THE AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION: TEN YEARS, NINE PATTERNS

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation shares nine practical patterns for social innovation, drawn from 10 years of practice.

Chris Vanstone

In 2009, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) was set up to further progress on social issues in Australia. As an independent not-for-profit organisation with $6m of seed funding, it was up to the team and the board to work out how. That $6m gave TACSI some early years of freedom to pursue its interests and make some big splashes, to invest in things that were good to do and to establish a back catalogue to display what we could achieve. When the seed funding came to an end, we had to shift from asking 'what social innovation do we want to do?' to 'what social innovation will people pay for?'. This tension between exploring big ideas and meeting the needs of the market continues to drive the development of our work at TACSI.

The front page of TACSI's first website featured what was, in 2009, a very a common question: 'What is social innovation?'. We've continued to ask that question over the last ten years. What is it, what do we want it to be, how do we organise to do it? We might now count ourselves among the elders of the social innovation lab world – but we're still learning. Nearly every week we have to find new ways to talk about what we do, because it's still new, and it's still evolving.

We don't yet have a process with a 100 % success rate. We don't yet have a guaranteed way to shift systems, take solutions to scale or convince decision makers that social innovation is essential to addressing inequality and enabling

> **Across the 100 or so projects we run each year, we're always looking for patterns of what works (and what doesn't) to refine our approach, to avoid making the same mistakes, and to get better outcomes.**

growth. We still face weekly setbacks as we try to design projects, shift systems and find people with the capabilities needed to do the work.

So what do we have to share? Across the 100 or so projects we run each year, we're always looking for patterns of what works (and what doesn't) to refine our approach, to avoid making the same mistakes, and to get better outcomes. Here are nine patterns from ten years.

NINE PATTERNS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL INNOVATION

1. *We've learnt about the power of people helping people*
Family by Family was our first service level solution, Weavers our second, and recently we've been working with lived-experience peer workers in the mental health sector. Every week we see how, with the right support, peers can provide a vital and often untapped resource for people going through tough times. Peers can speak your language, help normalise your situation and share strategies that relate to your context.

2. *We've learnt about the importance of mind-sets and conditions for innovation*
We often are invited to build innovation capability in organisations, and we've found, repeatedly, that it's not skills that are the most significant barrier. It's the individuals' mind-sets to engage with innovation, and the broader organisational ability to resource and create the space for early stage experiment and later stage integration. To do innovation well many things need to be in place.

3. *We've learnt to explain innovation as a way of mitigating risks rather than taking a risk*
Getting your hands dirty with 'innovation' can be seen as a risky business, especially in government. We've learnt to talk

about innovation as a way to mitigate the risk, embarrassment and cost of something not working in the long term.
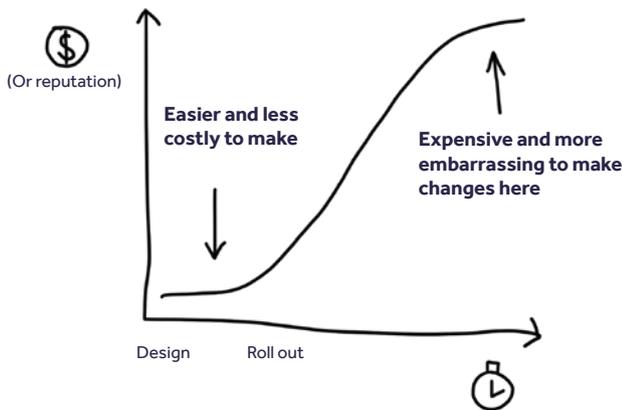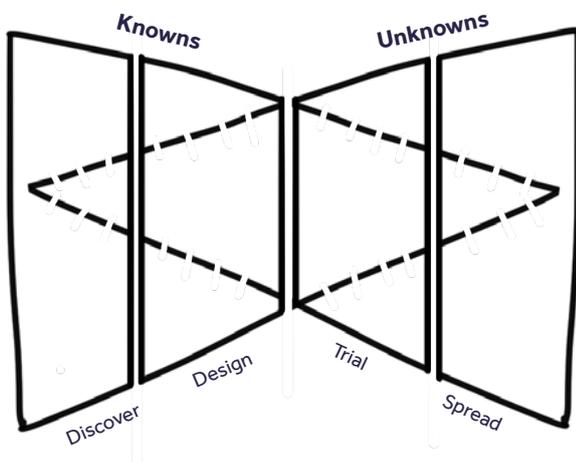

Social innovation and risk

We talk about social innovation processes as an approach to testing assumptions, to move from unknowns to knowns.
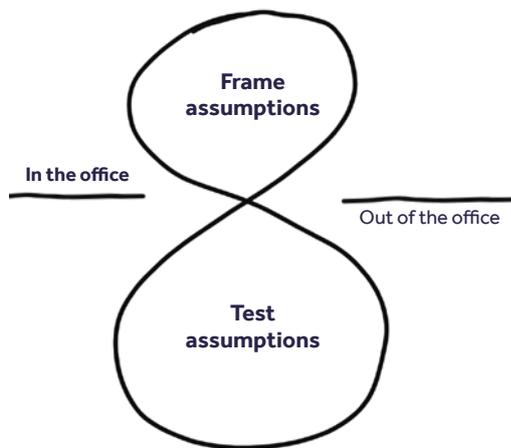
Testing assumptions

