WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR ABOUT

The Strategy Continuum

Social innovators tackling complex social, economic and environmental challenges – particularly those working with diverse stakeholders – can employ a variety of different types of strategy to guide them towards achieving their ambitious goals.

The following Strategy Continuum, informed by the world-renowned expert on strategy, Henry Mintzberg (1985), describes the three models most commonly used in social and community change efforts: Emergent, Umbrella and Detailed. They range from "loose" to "tight", each suitable for a particular type of context in which the social innovators are operating.

While the continuum lays out three distinct orientations to strategy, social innovators tend to employ a mix of each in their day to day work.

Few strategies reflect purely one model. Some parts of a group's approach may be laid out in elaborate detail (e.g., a plan to create a social enterprise grocery story in a struggling neighborhood) while other parts might be completely emergent (e.g., testing new ways to link early childhood development services to workforce development programs).

A group's strategy can shift over time – sometimes quickly. The typical progression is for a group to begin with a somewhat emergent approach and then over time develop an umbrella and a detailed strategy. However, it is also normal for a group to decide to replace an established strategy that has been rendered obsolete by rapidly shifting contexts or radically new learnings.

The Strategy Continuum provides a glimpse into the different ways in which multi-stakeholder groups can approach strategy. In addition, it legitimizes emergent and umbrella strategies (which often are considered less robust than detailed strategies) as reasonable approaches to tackling complex issues. Finally, it provides clues on how evaluators and funders can manage and support such efforts (Auspos & Cabaj 2014).

The Strategy Continuum

Innovators experiment with different ways to make progress on desired impace

Innovators have flexibility to align their actions to shared outcomes and guided by select parameters

Innovators agree to "plan-the-work" and then "work-the-plan" with high fidelity

Emergent Strategy

Emergent strategy begins with social innovators focusing on smaller scale actions and experiments designed to help better understand the challenge they are trying to address, the context in which they are operating, and what may or may not work. Emergent strategies are useful when innovators:

- have a weak understanding of the challenge they are trying to address and need to interact with the challenge more to understand it.
- operate with diverse perspectives and interests, and need an opportunity to get know each other and build trust.
- have internal or external pressure to "act" rather than consult and plan.
- are operating in a context that is so dynamic that fixed and elaborate strategies are difficult to prepare and are likely to become out of date very quickly.

Project Comeback in Surrey, British Columbia, is a good example of emergent strategy. In this instance, a diverse group of stakeholders agreed that they wanted to dramatically reduce the number of homeless day labourers in the community, but were unsure how to go about it. They embraced a learning-by-doing approach. It combined interactions with homeless day labourers (to get insight and empathy into their day to day life) with small scale experiments (to address their barriers and challenges).

This 18-month process of trial and error resulted in a variety of successful measures that increased the day labourers' shelter access, earned income, financial services, housing and social networks. The social innovators eventually turned their experiments into a formal program that quickly became the anchor initiative for a community-wide, collective impact approach to address poverty (Auspos and Cabaj 2014).

Social innovators interested in emergent strategy can choose from multiple methodologies. These range from traditional techniques for action-learning, and more recently developed approaches, such as agile development, change labs and positive deviance (See Table 1).

