The background of the top half of the cover features several interlocking puzzle pieces. One prominent piece is black with the word 'UP' in white. Other pieces are white and grey, some with faint white lines suggesting a network or map.

**CONNECT
INNOVATE
SCALE**

UP

How Networks Create Systems Change

Peter Plastrik
Madeleine Taylor
John Cleveland

**FROM THE
AUTHORS OF
*CONNECTING
TO CHANGE
THE WORLD***

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For Alvaro, Chinwe, Janet, Juan, Keith, Margaret, and Richard—
sharing our dreams and work, inspiring and generous in your guidance

—

For Anne and Amanda—friends and comrades
on the network path

The world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what's possible.

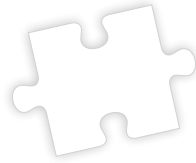
— Margaret J. Wheatley

Relationships move at the speed of trust, and social change moves at the speed of relationships.

— Rev. Jennifer Bailey
(Faith Matters Network)

History tells us that innovation is an outcome of a massive collective effort—not just from a narrow group of young white men in California.

— Mariana Mazzucato



Dramatis Personae

*Leaders/funders of social innovation networks appearing in
Connect > Innovate > Scale Up*



Spencer B. Beebe
Salmon Nation



Scott Bernstein
Center for
Neighborhood
Technology
(formerly)



Dana Bourland
The JPB Foundation



Gary Cohen
Health Care
Without Harm



Jennie Curtis
Garfield Foundation
(formerly)



Radhika Fox
US Water Alliance
(formerly)



Bob Friedman
Individual
Development
Accounts



Bill Guest
Talent Innovation
Network of
West Michigan



Mami Hara
US Water Alliance



Chrystie Hill
Gates Foundation



Asima Jansveld
High Line Network



**Sandhya
Kambhampati**
OpenNews



Sarah Klaus
Open Society
Foundations
(formerly)



Katy Lackey
US Water Alliance



Luis Lugo
Doug and Maria
DeVos Foundation



**Oluwole A.
(OJ) McFoy**
Buffalo Sewer Authority



Lisa Mensah
Opportunity Finance
Network



Mauricio Lim Miller
Community
Independence
Initiative



Anne Mosle
Ascend at the
Aspen Institute



Shweta Narayan
Health Care
Without Harm



Erika Owens
OpenNews



Johanna Partin
Carbon Neutral
Cities Alliance
(formerly)



Olivia Roanhorse
Roanhorse
Consulting



Doug Ross
Campaign for Free
College Tuition



Emily Simonson
US Water Alliance



Marjorie Sims
Ascend at the
Aspen Institute



Jennifer Tescher
Financial Health
Network



Maggie Ullman
Network building
consultant



Sisi Wei
OpenNews



Karen Weigert
US Green Building
Council



Ben Welsh
Los Angeles Times



Morley Winograd
Campaign for Free
College Tuition



Jeff Yost
Nebraska Community
Foundation

Introduction

The story in which you believe shapes the society that you create.

Yuval Noah Harari

This book tells many stories about people who are changing the world for the better. Dozens of stories about social innovation networks, shared by the founders, managers, members, and funders doing the nitty-gritty work. Stories about connecting, innovating, and scaling up innovations to transform the innumerable systems that are failing us at home, nationally, and globally. Stories of collaborations that play out over decades, requiring endless adaption by their practitioners.

It also tells a story of know-how—the growing body of practical knowledge and skills that network-building innovators have learned by doing. We, your coauthors, have created this story as a set of frameworks filled with how-to insights and lessons. We synthesized these understandings from across dozens of cases and our own experiences in network building and social innovation development, as well as many other sources of expertise. The frameworks illuminate choices, problems, and opportunities that innovation networks typically face, especially how to take innovations to scale. They provide ways of thinking and advice that you can use and customize to your own situation.

Your story is here, too. It's the story of the future you—someone who we hope gets even better and more resilient, goes even faster and further, at making a big difference. Whether you're starting an innovation-making network, or in mid passage with one, or taking your second, third, or umpteenth shot at social innovation—you will find inspiration and guidance in the pages that follow. You may also find a sense of camaraderie, of belonging, with the dozens of social innovation network entrepreneurs you meet here.

Ultimately, though, this book contains just one overarching story: the world must be changed and a powerful and proven way to change it is through connecting, innovating, and scaling up.

