



## **Problem, person, and pathway: A framework for social innovators**

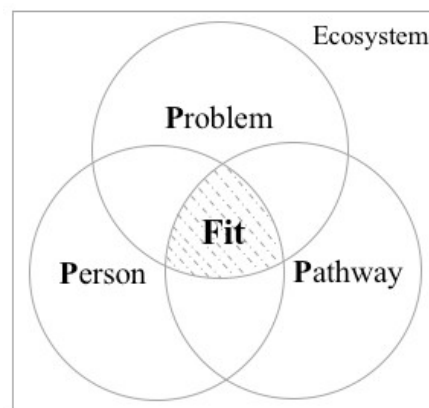
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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the last decade, the appetite for learning about social innovation has intensified, and universities around the world have tried to keep up by creating an array of new courses, certificates, and degree programs (Lawrence, Phillips and Tracey, 2012). As researchers, educators, and advisers, how can we better prepare social innovators for the work of addressing the world's pressing social problems at the relevant scale? We undertook this inquiry in recent years as we researched, taught, and advised social innovators around the globe. Broadly, we view social innovation as innovation with the intent to address social problems. Rather than assuming that creating something new is good, we consider innovation in light of its potential to lead to positive social impact, that is, to improve the lives of individuals and communities (Seelos and Mair, 2017). From our experience, we identified three key lenses to help social innovators contribute to social change, which culminated in what we call the “3P” framework that considers the nature of: the *problem* at hand, the *person* pursuing change, and the *pathway* to change (see Figure 1). For both new and experienced social innovators, considering the alignment of these 3Ps can provide an organizing template that helps them to think and act in ways more likely to benefit individual and communities. We find that exploring the problem, person, and pathway in turn can also shed light on the corresponding interrelationships, and where there may or may not be overlap. Rather than providing a one-size-fits-all blueprint, at its core the 3P framework offers sets of questions for social innovators to unpack and update iteratively. This approach encourages individuals and groups to find the “fit” between different elements.

Figure 1. The 3P Framework



<sup>1</sup> Abridged draft chapter for the forthcoming *Handbook of Inclusive Innovation: The Role of Organizations, Markets and Communities in Social Innovation*, edited by Gerry George, Ted Baker, Havovi Joshi, and Paul Tracey



The 3P framework is based on a situational approach (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977) to social innovation that accounts for ways in which different contexts may call for different responses. It also accounts for the politics of change. Addressing social problems often requires coordinating shifts in behavior across diverse individuals and institutions, and sometimes even sectors (see Alinsky, 1971; Battilana, 2015; Snow and Soule, 2010). Accordingly, accounting for the situational, interpersonal, and structural dynamics of power is key as a basis for realistic understanding and action (Pfeffer, 1992). This does not mean that the 3Ps is a tool meant for those who already have power. Social innovators often challenge power hierarchies. Even when they do not already have the power to do so, those seeking change can work to build their power bases in order to enhance their impact. From that standpoint, we view the 3Ps as an inclusive tool that also aims to help empower marginalized individuals and groups aspiring to participate in a movement for change. Furthermore, although the 3P framework is meant as a tool to help guide the thinking and action of individual social innovators, a single individual very rarely succeeds in developing and disseminating social innovations alone. As we elaborate below, such an adoption most often involves collective action. Accordingly, each social innovator is part of a broader movement toward social change (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017). In presenting the 3Ps below, we emphasize the importance of thinking beyond the individual level and accounting for the cultivation of collective capacities often critical for social change.

In the remainder of this chapter, we delve into each element of the 3P framework—problem, person, and pathway—in turn. Although our discussion proceeds in a linear sequence, we intend the learning journey to be iterative, whereby social innovators regularly revisit their assumptions and the sets of questions posed as circumstances change over time.

