India (nationwide)

Groups assembled: **8** "vartaLabs" (collaborative efforts addressing specific themes)

Organizations involved: **150+** members including institutional members (organizations) and individual members (leaders from different sectors, including government and multilateral agencies)

Constituents represented: **~150,000** young people are engaged through deeply transformative leadership experiences each year (conservative estimates)

The vartaLeap Coalition was formed in 2019 to grow understanding and strategy for youth leadership and development in India. The coalition initially started with 40 organizations and has now grown to over 150 members. The coalition aims to build vibrant and empowered spaces that nurture the leadership potential of young people to transform themselves and society. Building on Gandhi's mobilization of youth during the Indian Independence

movement, vartaLeap aims to understand young people as more than just assets, consumers and workers, and rather as individuals in society whose well-being is linked to that of the community around them. Every year, at least 150,000 young people are engaged through deeply transformative leadership experiences centred on well-being, gender equality, climate action and constitutional values.

4

Organizing for collective social innovation

Collective social innovators organize themselves differently than traditional organizations in order to mobilize vast constituencies.



Image credit: Shikshagraha, India

Given the values that collective social innovators hold and the impacts they create, collective initiatives organize themselves in different configurations than conventional organizations and institutions. Collective social innovation is built upon the five key values identified earlier in this report: bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, a commitment to impact through addressing root causes, maintaining flexibility, restoring agency, and ensuring respectful and balanced relationships.

To actualize these values, collective social innovators construct architectures, develop pathways and conduct activities that allow vast constituencies to flexibly contribute in authentic and agentic ways.

Collective social innovators construct collective architectures to mobilize vast constituencies

While each collective initiative included in this report addresses different social issues and assembles diverse constituencies, there are similarities to how these initiatives are constructed. Each collective has developed a multi-layered framework (also known as a “collective architecture”) designed to enable

the representation and participation of hundreds of thousands – and sometimes millions – of people. This architecture ensures that diverse voices are included, and that large-scale learning and collaboration are both possible and effective.

Interestingly, this collective architecture may or may not be supported by a traditional legal entity. While the majority of initiatives in this study operate through registered organizations, some – such as **MapBiomass**, **Shikshagraha** and **vartaLeap Coalition** – do not have such entities.

Typically, this structure comprises three distinct layers. The **action layer** consists of grassroots groups that engage directly with constituents to carry out activities on the ground. The **network layer** serves as the “connective tissue”, linking these groups across different geographies to create cohesion and shared purpose. Finally, the **supporting layer** provides the administrative backbone, ensuring continuity by managing resources, coordinating efforts and enabling long-term sustainability. Together, these layers form a dynamic and scalable system for collective action.



The world is facing tremendous challenges of inequality, conflict and ecological decline. We have seen in our work, young people – as trusted and part of key and significant intergenerational decision-making and dialogue spaces – not only bring alternative perspectives that can help us challenge the status quo, but also new innovations, entrepreneurship, and tremendous social change action by being the change they want to see in the world. Collaborative partnerships are needed for us to work across all sectors, across all countries, to co-create the space with young people for building youth leadership spaces that nourish love, learning, freedom, ownership and social hope.

Ashraf Patel, Co-Founder, Pravah ComMutiny - The Youth Collective; Member, vartaLeap Coalition, adapted from the5thspace. (2022). *Ashraf Patel, co-founder Pravah, ComMutiny and vartaLeap at World Economic Forum*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RslHGIMTo6A>.



Image credit: vartaLeap Coalition, India



The foundation for our work is aligning contributions towards getting results. When a core group of partners gets aligned around a shared vision, and working with data, they can ask: what is the data telling us? At StriveTogether, we can work with our network to learn about the data and the work playing out in different communities. When we find the strategies that are effective, we share them across the network and continue to iterate.

Jennifer Blatz, President and Chief Executive Officer, StriveTogether

Collective social innovators develop **collective pathways** that keep groups working and learning together

These profiled innovators have undertaken different journeys to arrive at a shared understanding of collective action among their stakeholders. Yet, again, there are likenesses in how these pathways operate to ensure that groups can work together effectively.

Each initiative has a set of key components that allow groups to journey together along a common pathway:

- A broad **vision** of the future that groups are working towards
- A set of **principles** that provide a guiding framework for how to accomplish the vision
- A portfolio of **methods** that lays out a shared methodology for groups to use in their work
- A collection of **practices** that groups are experimenting with to drive change

Collective social innovators typically spend considerable time and energy developing these components through participatory processes that enable the contribution of groups, organizations and people represented by the collective. Some of the components are developed through intentional efforts, while others emerge organically as the groups work together.