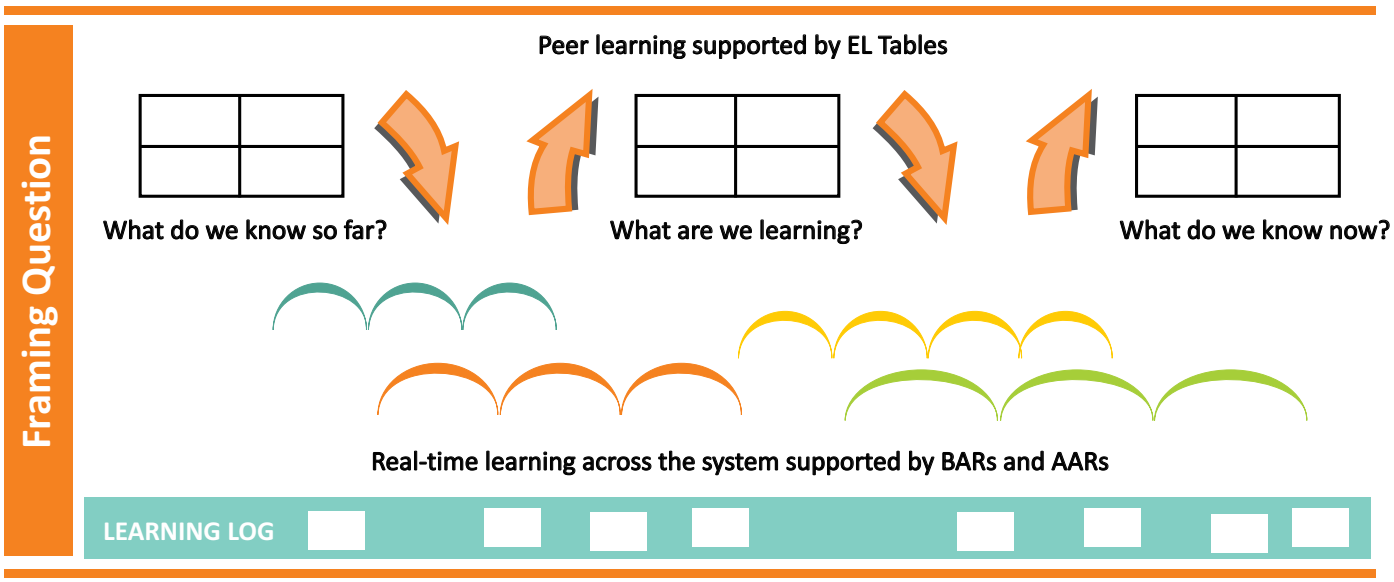
There are multiple roles for evaluation in emergent strategy. They include a) providing innovators with real-time, evaluative feedback on specific experiments, including a heavy emphasis on learning from inevitable failures; b) assistance in determining which experiments should be continued, scaled up or wrapped up; c) looking for patterns of learning and progress across multiple experiments, and d) surfacing the implications for the possible development of a more fulsome umbrella or detailed strategy. While social innovators using emergent strategy may be clear on the community-wide impact they seek, their outcomes are more likely to be initiative specific.

The "enabling" conditions for emergent strategy are demanding: a) a high tolerance for ambiguity and experimentation; b) sufficient time for experimentation; c) robust evaluation processes that can follow, capture and interpret the learning and results revealed through the process; and d) strong convening and coordinating capacity to pull diverse social innovators and experiments together.

Table 1: Resources for Emergent Strategy

APPROACH	DESCRIPTION	RESOURCE
Participatory Action Research/Action Learning	A variety of experiential learning processes organized around the iterative application of simple steps, such as planning, action, reflection and adaptation.	Eoyang and Holladay (2013)
Human Centered Design	A structured approach to addressing complex issues that puts the experience, needs and perspectives of "people," "users," or "clients" at the center of the design process. Usually begins with ethnographic research, followed by ideation, prototyping and then scaling.	Brown & Wyatt (2010)
Safe-To-Fail Experiments	A problem-solving technique that emphasizes controlled failure through conducting multiple, small-scale probes and experiments.	Cognitive Edge (2014)
Positive Deviance	A grassroots, asset-based approach that focuses on identifying instances where people or organizations are already effectively addressing a complex challenge, learning more about the practices underlying their success, and widely promoting the adoption of these practices.	Pascale, Sternin & Sternin (2010)
Agile Design/Lean Start -ups	A set of steps, tools and techniques developed in the private (high tech) sector that have been adapted for use in the social sector.	Gelobter (2015)
Change Labs	A collection of methodologies that bring together diverse stakeholders of a complex challenge to improve its causes and create multiple experiments to surface, test and pursue the most promising solutions.	Hassan (2013)
Strategic/Emergent Learning	A systematic approach to action-learning that organizes emergent strategy around "strategic learning" questions.	Darling et al (2015)

Example of a Process for Strategic Learning



Umbrella Strategy

In umbrella strategies, social innovators agree on the impact they would like to generate. They lay out guidelines and parameters about where and how to work together and contribute to those impacts. Yet diverse stakeholders are still allowed self-organize how to align their efforts with the general approach.

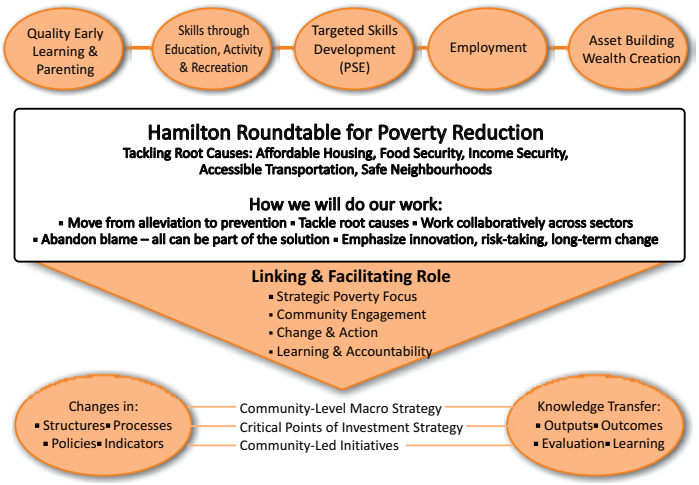
Umbrella strategies are useful when a diverse group a) is keen to find at least some common ground for collective action; b) finds it too complex to develop a detailed action plan to get there; and/or c) are operating in a context that is so dynamic that fixed plans become out-dated very quickly.