## **PROBLEM**

Social innovators often approach issues with interventions already in mind. However, enacting a prespecified solution without thoroughly understanding the problem risks causing negative unintended consequences. The stakes are high for social innovators, whose mistakes can incur not only costs for themselves, but also costs for those they seek to serve. To unpack the problem in the 3P framework, we put forward the questions: What is the nature of the problem? What is the problem statement?

### **What Is the Nature of the Problem?**

Social innovators may feel emboldened when they think that they know more than they do, or, on the flip side, feel paralyzed by the web of interconnected moving pieces. Intractability is a common reason given to delay action and diminish aspirations. In a middle way between naivety and paralysis, we encourage social innovators to identify sets of stakeholders and come to recognize their distinct perspectives. This exploration can provide an entry point into understanding the material and social conditions of the particular locality of the problem that social innovators seek to address.



Such an exploration is critical for social innovators to understand the nature of the problem at hand. Specifically, it can help them identify the various factors that contribute to the problem's reproduction. These factors may be economic, cognitive, normative, and/or political. For many problems, such dynamics are intertwined—with, for instance, deeply rooted gender roles (normative) intertwined with insecure property rights (political), and low levels of income (economic) intertwined with people's ability to make decisions about the future (cognitive). Yet, depending on the problem, each kind of factor may be more or less important as barriers to change than others. Mapping these factors and understanding how they contribute to the problem can help social innovators to overcome them (Seelos and Mair, 2017).

Our experience suggests that in order to fully understand the nature of the problem, there is no replacement for social innovators immersing themselves in the places where the problem exists, getting to know firsthand the distinct social norms, power hierarchies, legal rules, economic systems, historical legacies, and physical landscapes. Various established techniques for such immersion have grown out of the study of ethnography, which grounds interpretations of the perspectives of those under study in firsthand experiences of the setting (see Atkinson et al., 2001). Action research, dating back to Lewin (1951), has sought “to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers... to the people” (Bradbury-Huang, 2010). In participatory systemic inquiry, people try to find out everything possible about what, how, why, where, and with whom issues unfold in a specific ecosystem. Such an approach can help outsiders and insiders alike learn about the setting with the use of open-ended prompts that try to ascertain what is present, rather than focusing on what is missing. Being intentional about expanding the reference frame beyond “people like you” also helps reveal hidden narratives, besides dominant ones that maintain existing norms and hierarchies (Burns and Worsley, 2015).

Engaging in this kind of field-based inquiry is critical for social innovators to uncover stakeholders' habits of thought and action that contribute to perpetuating the status quo. Habits of action refer to the sequences of steps underlying flows of materials, money, and information. Habits of thought encompass people's narratives of themselves, each other, and the wider context (Forrester, 1971). When considered together, these habits can surface underlying distributions of power that reproduce asymmetries (Battilana, 2015). In the 3P framework, we encourage social innovators to create, and update, stakeholder maps that account for these habits of thought and action and demarcate the array of interrelated individuals and groups: who is harmed by the current reality (potential beneficiaries), who cares about an alternative future (potential allies), who benefits from the current reality (potential resisters), and who observes the current reality without particularly caring about it (potential fence sitters). Crucially, these categories are neither mutually exclusive nor static. A potential beneficiary may also be an ally, and a potential fence sitter may become a resister.

At the same time that we encourage social innovators to investigate what stakeholders take for granted, we also encourage social innovators to revisit their own assumptions. Cognitive scientists and psychologists widely accept that people create and use mental models of external



reality to help them engage with the world (Craik, 1943; Johnson-Laird, 1983). Yet, people’s ability to represent reality accurately is inherently limited and context-dependent (see Jones, Ross, Lynam, Perez and Leitch, 2011). Without reflection on their own mental models, social innovators risk blocking their way, and even exacerbating problems as they interact with and on behalf of others. To meet this challenge, social innovators can approach iterations of their stakeholder maps as hypotheses to test further rather than facts to validate firmly. In the process, they may compare whether potential beneficiaries, allies, resisters, and fence sitters share their own internal representations or not. Social innovators may also work to apply the notion of “unlearning.” As they surface their particular ways of relating to the world, social innovators not only can come to discard unhelpful mental models, but also can cultivate new openness to not knowing (Brook, Pedler, Abbott and Burgoyne, 2016).

