NETWORKS AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN SOCIAL INNOVATION

The world we live in is more connected than ever, and networks are very much in vogue. Networks are no longer just for socialites; they are a powerful tool for creating societal impact. So why has this phenomenon occurred, and what does it mean for organisations of the future?

Louise Pulford

Networks are very much in vogue, and rightly so. The world we live in is more connected than ever, and networks are directly linked to productivity and capacity building. The practice of investing in relationship and building social capital is no longer seen as the territory of senior executives and socialites. The number of organisations who are building networks, or who are taking a network approach to how they work, is on the rise.

We see more foundations drawing on their alumni networks, universities aligning their approaches, and traditional NGOs working collaboratively to improve access to resources. They are all seeking approaches that are more collaborative, creative and continuous, thus increasing the sustainability of their collective impact.

There are several reasons why this network phenomenon has occurred. Especially three reasons are particularly important for those who work in Social Innovation. First of all, the impact potential of individual social change organisations frequently depends on the robustness of the enabling ecosystem that they are operating in. Secondly, networks can practically speed up the process of learning. Since innovations often happen simultaneously in different places, networks can help innovators become visible outside of their own silos in order to connect and learn from each other more readily. Finally, networks also build capacity more quickly. Given the fact that Social Innovation is a relatively new and expanding field, supporting shared learning is a valuable way of accelerating how frequently deployable insights are developed, scaled and, finally, spread.

However, building and facilitating an effective network is not easy. The Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) has been building and nurturing a global cross-sector network of Social Innovation organisations and individuals over the

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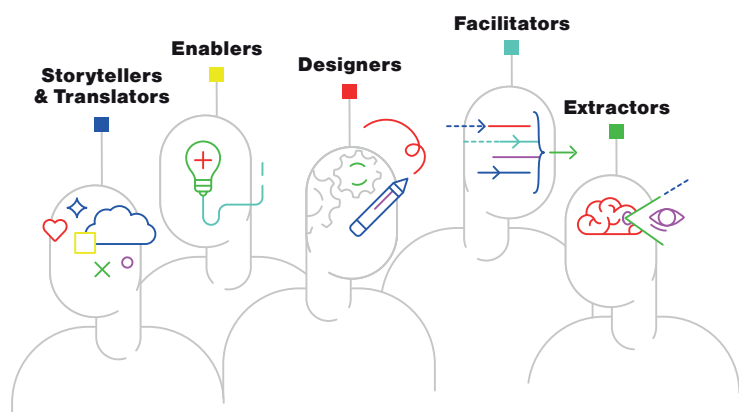
past nine years. With 16000 members (individuals and organisations), SIX helps to build the necessary relationships, capital and knowledge to increase social impact. At SIX, we have been analysing what we mean when we talk about using a network approach.

The *way* networks work is just as important as what networks do. Below, seven principles and key features on which the SIX network approach is based are summarised.
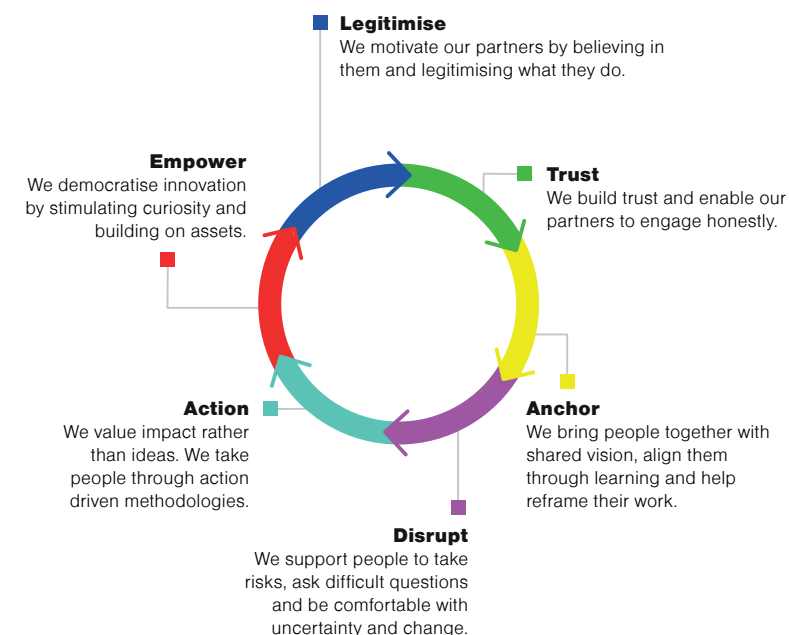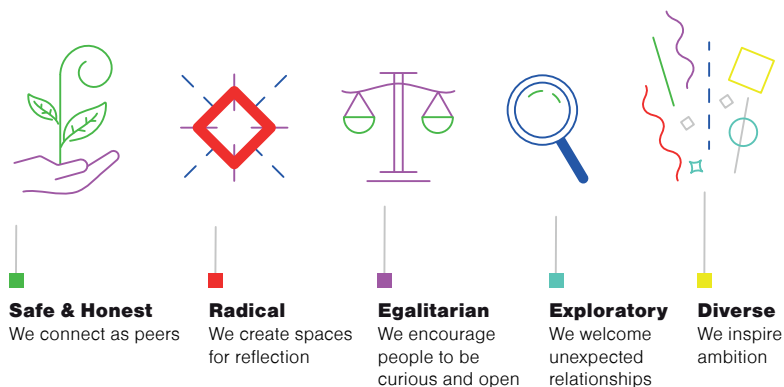
1. People focussed – We strengthen our partners by believing in them, motivating them and legitimizing what they do.
2. Trust building – We build trust and enable our partners to engage honestly.
3. Anchor and reframe – We bring together different people and groups aligning them through learning and a shared vision and holding their interactions.
4. Productive disruption – We support people to take risk and ask difficult questions making them comfortable with uncertainty and change.
5. Practice action – We value social impact rather than ideas, taking people through practical processes to seek knowledge and solutions.
6. Connect as peers – We connect people based on interest area not on job title.
7. Empower – We build on assets and stimulate self discovery and democratize innovation.