Eight years ago, we published *Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact*, showing how people the world over were forming networks, instead of organizations, to foster social change. We call these *generative social-impact networks*—groups of individuals or organizations seeking to solve a difficult problem in society by working together, adapting over time, and generating a sustained flow of activities and impacts. The networks' members forge powerful, enduring personal relationships based on trust and reciprocity; they link to form a unique and renewable capacity—a network—that can have large-scale impact.

Connect > Innovate > Scale Up has a different focus. We step into the particular terrain of networks designed and managed to achieve system change by developing and scaling up social innovations. This is remarkably fertile soil, a global seedbed for growing transformative change. But it is also an uneven and mostly uncharted landscape; one's footing can be shaky and direction can be uncertain. What does this important, but tricky, work look like, how is it done?

We have lived and worked in this territory for several decades, and visited with and learned from many of the pioneers who are in these pages. Reflecting on these experiences led us to develop explanatory frameworks about the five topics at the core of this book. (Each topic is the subject of a single chapter.)

- **Systems change.** What approaches can social innovators take? What are the most powerful levers they can use?
- **Social innovation development.** What types of scalable social innovations can innovators develop, and which innovation-development processes do they use?
- **Scaling pathways.** What types of scale can social innovators target and what are the pathways they can follow to scale?

- **Social innovation network design.** What network models can social innovators design, implement, and evolve to ensure their innovations gain traction and scale?
- **Network leadership.** What unique roles must social innovators play to most effectively guide social innovation networks?

Our insights are grounded in the practical experiences of dozens of social innovation networks with which we have consulted and partnered closely in the past few years. These collaborations have targeted a range of systems for radical change: affordable housing, college financing, community development, energy supply, financial services, health care, higher education, human services, the journalism profession, water management, workforce development, and more. Most have been operating for many years, even decades—a typical timespan for reaching significant scale. The great majority are focused on systems in the US, but several operate internationally.

Networks Rule

Social innovation is the key to making big, intentional, and equitable social, economic, and environmental changes in our troubled world. This transformational role is not new. “In the long story of human history,” explains social innovator Michael Sherraden, a sociologist who directs the Center for Social Development at Washington University, “massive social innovations have created conditions that make technological and economic advancements possible. Not the other way around.” Today, much of the attention on innovation is on technological and business innovation, especially digital products and services. These have social impacts, of course, but they are mostly driven by profit-seeking motives and rarely have systemic social impacts.

Social innovations reach for a higher bar. They must be, as the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* spells out, “more effective, efficient, sustainable or just than existing solutions.” The value they create must accrue “primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.” They seek social impact by targeting human needs, not just consumer desires. They use financial returns to achieve social impact, not private profit. And they dramatically affect the performance of big systems.

Networks are the way that social innovation happens. This is not widely recognized. Instead, we are usually told that “lone genius” inventors supply innovations to the rest of us. Look closely, though, and you’ll see that behind successful innovations there are networks, not single individuals. That’s what Andrew Hargadon, a professor of innovation and entrepreneurship, discovered when he studied numerous well-known innovations. He uses the example of Thomas Edison, developer of the electric light bulb, phonograph, and other devices, to illustrate this. Edison “did more than perhaps anyone else to fix in our minds the notion that innovation is the province of the creative genius and his or her inventions,” Hargadon says in his book *How Breakthroughs Happen: The Surprising Truth About How Companies Innovate*. But, he continues, Edison “was neither that heroic, that imaginative, nor that alone.” He “didn’t invent the electric light, but he brought together previously disparate people, ideas, and objects from his network of past wanderings in a way that launched a revolution.”

It’s not just Edison who didn’t innovate alone. Successful innovations, Hargadon concludes, are usually accomplished by networks of people: “In contrast to lone inventors, communities draw other actors, objects and ideas together into tight knit networks, where people’s roles become clear and interdependent . . . where ideas become shared organizing principles.”

Another study of innovation also uncovered its communal nature. Innovators seeking new ideas depend on engaging with other people, report the authors of *The Innovator’s DNA: Mastering the Five Skills of Disruptive Innovators*, a fascinating study of business entrepreneurs based on surveys and interviews. “Innovators gain a radically different perspective when they devote time and energy to finding and testing ideas through a network of diverse individuals.”