### **What Is the Problem Statement?**

A clearly formulated problem statement is an underappreciated tool (Astor, Morales, Kieffer and Repenning, 2016), both as an internal compass for individual social innovators, and for external communication to cement a shared purpose and mobilize collective resources inclusively. Psychologists have long found that individuals exert more effort and focus in the face of understandable goals (see Locke and Latham, 2003). A growing body of evidence suggests that mental contrasting in particular can help spur action, whereby individuals juxtapose positive aspects about a desired future with negative aspects of the status quo (Oettingen, Hönig and Gollwitzer, 2000). A corresponding way to approach problem formulation is to demarcate the gap between the current reality and a goal state. The current reality captures how the world is, while a goal state captures a notion of how the world could be different. That gap is a source of creative tension, with tension dissipating either when reality rises to the level of a goal state, or a goal state lowers to the level of reality (Senge, 2009).

Such problem formulation is a delicate dance. Imagining a goal state can easily lead to presupposing a solution, yet a problem statement loses its potency when it is actually a solution in disguise (Astor, Morales, Kieffer and Repenning, 2016). For example, saying “most Ugandans still do not live near an electric grid” assumes that access to an electric grid leads to reliable power, that proximity to a grid guarantees connection, that a connection guarantees the necessary power, and that power is affordable. A broader formulation—such as “just 30% of Ugandans have a reliable supply of energy throughout the day”—leaves room for more open investigation of the problem, as well as pathways to change.

In our experience, social innovators very rarely formulate a problem once and leave that statement static. Instead, they iterate and adjust their formulations of the problem over time, based on both their more nuanced understandings of the current reality and fresh visions of alternative futures. One common theme of effective problem statements, though, is that they enable social innovators to distinguish the direction of progress (Astor, Morales, Kieffer and Repenning, 2016). In the energy example, it is clear that the goal state involves an increase in the number of Ugandans whose access to energy is affordable, continuous, and reliable.



## **PERSON**

In addition to understanding and communicating about the problem, social innovators often need to understand and communicate about themselves as individuals. Rather than such introspection amounting to indulgent navel-gazing, we find the opposite—that it can help social innovators contribute more effectively to collective action when they can be both inward- and outward-looking. Addressing social problems often requires breaking with existing norms, and a single individual rarely succeeds alone. Instead, social innovators contribute to collective movements toward change (Ganz and McKenna, forthcoming). To do so, we encourage social innovators to probe how they can harness their motivations and sources of power to benefit individuals and communities, while ensuring their efforts have the necessary legitimacy and support (Moore, 1997). To understand person in the 3P framework, we invite the questions: What are the motivations? What are the sources of power? In answering both, we encourage social innovators to look inwardly at themselves as well as outwardly to account for other stakeholders' motivations and sources of power.

### **What Are the Motivations?**

Social innovators need to persevere when uncertainty looms, momentum slows, new obstacles arise, and critics become louder. Such perseverance requires passion and courage (see Kanter, 2005b). One side of this coin is emotional. Marshall Ganz, for example, suggests combatting inertia with urgency, apathy with anger, fear with hope, isolation with solidarity, and self-doubt with the belief that an individual can make a difference (Ganz, 2011). Another dimension is mindset. Carol Dweck has pioneered a growing body of research on the growth mindset, showing that when people perceive failure as an opportunity to learn and strengthen themselves, rather than a sign of permanent inadequacy, they are more likely to exert additional effort, take risks, and achieve long-term goals (Dweck, 2007). For new and experienced social innovators alike, such a growth mindset can help in the face of complexity and resistance.

Furthermore, the public never recognizes many who contribute to collective action, and the level of control of a single individual in a movement for change is often limited. While some motivations may inevitably ebb and flow over time, we find that people who can tap into a lasting personal sense of purpose are more likely to persevere in the face of setbacks, or when their work does not receive the anticipated public recognition.