However, the role of the network is much deeper than simply connecting. In the following, five roles are described that networks should play in order to be most effective.

We are...

We create environments which are...

Safe & Honest
We connect as peers

Radical
We create spaces for reflection

Egalitarian
We encourage people to be curious and open

Exploratory
We welcome unexpected relationships

Diverse
We inspire ambition

Legitimise
We motivate our partners by believing in them and legitimising what they do.

Empower
We democratise innovation by stimulating curiosity and building on assets.

Trust
We build trust and enable our partners to engage honestly.

Action
We value impact rather than ideas. We take people through action driven methodologies.

Anchor
We bring people together with shared vision, align them through learning and help reframe their work.

Disrupt
We support people to take risks, ask difficult questions and be comfortable with uncertainty and change.

The approach of Social Innovation Exchange (SIX)

Providing a strategic foresight – Networks must remain relevant and current, providing strategic foresight. This means we believe that networks have a responsibility to continuously seek out and leverage strategic opportunities and connections. Their role should be in both thinking and doing, and they should connect to policy, power and practice simultaneously. There is a global breadth of knowledge that can support practitioners to leapfrog ahead by borrowing great proven ideas and adapting them to local circumstances. To stay relevant, network secretariats must keep the horizon scanning functionality, always on the lookout for new people and projects – the value is more than the sum of it's parts. A network approach means an ability to seek and identify topics and themes that bring value to the community in the present and for future challenges.

Strategic curation – This means taking advantage of the evolving strategic foresight that network facilitators gain from their members. If the curation approach and strategy is shaped carefully, its direction, sequence of activities and focal points will combine to expand the field's shared knowledge and impact.

This approach will be supported by strong secretariats. There are several ways to structure a network and the advantage of a strong secretariat is that we can support core functions such as information sharing, networking, building strong peer relationships, knowledge-building, strengthening the distributed capability of the network to have agency. Strong secretariats can also develop and deploy specific strategies built around goals such as capacity building, policy engagement and field building. Growing slowly, organically helps build a strong foundation – this means inviting people to be a part of it, and encouraging distributed leadership across the breadth of networks and organisations served.

Trust building – Carefully building trusting and trusted relationships is central to a network's effectiveness. Trust can be built by action as well as attitude.

Whether a network has a formal membership or not, effective networks rely on the power of "pull" in order to keep

people and institutions connected into and active in support of network activities. This also implies working in partnership with organisations in the network. The more activities, whether these are events, research papers, or trainings, are conducted in partnership, the more trust is built and the more effective the work will be. Networks never act alone.

A cocktail for reciprocity – Power dynamics are always at play in any network that includes diverse groups of people. As conveners, it is crucial to never forget where the initial connections come from. Relationships are always reciprocal and layered. This is how networks develop and grow broad-based partners and collaborators across sectors and diverse regions.

Building a narrative and brand – A challenge for networks in this field is developing a powerful and viral narrative, making it much simpler to explain to people in the mainstream what exactly "Social Innovation" is and why it is so important. The narrative helps to build brands, which in turn attract people to become a part of the network, which, in turn, increases the impact.

However, taking this approach is not easy, and there are several challenges that Social Innovation network organisations face.

1. Operating at the periphery of mainstream innovation system – How do we get 'social' into the water supply?

The dominant global thinking and organisation of innovation policy and innovation ecosystems is still centred on STEM innovation (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and business model innovation. As a result, Social Innovation is often invisible to the main innovation system, and therefore continues to operate in it's own silo. Challenging this dominant innovation narrative remains a daunting, but indispensable task if Social Innovation is to have the impact it seeks and networks play a key role in this mainstreaming strategy.

2. The power of weak ties – How should we manage the tension of depth vs. breadth?

Network theory highlights the power of weak ties versus strong ties. Focussing on weak ties enables people and organisations to reach a large number of diverse and relevant contacts for knowledge or action. There is always a trade-off between size and depth; openness and building a core

of like- minded people. This needs to be a conscious choice. The language of Social Innovation is challenging for some organisations and sectors, therefore being aware and sensitive of this will effect how networks are built and how open you choose to be.

3. Ensuring network sustainability – What is the right business model for a network?

Finding the right business model to support the core functions of networks requires an innovation all of its own. Membership fees are just one way to fund a network, and may not be appropriate depending on the choice of breadth vs. depth. In recent years, several networks have been established as part of European Commission funded projects, and there is now money available to support the core function of a secretariat which works across several countries. This is quite unusual compared to other parts of the world where several Social Innovation networks struggle to secure such core support and are forced into more diverse business models, seeking funding from events, training, research work and consultancy, rather than just core network building functions.

BUILDING NETWORKS OF THE FUTURE

Networks of the future need to be more digitally robust, providing a space for online connection and interaction. Whilst face to face interaction is crucial for building relationships, we can not ignore the role and potential of technology to be able to support peer-to-peer connections and collaborative value creation. Much more robust platform development provides an opportunity for the growth of Social Innovation networks by enabling them to harness the distributed knowledge of peers around the world in more effective and ongoing ways.

As Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze describe in "Using Emergence to take Social Innovations to Scale" [1]: "In spite of current ads and slogans, 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."

If we want to enable more organisations to leverage knowledge and resources more effectively, and build capabilities through networks, we must ensure networks are carefully managed.

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