Network building is also a defining characteristic of the many social entrepreneurs who are widely celebrated as change-making leaders. “The world’s leading social entrepreneurs are not innovators working in isolation,” says Anamaria Schindler, former global co-president for Ashoka, which has elevated and supported leadership by social entrepreneurs for four decades. “Their success depends on creating roles for other people to step up and lead change and further spread solutions.”

Although social innovation is a collective activity, it's not the same thing as a mass movement. Movements are the demand side of social innovation. They can be a necessary condition for inspiring deep-seated changes in some systems. Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, the Navalny-sparked protests across Russia, the global climate emergency, LGBTQ rights: these and other movements surge into existence demanding vital changes and commanding public attention and the streets. A movement's ideals, such as racial justice, can inspire, inform, and activate millions of people. "Social movements challenge existing power relations, cultural beliefs, and practice through sustained public activism and demonstrations," notes a Frameworks Institute analysis. They "can provoke a more serious reconsideration of an existing way of thinking about the world."

But movements alone are usually insufficient for making fundamental, wide-spread change happen. They need networks of people to develop detailed changes—innovative policies, practices, services, and the like—and ensure that they are widely incorporated into systems.

It turns out that networks are essential for the creation of large-scale social change. They convert the impatient aspirations of movements into a flow of promising social innovations. And they are used by leading change advocates—network entrepreneurs—to assemble and harness the combinations of skills, perspectives, and resources needed to make large-scale impact. The true superpower of most social innovators is their ability to mobilize networks of people and organizations to create and implement novel and potent solutions to social problems.

Drivers of Collaboration

Social innovation networks are everywhere now. People are starting networks to develop, implement, and spread innumerable innovations. "Social innovation has moved from an emergent field to become a global phenomenon," note Kriss Deiglmeier, former head of Stanford University's Center for Social Innovation, and Amanda Greco. Although these networks operate openly, most are off the radar screens of the media and established institutions. They have proliferated, but no one knows how many of them there are, and few people are involved in more than a handful of them. There is no inventory of the array of social innovations they are producing.

Social innovation networks play out an inspiring drama: courageous changemakers with modest resources band together to take on large, seemingly unmovable systems. “There has been a shift in the previous two decades which were more focused on the role of individuals (social entrepreneurs) and organizations,” Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant report in *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*. “Now the focus is on larger networks, ecosystems, and collective impact.” There are several reasons for this shift.

Focus on systems change. The ambition to instigate change of entire systems—the world’s health care systems, for example, not just a single hospital, or a nation’s water system, not just a single city’s water utility—leads to the recognition that it takes many people and organizations, aligned in purpose and methods, to leverage change at that scale. This awareness is growing in the government, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors.

“Leaders who will succeed in the coming years will recognize that some problems are too big to solve alone,” says Diana Aviv, CEO of Partnership for American Democracy. “They will participate in meaningful collaborations that maximize the assets of multiple organizations, deepen the group’s collective knowledge, and move together in ways that also fulfill individual missions.”

The challenge of instigating systemic change is driving the growth of collaborations, say leaders of The Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit that advises change leaders: “Fundors and nonprofits increasingly recognize that no single organization or strategy, regardless of how large or successful it may be, can solve a complex social challenge at scale.” Barbara Picower, president and chair of the board of one of the largest philanthropies in the US, highlights the importance of this reason for investing in networks: “It has become clear to us at The JPB Foundation that complex social issues like poverty cannot be solved by single grantees working alone. Instead, we have found that we can help them proceed faster and further in their missions when we take a ‘hub and network’ approach to funding.”

The push to change systems is further boosted by growing efforts to address inequities produced by social and economic systems. “There are inequities at every level of systems change that must be recognized and

addressed,” observe John Kania and Mark Kramer, developers of the collective impact approach, and Peter Senge, a prominent systems scientist, in “The Water of Systems Change.” Addressing inequities calls for deep, all-encompassing system transformation that embraces people and ideas that have been kept outside of the mainstream for generations. As Edgar Villanueva writes in *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, “All of us who have been forced to the margins are the very ones who harbor the best solutions for healing, progress, and peace, by virtue of our outsider perspectives and resilience. When we reclaim our share of resources, when we recover our places at the table and the drawing board, we can design our healing.”