Moreover, because social innovators often coordinate with others to be able to improve the lives of individuals and communities, we encourage them not only to examine their own motivations, but also to consider the motivations of others from their perspectives. Such understanding of others is critical in order to mobilize and organize effectively as part of a movement for change (Benford and Snow, 2000; Bernstein, 1997; Tilly, 1999). Doing so requires tailoring communication accordingly such that it provides potential partners with resonant meanings and shared identities to help bring them into a coalition (Snow and Soule, 2010). When social innovators can connect their own motivations to values shared by the coalition, this alignment of feeling can also help the alignment of action.



## **What Are the Sources of Power?**

In our experience, social innovators too often underestimate political considerations in pursuit of their noble goals. Many gravitate to the technical aspects of a perceived solution while discounting relational elements. Take the example of a mobile application for farmers in India that reports up-to-date levels of local agricultural prices. While the technical aspect of this social innovation may function brilliantly on mobile phones, its ability to empower farmers also inextricably depends on the relational dynamics of the relative bargaining power between farmers and middlemen who sell their products to restaurants and grocery stores.

Underestimating the political aspect of empowering farmers, and what is at stake for those involved, can render social innovators ineffective, or even harmful. Ultimately, power is not a possession that some people have inherited or accumulated while others lack it. Power depends on the situation and the extent to which people therein control access to resources, tangible or intangible, that others value.

We encourage social innovators to think systematically about the sources of power available to contribute to social change, both their own as individuals and those of existing and potential partners. In the 3P framework, we distinguish between personal, positional, and relational sources of power. Each is important to consider with respect to individual social innovators as well those who make up their coalitions. Personal sources of power are internal, deriving from personality, experience, and expertise. Positional sources come from formal roles in organizations and society. Relational sources come from connections with family, friends, and colleagues (Battilana, 2015). We encourage social innovators to map all of these sources of power, assessing themselves individually, as well their influence on others and the strength or weakness of their social ties. Besides creating their own such map, we also encourage social innovators to map the sources of power of potential beneficiaries, allies, resisters, and fence sitters.

Overall, sources of power are far from fixed. They often change over time and space, across different relationships and as the problem statement or proposed vehicle for change shifts. It is thus critical for social innovators to update their stakeholder analysis regularly, in order to more accurately capture stakeholder orientations toward the proposed change and their sources of power. The effectiveness of various sources of power will accordingly also depend on the context. Different sources may be more or less critical for different tasks and across different relationships. Influencing others and convincing them to join a movement for change draws heavily on relational sources of power in the form of strong social ties (see Battilana and Casciaro, 2012, 2013). If social innovators do not have the dispositions and networks to build coalitions, they may grow them over time, and/or team up with others who do, to bring these strengths into the movement.

## **PATHWAY**

Besides the problem and person, the remaining P of the 3Ps is the pathway to change. Because social change often results from coordinated action, we encourage social innovators to account



systematically for how their efforts can most effectively complement other existing ones in the ecosystem. Importantly, we also see potential beneficiaries as potential partners in addressing the problem. To help guide social innovators in assessing different pathways to change in the 3P framework, we pose the questions: What are possible vehicles for social impact? What could scaling social impact look like?

### **What Are Possible Vehicles to Social Impact?**

The universe of potential entry points to push for social change tends to be manifold (Kanter, 2005a; Tracey and Stott, 2017). At one end of the spectrum, some occupy themselves with “arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” (Meadows, 1999, p. 6). Indeed, taking the existing rules of the game for granted can translate into smaller social impact. At the other end of the spectrum, social innovators may utilize leverage points to try and alter the goals of the system as well as the mindsets that perpetuate it (see Meadows, 2008). Such divergent changes that break with taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving are especially challenging to push, because they tend to face more resistance (see Battilana and Casciaro, 2012, 2013).