For example, the **Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance** spent more than three and a half years conducting multiple participatory workshops to arrive at its Bioregional Plan, which outlines the collective pathway for the 30 Indigenous nations that are part of the alliance. In a similar effort, **StriveTogether** regularly revises its Theory of Action – a detailed document outlining many of the components of its collective pathway – through an iterative and highly engaged process with more than 70 place-based partnership network members.

Importantly, the purpose of these processes is not just to arrive at effective approaches but, more critically, to align the interests and activities of diverse constituencies. Again, the process is as valuable as the outputs.

Collective social innovators conduct **collective activities** that amplify group efforts and ensure momentum for change

Collective initiatives undertake a diverse array of collective activities to amplify the work of groups, ensure their effectiveness and sustain momentum for change. These activities are categorized into five areas, each serving a unique purpose in advancing collective efforts.

- **Movement building** focuses on creating shared narratives and expanding the stakeholder base
- **Strengthening data systems** ensures access to reliable information to guide decision-making
- **Influencing institutions** involves advocating for systemic changes through supportive policy-making
- **Hosting learning communities** enables learning and growth for constituencies by providing spaces for stakeholders to exchange ideas and best practices
- **Investing in systemic solutions** paves the way for enduring change by ensuring sufficient resources

These activities are designed not only to achieve the objectives of individual groups but also to nurture broader ecosystems that enable further collective action. Notably, **Community Solutions** creates shared definitions and data collection methods that provide the basis for policy advocacy at state and national scales. **Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement** takes a complementary approach, hosting learning networks that enable members to develop key skills and competencies and then apply them across different contexts. In another example, **ProjectTogether** has developed an entire initiative around government reform that connects civil servants across the bureaucratic state to instill a culture of innovation within public institutions, while **Financing Alliance for Health** is bringing together governments, NGOs, donors and communities to develop innovative financing structures for community health.



Image credit: Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, Canada



When we work with rigour in collective ways, we can achieve really big things. We can move toward the future that most of us want – one shaped by equity, and by community and kindness in the places where we live and visit and that we hold in our hearts. Collective approaches bring more joy and fun and lively energy into the work of creating communities where everyone has enough. This way of working is impactful, and it moves us into a future that is a couple of steps beyond where most of us are able to set our sights on when we're at it alone, given the current crises.

Danya Pastuszek, President and Chief Executive Officer,
Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement

Collective social innovators establish **supportive infrastructures** that sustain collective action

Collective social innovators also create supportive infrastructures that seek to achieve a blend of adaptability and stability – a vital balance for sustaining long-term engagement from multiple stakeholders. Much of this work occurs “behind the scenes” and evolves significantly over time and therefore may be underappreciated or difficult to comprehend on the part of partners, funders and policy-makers.

Key elements in supportive infrastructure include:

- **Governance and participation structures** that ensure inclusive, transparent and adaptable decision-making processes while preserving the relationship between group members and the supporting entity

- **Team culture and competencies** that prioritize adaptability and learning, with a notable focus on a balance of content and facilitation expertise
- **Enabling technology** that facilitates communication, data sharing and project management, often with features that enable coordination and learning activities across groups and regions.

In one key example, **StreetNet International** has constructed a set of well-defined structures to channel the participation of nearly one million informal economy workers globally. These structures – including an International Congress with delegates from every affiliate organization and an International Council of elected office-bearers – allows members to be elected into leadership positions and gain significant experience and training in global leadership skills. Together, these administrative dimensions provide the foundation for sustained collective action, allowing initiatives to thrive even as external conditions shift and evolve.

Collective social innovators operate through a number of different revenue models and are not limited to non-profit models. In the Schwab awardee network, there are many for-profit and hybrid business models using collective action approaches to drive impact at scale. These companies operate with the same values and aspirations outlined in this report, while developing partnerships and multistakeholder structures that prioritize sustainable revenue streams and emphasize scale. Some examples include:

Ujala Cygnus in India is a network of 23 hospitals across 18 underserved cities that brings together the expertise of over 1000 doctors and medical experts to serve patients with advanced technology and high quality care. Ujala Cygnus is now partnering with the public sector to ensure that their activities and infrastructure can have the furthest reach.

Indigital is a majority Indigenous-owned and managed social enterprise dedicated to creating positive systems change through collective action. As a trusted intermediary, Indigital partners with materials companies and communities to blend Indigenous knowledge and cutting-edge technology, creating solutions that care for country, culture and communities. The result is improved social, economic and environmental outcomes for all.