The case of the Hamilton Roundtable to End Poverty is a good example of an umbrella strategy. Driven by the vision of making their City "the best place to raise a child" – with a primary focus on reducing poverty – the Leadership Roundtable worked with a wide range of local stakeholders to create a "framework for change" with several features.

- A vision of making Hamilton the best place to raise a child
- Five strategy areas (e.g., early learning and parenting), each with key measures of success
- A set of principles or shifts to guide their efforts (e.g., work collaboratively across sectors)
- Key roles for the teams stewarding the strategy (e.g., community engagement)
- A portfolio of "starting point" initiatives to kickstart the poverty reduction campaign

To manage the implementation and on-going adaptation of the strategy, the Roundtable relied on the stewardship of five local networks, each responsible for one of the strategy's key transition points, all supported by a small backbone team.

The Aspiration: Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child



Evaluation in the umbrella strategy has more moving parts than in the emergent strategy. In addition to tracking initiative level outcomes and progress towards a longer term vision or impact, it also captures results related to the strategy's various substantive priorities (e.g. improving access to childcare for a greater percentage of the population, a key contribution to reducing poverty). Equally as significant, it requires that social innovators pay more attention to assessing the strategy itself. While this can take many forms, the three major questions employed to assess principles-focused approaches provide a useful example of what to ask of any part of an umbrella approach (Patton 2017):

- To what extent are the principles (or other parts of the umbrella strategy) meaningful to those involved in the change effort?
- To what extent are the principles (or other parts of the umbrella strategy) applied, implemented and manifested (and how)?
- To what extent are the principles (or other parts of the umbrella strategy) effective in contributing to the outcome we want to see?

The answers to these questions should inform a social innovator's ongoing adaptation of their approach. For instance, the leadership of the Hamilton campaign met annually to reflect on their activities, progress and learnings and to determine whether or not their strategy, implementation arrangements or initiatives needed changing. The Hamilton group made only modest adjustments to their approach in the first five years of operation. Nevertheless, several of their peers in the Vibrant Communities initiative (a network of city-wide collaboratives committed to reducing poverty) radically adapted their strategies several times in the same time period in order to build on new learnings and changes in their environment.

Table 2: Resources for Umbrella Strategy

APPROACH	DESCRIPTION	RESOURCE
Framework for Change	A modified version of the theory of change approach, incorporating a variety of parameters to guide social innovators: hoped for results, leverage points for strategy, key principles and roles, and starting point initiatives.	Cabaj (2011)
Strategy as Principles	An approach to crafting and evaluating high-level evidence-based or values-based principles that guide social innovators in their overall approach, while leaving the specific practices and actions to social innovators.	Patton (2017)
Strategy As Simple Rules	A framework for decision-making employed by private sector companies working in new or turbulent contexts. They organize their decisions in terms of five sets of rules: boundaries, priorities, processes, timing and exit rules.	Eisenhardt & Sull (2001)
Boundary Planning	An approach that provides diverse stakeholders with guidance on how to pursue high-level outcomes by outlining actions, behaviours and measures that should be "avoided" in that pursuit.	Hummelbrunner & Jones (2013)
Pathways to Change	A grassroots, asset-based approach to identifying people or organizations that already are effectively addressing a complex challenge, learning more about the practices underlying their success, and promoting the widespread adoption of these practices.	Pascale, Sternin & Sternin (2010)
Strategic Intent	A device used by military commanders to lay out the mission and intended outcomes of an engagement, the overall approach, and the ideal sequence of events, but permit front-line units a great deal of flexibility in how they plan and adapt their work during battle.	Pascale, Milleman & Gioja (2000); Hamel & Prahalad (2005)
Outcome Mapping	A planning, monitoring and evaluation methodology developed for international development work that focuses on being clear about the desired impact of a group, and the behaviours of key institutions (aka boundary partners) required to make the impact happen.	Earl & Smutylo (2001)
Minimum Specifications	A concept from experts in complex adaptive systems design from the health care systems. It encourages change-makers to be clear about their general intent and the "minimum specifications" required to get there.	Zimmerman, Lindberg, & Plesek (2006)

Detailed Strategy

Detailed strategy can be summed up simply as "plan-the-work" and then "work-the-plan." It differs from umbrella strategy in a commitment to elaborating the actions to move strategies forward and in the thoroughness of its implementation arrangements.