In the 3P framework, we encourage social innovators to consider multiple possible vehicles to social change in light of their potential to improve the lives of individuals and communities. This exploration goes against the impulses of social innovators to latch onto to their first idea for a solution, or to bend to the wills of donors and investors who can provide financing but whose stipulations compromise social impact. In different settings, the route to social impact may be on the back of individual or collective action, starting new initiatives or working within existing ones, a single organization or collaboration across organizations, cooperation that is officially or loosely bound, or some combination.

Individually, social innovators can try to push for change as authors, speakers, and performers. As a scientist, Rachel Carson sought to alert the American public that pesticides were toxic in the 1950s and 60s. Through her writing, speeches, and Congressional testimony, she helped spur new policies to protect people’s health and the environment. At the same time, the limits of individual action tend to be stark. Social impact needs a movement toward change to launch and develop. Carson’s work had impact precisely because it gave rise to such a collective movement in the United States and beyond (Kisfalvi and Maguire, 2011).

Some social innovators jump to the conclusion that they need to create a new organization to address the problem at hand. Yet, in some contexts, the sources of power available through existing organizations or movements may outweigh the flexibility of creating a new entity. There are increasingly institutional channels for such “social intrapreneurship” across organizational structures and sectors (Davis and White, 2015). Among collective movements, social innovations such as fair trade agreements have emerged out of movements for ethical international development and solidarity. Among businesses, new strategies have tried to take sustainability seriously, like the Sustainable Living Plan at the multinational corporation Unilever. In governments and not-for-profits, innovation labs are emerging, including across the European Union and in the large not-for-profit BRAC based in Bangladesh (Tracey and Stott,



2017). Whichever the sector, social intrapreneurship may take place as part of internal operations in a single division or multiple; in a subsidiary that is partial, complete, or a joint venture; as part of a partnership that is formal or informal; or some combination of arrangements (Kistruck and Beamish, 2010).

Alternatively, social innovators may realize that they need to start new organizations to enhance their social impact—a typical not-for-profit, business, public entity, or some hybrid of these traditional organizational forms, like social enterprises. To compare across different possible vehicles for social change, we encourage social innovators to map how different options could create value and for whom (Mair and Martí, 2006). The rapid prototyping that characterizes design thinking can be helpful when it comes to experimenting with various kinds of pathways. The process of engaging beneficiaries and/or customers early and often can help reveal unexpected opportunities and challenges, including at “the edges, the places where ‘extreme’ people live differently, think differently, and consume differently” (Brown and Wyatt, 2010, p. 32).

Regardless of the vehicle, social innovators will need to chart a path that involves collaborating and coordinating with others, often across sectors, to address social problems. While governmental contracting and community development projects involving both the corporate and social sectors have become more mainstream, cross-sector work can still be difficult to organize and sustain. Different missions, values, accountabilities, and constituencies can make the task of aligning interests formidable (Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2006). Yet, examples of effective models to reconcile fundamental partner differences do exist, such as the partnership between the Norwegian corporation Telenor and the Bangladeshi social enterprise Grameen Bank (Seelos and Mair, 2007).

### **What Could Scaling Social Impact Look Like?**

Scale is a hot topic in research and practice (see Shah and Han, 2018). Our approach focuses on expanding and/or adapting to match the magnitude of the problem at hand. One aspect of such scale may be organizational growth—increasing revenue, staff, and offices. However, growing an organization does not always translate to scaling social impact (Gugelev and Stern, 2015). In the 3P framework, we encourage social innovators to investigate the gamut of scaling options in light of their potential to match the magnitude of the problem in its entirety. Besides options in terms of what to scale—a product, program, model, organization, principles, or some combination—social innovators also face the choice of how to scale—across geographies, activities, and/or collaborations.

Geographically, social innovators may try to replicate what they already do in new communities, provinces, countries, and/or regions. Such expansion might happen in new branches, franchises, or subsidiaries. A particular risk here is not accounting for the context-specific nature of some innovations’ initial successes that could prevent growth. Even BRAC, often considered one of the most effective and experienced international development organizations, struggled after it decided to expand its Bangladeshi operations to new countries.