Shonaquip is a hybrid South African social enterprise dedicated to improving the lives of children with disabilities by designing and manufacturing assistive mobility devices, training and support services that address the needs of users living in more off-road and under-resourced regions. It brings together government, non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) and other partners to ensure access for underserved communities, and works with public health systems to integrate assistive devices into national policies.

Karo Sambhav is an Indian social enterprise aiming to make the circular economy possible through technology-driven waste management solutions. Initially focused on electronic waste, it has expanded to plastics, batteries and glass. Collaborating with enterprises, multilaterals and governments, Karo Sambhav supports circular economy and extended producer responsibility (EPR) initiatives. Its technology platform ensures transparency and traceability in waste collection, recycling and secondary materials management. Operating in over 70 Indian cities, it has processed over 120,000 tons of waste, offsetting approximately 115,000 tons of CO₂, and runs three recycling units recovering critical raw materials and precious metals.

Collective social innovation approaches can also bring together private sector groups to engage with the public sector and civil society to collaborate for social impact.

The **Private Sector Advisory Group (PSAG)** in Nigeria was founded in 2017 as a coalition of businesses committed to advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through strategic partnerships and investments. It collaborates with the government to drive policy reforms, mobilizes private sector resources for social impact and engages communities to implement sustainable initiatives. By promoting innovation and corporate social responsibility, PSAG strengthens Nigeria's development agenda and works collectively to ensure economic growth, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.



We are permanently creating something new that never existed before. We are organizing self-employed workers. It is different from organizing workers with a direct employment relationship, which is what trade unions have done traditionally. We deal directly with ordinary people: most of our members are self-employed women, they are informal street and market traders. They are building jobs for themselves; they are not waiting for the government to do it for them. They face daily harassment, violence, and lack of legal and social protection – even though they are essential workers who provide affordable goods, food and services to local communities and urban poor. Despite these challenges, we want to create and to be part of the solution, especially on the way to the formalization process of our jobs. We don't lose hope and look ahead to a just future, without getting left behind.

Oksana Abboud, International Coordinator, StreetNet International

↓ Image credit:
StreetNet International,
Global



5

Unleashing collective social innovation

Collective social innovators enable new relationships and engagement from stakeholders, including partners, funders and government.



Image credit: Financing Alliance for Health, Kenya

🗣️ **Collective social innovation can be advanced by creating new types of relationships and engagement with prospective partners, funders and governments.**

Solving global issues is growing more challenging as political transitions, environmental realities, economic inequalities and new technologies threaten to divide us into geographic and sectoral factions. These divisions are costly and inefficient since creativity, expertise and resources exist most frequently at the intersections of diverse stakeholders. Collective social innovation is designed to counter these divisions, creating “connective tissue” across vast constituencies that would otherwise remain disconnected.

This report has outlined the values, impacts and organizing approaches of collective social innovators, and how these differ from the approaches favoured by single organizations and institutions. Based on these differences, collective social innovation can be advanced by creating new types of relationships and engagement with prospective partners, funders and governments.

To grow their work further, collective social innovators can enable the following:

Partners, including the private sector, can reduce fragmentation while tapping into a vast repository of ideas and participating in collective problem-solving

The dominant development paradigm has created a competitive environment for social innovators, where organizations vie for grants and contracts at the expense of their peers. To promote collective social innovation, this competitive landscape needs to shift to a collaborative field where organizations and groups are incentivized and motivated to work together to solve problems, finding the right role for each stakeholder based on areas of expertise and context.

The examples in this report showcase initiatives where organizations have set aside isolated agendas in order to share learnings, assemble data, develop mutual policy positions and work towards a common vision. This signals a “culture shift” in social innovation, which could be further supported by:

- Mapping the landscape to understand the supportive practices and policies for collective action in regions and sectors
- Developing shared training platforms and learning hubs where collective social innovators openly contribute resources, tools and case studies
- Aligning frameworks and measurement methodologies to assemble the impacts of collective efforts

Funders and investors can build critical ecosystems that allow many organizations to flourish

Funders and investors seeking to address complex social challenges play a pivotal role in advancing collective social innovation. Yet, due to its distributed nature, it is more difficult to develop funding proposals and attribute impact to collective action. Fundamentally, collective social innovators and funders can work together to advance collective efforts by building ecosystems that move beyond transactional relationships and cultivate partnerships involving experimentation, feedback and adaptation. By committing to learning alongside innovators, funders have the opportunity to gain deeper insights into the on-the-ground realities that contribute to impact, ultimately enabling greater trust and ongoing commitment. Funders will also be able to witness the impact of their contributions in real time rather than through standard reporting timeframes.