Take, for instance, the Calgary Plan to End Homelessness from 2008 to 2018. Motivated by an ambition to end poverty in ten years, its participants took a full two years to prepare a comprehensive plan. It included annual targets for reductions in the number of homeless persons, 5 key strategies, 12 principles, scores of concrete actions, each with implementation leads and deadlines, backed up with several multilateral and funding agreements.

The evaluation model for detailed strategies is often as elaborate as the strategic plan, and may include indicators for multiple levels of outcomes; well laid-out methodologies and work plans; and an emphasis on monitoring the progress and challenges of implementing the detailed plan.

Detailed strategies are possible and useful in the following circumstances:

- Social innovators know the factors underlying the challenge they are trying to address. They understand the systems in which they are embedded, and are confident about the strategies required to make progress.
- Stakeholders have a high level of agreement about the path forward and their respective roles.
- There is an organization or office, with sufficient capacity, authority and support to design, coordinate and monitor the activities of participants.
- The resources required for implementation of the plan are readily available.
- The context in which social innovators operate is relatively stable and predictable.

Despite the appeal of detailed strategies, it is difficult to meet these conditions: a) the root causes and solutions to complex issues are often unclear; b) stakeholders don't always agree on the nature of the challenge and how it should be addressed; c) it is difficult to manage the implementation of large-scale plans; and d) even the most flexible and adaptive social innovators often find themselves reluctant to adjust a plan in which they have invested so much time and energy in developing – even when the case for making changes is overwhelming.

It is also important to note that simply having a detailed plan does not guarantee success. The participants in the Calgary plan halted the dramatic increase in the number of homeless persons in the city (housing nearly 10,000 people). Yet they fell short of their ambitious goal of eliminating homelessness. Instead, they reduced it by 11%. There were a variety of reasons for this: the city's ongoing demographic growth; an economic recession; the delay of public investments; and a host of implementation challenges. The change-makers in Calgary have since renewed this approach, and are about to launch the next ten-year plan.

When and where the social innovators feel that detailed strategy is appropriate, they have plenty of resources from which to draw. There are hundreds of handbooks, manuals and worksheets for organizations, collaborations and networks that explain different planning models (See Table 3).

Table 3: Resources for Detailed Strategy		
APPROACH	**DESCRIPTION**	**RESOURCE**
Theory of Change	An approach that requires social innovators to work backwards from their desired impact and create logical, evidence-based, pathways to achieving them.	Center for Theory of Change
Multi-Stakeholder Results Framework	A collection of steps and tools to assist diverse stakeholders in assembling a set of outcomes, indicators and strategies that address shared challenges.	World Bank (2013)
Comprehensive Community Planning	A planning framework developed for use by Indigenous communities in Canada that may be useful for community planning in other smaller communities.	Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada
MAPP Model	A community planning framework developed by the Center for Disease Control and that focuses on community health but employs processes that can be used for other issues as well.	NAACHO and CDC (2002)
Collaboration Handbook	An approach to planning that is organized around the phases of collaborative action, from beginning to end, with a host of examples, tools and tips.	Winer & Ray (1994)
The Collaborative Leadership Field book	A seven-stage approach to planning and implementing strategies in a wide range of public issues with detailed descriptions and examples.	Chrislip (2002)
Collective Impact Approach	A collective approach to addressing complex community challenges organized around common agendas, mutually supporting activities, continual communication, shared measurement and backbone support.	Collective Impact Forum