Despite decades of experience and a large cadre of professional staff, the organization had to stop or spin off programs that it failed to adapt to new contexts (Seelos and Mair, 2017).

Changing the parameters of activities and collaborations also requires attention to the different sources of power necessary to understand these different kinds of tasks and relationships, as well as balancing more or less control over outcomes. In terms of activities, social innovators may grow their operations by expanding the range of activities that they undertake, either upstream or downstream. In terms of collaborations, social innovators may grow their operations by working with new stakeholders—in the arenas of government, business, not-for-profits, and/or social enterprise—in new kinds of arrangements. Through open source platforms, social innovators may disseminate their innovations for free. With affiliations, social innovators may create networks with external partners to replicate or adopt their innovations for fees. A team led by medical doctors Atul Gawande and Bill Berry, for example, collaborated with the World Health Organization to leverage its global influence to disseminate the first Surgical Safety Checklist for operating rooms around the world. After rapid iterations of the design and content, the World Health Organization issued the first edition of this checklist in 2008 and a second in 2009. Today operating rooms across the globe, in developed and developing countries alike, are utilizing the checklist, whose implementation was associated with a 36-percent drop in postoperative complications in diverse settings (Haynes et al., 2009).

To consider different scaling trajectories side-by-side, social innovators have multiple tools at their disposal. Through research and evaluation, they can better understand which aspects of their innovations are core and which can be flexible. Through enabling adaptation, they can support modifications that meet the needs of a growing number of beneficiaries. Through reducing the resources required for implementation, they can lower some of the burden of dissemination. Through willingness to rethink their innovations, they can enhance their ability to evolve as the context evolves. Through empowering users, they can inclusively, and powerfully, harness users' knowledge as "co-evaluators," "co-designers," and "co-scalers" (see Clarke and Dede, 2009).

## **FINDING THE FIT**

Rather than providing definite or prescriptive answers, the 3P framework draws attention to essential sets of questions for investigation. The culmination of the framework is the intersection between the problem, person, and pathway. At this intersection is the locus of action that accounts for the fit of each element in relation to each other.

How do the problem and pathway fit? Some vehicles for social change may address the symptoms of the problem but not its root causes. The way that particular resistors think and act may make some pathways especially difficult to champion. How do the problem and person fit? Individuals' levels of direct experience with the problem is likely to inflect not only their understandings and motivations internally but also their sources of power and perceived legitimacy externally. How do the person and pathway fit? Some pathways may require sources of power that individuals do not currently have, while some motivations may lead people to other



vehicles for change. Altogether, how do the problem, person, and pathway fit? This question is literally the center of the 3P framework (see Figure 1), whereby we encourage social innovators to understand and undertake their roles in movements for change attuned to the dynamic interplay across the problem, person, and pathway.

## CONCLUSION

Each year students join the ranks of our universities with aspirations to make the world a better place. Given the scale, scope, and persistence of the world's most pressing social problems, we have joined together with them in serious consideration of this premise and have committed as researchers, teachers, and advisers to support social innovators navigating the complexities of initiating and implementing social change, while in school and beyond. Over time, our hope is that insights produced through these efforts will contribute to a dynamic knowledge base that accelerates learning in the field of social innovation, grounded in a better understanding of the role that social innovators can play in creating and sustaining a more just and livable world.

*This note was developed by faculty of the [Social Innovation and Change Initiative](#) (SICI). SICI launched at the Harvard Kennedy School in 2016 with a mission to advance the study and practice of innovation with a social intent. SICI engages in the development and delivery of research, pedagogical content, and educational programs that help students, citizens, and organizations around the world, navigate the challenges of initiating and implementing social change. Through these core activities, SICI aims to illuminate the multiple paths social innovators can take to advance social progress across sectors.*



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