Emergence of digital power. The rise of digital technologies—including smart software, big data, cloud computing, social media, and mobile apps—enables long-distance, distributed, instant connectivity among people and provides them with new tools for collaborating to address social problems. It’s much easier now for people to connect and stay connected with lots of other people and to collaborate across great distances. “For the first time in history it is possible, without ever leaving your home, to use technology to find a network of hundreds of thousands of workers who wake up every day and ask themselves the same questions you ask,” says Sara Horowitz, founder of the Freelancers Union, in *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up*. It’s not just ideas that are supported by these digital technologies; services are also being redesigned to take advantage of them. In the United Kingdom an app called Good SAM alerts more than 25,000 volunteers—off-duty doctors, nurses, paramedics, and first responders—when someone nearby has a life-threatening medical crisis. The proliferation of mobile financial services is increasing access to capital for people with low incomes. Social-media platforms and other digital tools are transforming political campaigns and civic activism, notes sociologist Dana Fisher in *American Resistance*, by supporting bottom-up, geographically diffuse organizing and the formation of loosely affiliated networks that mobilize and connect people. Crowdsourcing, which uses online tools to enable any participant to submit an idea to solve a specific problem, is expanding the innovation capabilities of foundations, suggest Kiko Suarez, vice president of communications and innovation at Lumina

Foundation, and Alph Bingham, a cofounder of InnoCentive. In Germany, for instance, a digital platform, #WirVsVirus, engaged 28,000 citizens in a 48-hour hackathon to develop ideas about how to address Covid pandemic challenges.

Resistance to business as usual. A widespread distrust of top-down, centralized institutions and organizations—and awareness of their limitations and failures—inspires the exploration of alternative models for taking action. This is especially true for younger generations, as columnist David Brooks points out: “The emerging generations today . . . grew up in a world in which institutions failed, financial systems collapsed, and families were fragile. Children can now expect to have a lower quality of life than their parents, the pandemic rages, climate change looms, and social media is vicious. Their worldview is predicated on threat, not safety.”

Journalist Ezra Klein points to this generational shift in US federal policy realms: “Washington is run by 20- and 30-somethings who run the numbers, draft the bills, brief the principals. And there is a marked difference between staffers and even the politicians whose formative years were defined by stagflation, the rise of Reaganism and the relief of the Clinton boom, and those who came of age during financial crises, skyrocketing personal debt, racial reckonings and the climate emergency. . . . In general, the younger generation has sharply different views on the role of government, the worth of markets and the risks worth taking seriously.”

A majority of young foundation staff, according to a 2018 report, feel their institutions are not in touch with the needs of the communities they support and nearly three-quarters say the communities they serve do not have a voice in decision making.

“There is a generational shift in America toward increasing justice and collective responsibility,” argues Malia Lazu, a lecturer at MIT’s Sloan School of Management. Younger generations, especially Millennials, embrace a culture of collective action, which resonates with the inherent communality of networks.

Barriers to Scale

Even though social innovation networks are proliferating, it's commonly said that they rarely achieve impact at scale. "Despite scale being a large focus of conversations, blogs, articles, and conferences, the do-good industry is still failing to bring the rigor and depth needed to make the desired impacts on social issues," declares Greg Coussa, founder of Spring Impact, an organization that helps social ventures scale up. A typical observation comes from a trio of leaders of IDEO, the global design consultancy that a decade ago introduced the design-thinking approach to the social sector: "While many social-impact design efforts over the past decade have demonstrated innovation in tackling social challenges, far fewer have demonstrated change at scale." In a two-year study of how nonprofits, philanthropists, and community groups increasingly engage in cocreation—open innovation, design competitions, crowdsourcing and other approaches—scholars Joanna Levitt Cea and Jess Rimington conclude that "few of the results lead to system change or profoundly shake up what is considered possible."

Innovation networks seeking big social change face daunting obstacles to success. They must convert their audacious goals and ideas into actual innovations. They must test the innovations they've designed and then revise them according to the real-world feedback received. And, of course, they must meet the challenge of implementing innovations at scale. Along the way to success, networks will likely have to address the skepticism, indifference, and opposition of or competition from other people and organizations. They will have difficulty raising money and encounter problems making their ideas and strategies work well.