Table 4: Strategy Continuum			
	EMERGENT STRATEGY	**UMBRELLA STRATEGY**	**PLANNED STRATEGY**
CONTEXT			
Certainty	Weak understanding of causes and solutions	Some understanding of causes and solutions	Strong understanding of causes and solutions
Stakeholders	Low agreement about issue and path forward	Some agreement about issue and path forward	Strong agreement about issue and path forward
Context	Dynamic and unpredictable	Dynamic but predictable	Predictable to stable
STRATEGY			
Theory of change	Hoped-for results and pathways to change may emerge through experimentation	Hoped-for results and general boundaries and processes are clear	Hoped-for results and general boundaries and processes are clear
Plan & Implementation	Emphasis on learning by doing, rapid plans, implementation	Left to the discretion of distributed actors who align actions to fit umbrella	Actions, roles, schedules laid out in detail
EVALUATION			
Questions	What are we learning about the challenge? What are promising solutions? What are implications for strategy?	What are activities, learnings and results? Should we adjust strategy and/or expand strategy?	What are activities, learnings and results? Is implementation and progress on track? Should we adjust and/or expand strategy?
Measures	Mostly initiative level measures	A mix of shared and initiative specific measures	Larger set of shared measures with initiative-specific measures
Design	Diverse, highly adaptive, and light-weight designs; emphasis on seeking patterns	A dual focus on customized initiative evaluations and overall strategy; emphasis on collective sense-making	Multiple level, often detailed design with work plan and roles
ENABLING CONDITIONS			
	High tolerance for high ambiguity; sufficient time to allow for small-scale experimentation; capacity for sense-making across diverse experiences; capacity and resources for coordinating group	Some time, resources and expertise for up-front planning; strong core capacity and resources to keep diverse stakeholders connected	Significant time, resources and expertise; robust implementation coordinating time; acceptance of some hierarchical authority; resources for implementation

References

Auspos, Patricia and Mark Cabaj. 2014. Complexity and Community Change: Managing Adaptively to Improve Effectiveness. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.

Brown, Tim, and Jocelyn Wyatt. 2010. "Design Thinking for Social Innovation." Stanford Social Innovation Review (Winter): 28-40.

Cabaj, Mark (Editor). 2011. Cities Reducing Poverty. Waterloo: The Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement.

Calgary Homelessness Foundation. 2008. Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. Available online from: http://calgaryhomeless.com/wp-content/uploads/Calgarys_10_Year_Plan_2008.pdf

Center for Theory of Change. Available on-line: http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/

Chrislip, David. 2002. The Collaborative Leadership Field book: A Guide for Citizens and Civic Leaders. San Francisco: Jossey-Boss.

Collective Impact Forum. Available on-line: https://collectiveimpactforum.org/getting-started#toolkits

Cognitive Edge. 2014. "Safe-to-Fail Probes." Available online at www.cognitive-edge.com/library/methods/safe-to-fail-probes/.

Darling, Marilyn, Bruber, Heidi, Smith, Jilliane, and Joan Stiles. 2016. Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation. The Foundation Review. Volume 8, Issue 1: 59-73.

Earl, Sara, and Terry Smutylo. 2001. Outcome Mapping: Building Learning & Refection In Development Programs. Ottawa, ON: International Development Research Corporation.

Eisenhardt, Kathleen and Sull, Donald. 2001. Strategy as Simple Rules. Harvard Business Review.

Eoyang, Glenda H. and Royce J. Holladay. 2013. Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty In Your Organization. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gelobter, Michel. 2015. Lean Start-ups for Social Change: The Revolutionary Path to Big Impact. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler.

Hamel, Gary, and C.K. Prahalad. 2005. Strategic Intent. Harvard Business Review. July-August.

Hassan, Zaid. 2013. The Social Lab Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges. San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler.

Hummelbrunner, Richard and Harry Jones. 2013. A Guide for Planning and Strategy Development in the Face of Complexity. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. Available on-line from: https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100021966/1100100021970

Mintzberg, Henry. 1985. "Of Strategies: Deliberate and Emergent". Strategic Management Journal. July/September. Volume 6, Issue 3: 257-272.

NACCHO (National Association of County and City Health Officials) and CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). A Strategic Approach to Community Health Improvement: MAPP. Available online at http://mapp.naccho.org/MAPP_Home.asp. Accessed October 16, 2002

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2017. Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Pascale, Ricard, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin. 2010. The Power of Positive Deviance. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plastrik, Peter, Seltzer, Marlene and Judith Combes Taylor. 1999. The Framework for Labor Market Systems Reform for Jobs Initiatives Site. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Winer, Michael and Karen Ray. 1994. Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining and Enjoying the Journey. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

World Bank Institute. 2013. Designing a Multi-Stakeholder Results Framework: A Toolkit to Guide Participatory Diagnostics for Stronger Results & Effectiveness. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

Zimmerman, Brenda, Lindberg, Curt, and Paul Plsek. 2006. Edgeware: Lessons from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders. Irving, TX: VHA.

Mark Cabaj
Here to There
CONSULTING INC

What We Know So Far is a series of documents that summarize some of the latest thinking or developments in the field of social innovation and community change.

TAMARACK
INSTITUTE

For more tools and resources, visit www.fromhere2there.ca and www.tamarackcommunity.ca.