Funders will realize “amplified gains” by investing in the institutional capacity of collective social innovators. Collective social innovators create efficiencies by delivering learning, data and solidarity across vast networks. Yet, too often, this is achieved with very small staff sizes and lean budgets, rather than the long-term capacity it deserves. Collective social innovators can build sustainable ecosystems with:

- Trust-based funding practices,¹¹ including greater flexibility and longer time horizons, as well as a commitment to learning alongside innovators
- Balancing short-term and long-term goals, embracing the prospect that project plans will change as realities unfold
- Funding for the “supportive infrastructure” of collectives, creating exponential impact as collectives share learnings and build the capacity of groups within their networks

Government and policy-makers can align interests, access critical data and achieve population-level scale

Collective social innovators offer public sector institutions the opportunity to align interests among many stakeholders and harness the knowledge and expertise of constituencies and communities that would otherwise remain passive beneficiaries. In several examples, collective social innovators are already partnering with governments to provide critical linkages between policies and implementation.

However, most government stakeholders still visualize traditional governance systems and single organizational entities when engaging with collectives. Governments and policy-makers can better support collective efforts by understanding their unique governance structures and creating supportive policies and funding mechanisms that capitalize on the distributed structures of collectives. Governments and policy-makers can advance collective social innovation through:

- Using their convening power to initiate collective efforts in partnership with collective social innovators

- Supporting scale-up (often through technology-enabled initiatives) by promoting platforms on many levels to create sustainability and objectivity
- Creating novel legal entity structures that do not centralize governance in a single organization but instead distribute decision-making and governance across multiple groups
- Partnering with collective social innovators to link multistakeholder initiatives with public sector services, providing opportunities for training, capacity building and continuous improvement that is directly linked to community outcomes



In the beginning, we started off by supporting individual changemakers and initiatives, but then we realized that our energy and resources are better used to build those connectors and new forms of collaborations that can work at the systemic level. Who do you have to get on board so that all others follow? How do you create first mover effects? What are the levers which we only can tackle together? Lots of people think, ‘Okay, I found a lever’. But if most of the time, you only pull that one lever, nothing will change. You need multiple levers coming together. That’s when systems start changing. But building these – sometimes very unusual – alliances doesn’t just happen; it requires thorough orchestration. Today, very few are working on this structural alliance building and orchestration. That is what we realized is missing and what we are committed to building.

Henrike Schlottmann, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, ProjectTogether



Image credit: ProjectTogether, Germany

Conclusion

As the world undergoes significant changes across economic, technological, geopolitical, environmental and social sectors, there must be innovative ways to collaborate across sectors, disciplines and communities. This report highlights key insights and lessons from a new wave of social innovation, focusing not just on products, services and delivery models, but on how people work collectively to drive meaningful change.

Although the innovators featured in this report come from diverse backgrounds, they share a common dedication to collaborating across stakeholder groups to generate large-scale social impact. These stakeholder groups can benefit from collective action approaches in multiple ways:

By partnering with collectives, **partners**, particularly from the private sector, can tackle critical challenges more effectively, reducing fragmentation and gaining access to shared resources and invaluable community knowledge. Collective social innovators are already working with businesses to build more sustainable supply chains, enhance distribution and value to last-mile communities, and transition to circular economies. Through collaboration, businesses can align their corporate goals with broader social objectives, ensuring that their efforts contribute to meaningful social change while also driving economic growth.

For **funders and investors**, collective action offers a strategic opportunity to maximize impact by supporting the systems and infrastructure that enable organizations to work together and

flourish. Rather than funding individual projects in isolation, funders can contribute to the creation of robust ecosystems. By building the architecture that allows entire change efforts to work in collaboration, funders can help catalyse systemic change. This collaborative approach avoids the risk of short-term impacts and rather leads to more durable outcomes, greater momentum and sustained change.

Finally, collaborating with collectives enables **governments and policy-makers** to work in a unified manner and at scale, making it easier to address population-wide challenges. Instead of managing a piecemeal landscape of competing organizations, governments can engage with a coordinated network of partners with aligned purpose and strategies. This reduces the duplication of efforts and enhances the efficiency of policy implementation and resource allocation. Furthermore, working with collectives ensures that interventions are aligned with national and global priorities, driving progress across multiple sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, education and economic development in a cohesive manner.

Collective social innovation is a key approach for driving large-scale, sustainable social change, uniting diverse stakeholders toward collaborative action and shared purpose. By embracing this emerging aspect of social innovation, diverse stakeholders can learn to bridge deep divides and create lasting systemic change, ensuring meaningful progress towards addressing the world's most pressing societal challenges.



Image credit: Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance, Ecuador

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Endnotes

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