Many social innovations fall into a "stagnation chasm," where proven ideas get stuck before they are able to maximize their impact," observe Deiglmeier and Greco. Their research identified three barriers that block scaling up: inadequate funds for growth, even as the costs of getting to scale increase; the complexities of managing multi-sector collaborations that are often needed for social innovation scaling; and the difficulties of attracting and retaining the functional and technical expertise to broker innovation development. There's an additional barrier, identified by Heather McLeod Grant, cofounder of Open Impact and an expert in

network building: local nonprofits, she observes, “often don’t have enough power or resources to take on larger systemic issues by themselves. . . . working in silos [keeps] them from tackling more complex, systemic issues.”

Networks that overcome these high hurdles may yet stumble when it comes to scaling up what they have created. It’s more than likely they will have to persist for many years—even decades. There are few shortcuts on the road to social impact.

Knowing about and experiencing these challenges doesn’t stop people from trying. Their personal passion for the change they want is too compelling to set aside. This powerful desire is the starting point of most social innovation networks: people connect and align with each other around a motivating goal for change, creating a collective pool of skills, knowledge, creativity, and other capacities. But beginning a social innovation network journey doesn’t necessarily prepare you for what awaits along the rest of the way.

Filling the Know-How Gap

Knowledge about what social innovation networks do and how they do it, and especially how they reach high-scale impact, is not exactly well-developed and broadly shared. “Surprisingly little is known about social innovation compared to the vast amount of research into innovation in business and science,” is how the Young Foundation put it some years ago, noting a “lack of reliable knowledge about common success factors and inhibitors.” More recently, scholars Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair report little improvement in the situation: “Research on the role of social innovation or how social enterprises actually innovate has been scarce. The lack of a shared understanding prevents learning, accumulation of knowledge, and consistent decisions.”

But developers of networks for social innovation do not have to work in a knowledge vacuum. With so many of us working in networked ways, a body of know-how is constantly being created and expanded, at least implicitly.

Connect > Innovate > Scale Up provides the founders, members, managers, and funders of social innovation networks with a great deal of what is known about what has worked in many contexts and how to

apply it. What to know about navigating through the twists and turns that are characteristic of the social innovation journeys taken by networks. How to achieve scale.

Below is a list of the networks whose stories are included in these pages. (Full disclosure: networks marked with an * have at some time contracted with one or more of the coauthors for consulting and evaluation services; see end note for details). Although some of these networks have become formal organizations, such as nonprofit corporations, they are mostly made up of webs of people—groups of the like-minded—that expand, shrink, and morph as they connect, align, and collaborate to achieve social impact. We gradually introduce the networks throughout the book—four in chapter 1, several more in chapter 2, and so on—and then draw on all of them to illustrate framework themes and advice for practitioners.

Networked innovation involves many people, but the network stories we tell present just a few of the countless network entrepreneurs who are involved. This efficiency in story telling should not be taken to undercut the theme of collaboration; indeed, many of these innovators emphasize to us that “it’s not just me, it’s the network!”

- Ascend at the Aspen Institute*
- Biophilic Cities Network*
- Campaign for Free College Tuition*
- Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance* (global)
- Community Independence Initiative
- Energy Efficiency for All*
- Financial Health Network*
- Good SAM
- Health Care Without Harm* (global)
- High Line Network
- Individual Development Accounts (networks of networks)
- International Step by Step Association (Europe and Central Asia)
- Nebraska Community Foundation*
- OpenNews*

- Opportunity Finance Network
- Project ECHO (global)
- RE-AMP*
- Salmon Nation*
- Talent Innovation Network of West Michigan*
- US Green Building Council (LEED)
- US Water Alliance*

Our collaborations, reflection, and research into the insights of many others in the social innovation field deepened our understanding of how social innovation networks develop and succeed. They reinforced our recognition that these are complicated efforts that blend tight discipline, improvisation, and evolution. And they heightened our appreciation of the remarkable magic of social innovation. It harnesses the power of vision, creativity, and ideas, of alignment, collaboration, and grit. The power of standing together, of putting hope into practice.

Social innovation is demanding, uncertain, and prolonged work. Those of us who have chosen this work, or stumbled into it, can benefit from knowing the many lived experiences, practical knowledge, insights, and stories of other practitioners. The know-how feeds hope and confidence. It guides thought and action. Most important, it proclaims something we all want to hear: you are not alone and you can make a difference.