Moving from unknowns to knowns

4. We've learnt that innovation teams have to balance tensions

Sometimes we work on a project and it feels like the team has just got what it takes. You can characterise the forces at work in these projects with three dichotomous pairings: how do you stay ambitious and pragmatic, how do you see from the perspective of people and systems, how do you work with existing evidence and create new evidence through experimentation. And how do you do all of these things at once? Doing so means aligning an eclectic set of people, methods and organisations around shared principles and processes.
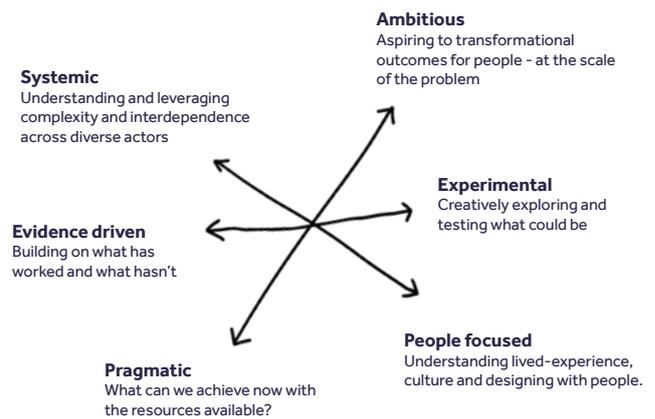
Tensions in social innovation

5. We've learnt that experiences, networks, resource flows and capability are all strategies for change in systems
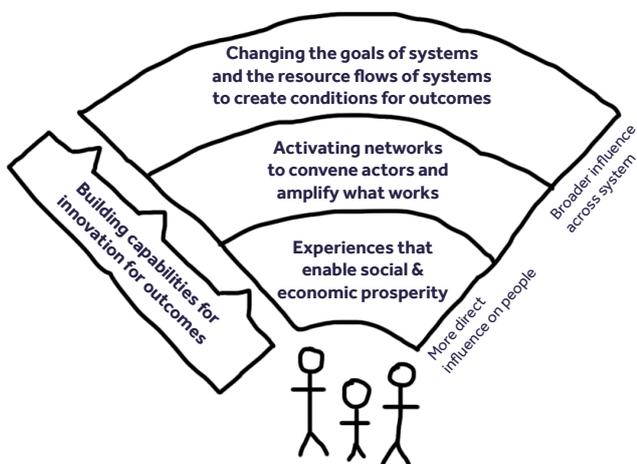
Over our ten years there's been a steady growth in the complexity of our work. Recently, we've been explicitly exploring strategies to create transformational change in systems, and to reflect on our practice so far we've written examples and emerging insights from TACSI's big change work. There's still a lot to learn. In our work at the intersection of innovation and systems, we've identified four practical strategies for impact: experiences that create change for people, networks that amplify what works, changes to resource flows, and building capability at all levels of the system.

6. We've learnt about furthering self-determination through social innovation

In our work supporting Aboriginal-led innovation, we've developed a set of guiding principles for our practice, which we suspect could be applied to all community-led innovation:

- Self-determination: Projects are driven, governed and owned by community
- Relationships first: Earn trust, and plan to be flexible with timelines and pace
- See connections: Understand the past, plan for now, and plan for the future
- See diversity: Recognise the variety of experiences
- Strengthen what's started: Listen to experience, build on evidence

- Tell stories: Create space for visual learning, tactile sharing and storytelling.

Changing the goals of systems and the resource flows of systems to create conditions for outcomes

Activating networks to convene actors and amplify what works

Experiences that enable social & economic prosperity

Building capabilities for innovation for outcomes

Broader influence across system

More direct influence on people

Systems of innovation

- Working with rigour, agility, evidence, experimentation and practice wisdom.
- Furthering self-determination by communities experiencing marginalisation.
- Building capability so that individuals, organisations, systems and the planet are better equipped to tackle the challenges they face.

We're learning about designing people into every step of decision making and delivery in health systems. We're learning about what it takes to enable community led-innovation independent of government and services. We're learning about how to build alliances to influence broader systems change. And we're learning how to design a networked social innovation organisation – our own – to maximise learning, outcomes and growth.

All patterns we can report on in years to come.

7. *We've learnt that 'social innovation' is rarely a call to action*

In our attempts to galvanise a movement around social innovation in Australia we've found that 'social innovation' is often a bad place to start. For many, including those doing socially innovative things, it's an elitist or overly abstract term. What they care about is their practice, the populations they serve, or the mission they are on.

8. *We've learnt that unusual people make social innovation happen*

Though we've spent years experimenting with different methods, we've come to understand that good social innovation is dependent on teams of unusual people. We look for practitioners who can bridge the worlds of innovation, social impact, and leadership – of people, of organisations and in systems. Ideally, we look for deep capability in all three, but we're yet to find that ridiculously talented individual.

9. *We've learnt that social innovation is best defined by principles not methods*

Ten years on, we're getting more confident in naming what we see as social innovation. One of the ongoing challenges and responsibilities we've set for ourselves is to define what quality work looks like in an evolving market and an evolving society, in which we're continually experimenting with new approaches. Sometimes we've defined it too tightly, sometimes too loosely. Today, to us, social innovation means:

- Seeing social problems as economic problems and economic problems as social problems.
- Taking a systemic and long-term view, seeing the interconnectedness of everything.
- Engaging lived experience throughout planning, design, delivery and evaluation.