

Saving Brains

Thematic Brief on Stakeholders: Eco-system Builders

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INTRODUCTION: A different perspective

Is the glass half-empty or half-full? Do you see a flower vase or two young children?



Many of the challenges faced by Saving Brains innovators depend a lot on how you look at them. We already know that innovators tend to see opportunities where others see problems; they tend to push ahead when others see obstacles. Is this little more than a play on words; or are there truly different ways to see impact in the world of social change?

This third thematic brief **describes five different perspectives on stakeholder relationships which have the potential to drive new ways of thinking about engagement and impact.** It explores the different perspectives by which successful innovators view and navigate the complex issue of stakeholders.


This brief captures the experience of social innovators spread over five continents who attended Saving Brains *transition-to-scale workshop* supported by Grand Challenges Canada (GCC) and Porticus, during February (in Nairobi) and June 2020 (online). The innovators have created a diverse range of programmes in early childhood development, across a wide variety of contexts. Our approach in these workshops and this brief is not to develop a theory and illustrate it with case studies, but to build from ground level by encouraging innovators to share their lived experience and from that, observe and extrapolate approaches that may be of value to the wider community and sector. In sharing the experiences and insights of these innovators through this brief, we aim to spark a dialogue in which others contribute their own ideas and reflections. This brief is thus a work in progress; see the next section on 'Your Contribution' for specific ways to participate.

Innovators at the workshops explored the concept of stakeholders and how to create winning stakeholder relationships that reinforce the organization's strategy and further enable success. This adds a new dimension to our previous thematic briefs on scaling ECD through [social entrepreneurship](#), and on scaling through [partnerships with government](#). In all three cases the lessons learned overlap, have wider applicability and illustrate the varied issues that innovators must address as they seek sustainable social change at scale. We hope the cumulative learning will help early childhood innovators see new opportunities (from new perspectives), avoid pitfalls and ultimately help the sector make greater progress towards quality ECD at scale.

YOUR CONTRIBUTION: Four ways you can help

This document is not a final report, but a means to further synthesize and illustrate the dialogue we started. It is written as a Google Doc with an open invitation to everyone connected with the Saving Brains community (**yes, you!**) to edit and contribute your experiences. The goal is not to write an academic paper, but to capture the **real-life experience-based insights** of those bringing ECD to scale.

You can contribute in four ways:

1. **Adding your story:** We need your help to illustrate these perspectives through more innovator examples. If you have a short story or example of one of these perspectives making a difference, please add a note in Appendix C.
2. **Expanding on the examples:** This document is full of “**for example ...**” bullet points. Do you have another idea or suggestion that could help others? If so, please add your bullet point example to any list in the document.
3. **Filling in the gaps:** Can you respond to a “**⚠️ HELP!**” flag in the document? These are points where editors have flagged content that particularly needs enhancing or improving.
4. **Review and Reflections:** Finally, at the end of each section and at the end of the document you will see some  **pink commentary boxes**. This is an opportunity to contribute a reflection or observation on what you have read. Can you see an angle, pattern or trend in what you’re reading? Is there a gap, opportunity or blind spot?

Please don’t just comment - get your fingers moving and add or edit some content! Your contribution will become part of a document that will be widely shared to help innovators around the world. If any of your examples are sensitive or need to be anonymous, contact andrew.bollington@viaed.net first to talk about how that is best done.

The result will be a richer resource for those on the front line and a grounded contribution to the global dialogue about what it takes to scale quality ECD.

PERSPECTIVE 1: Through the eyes of others

Stakeholder complexity is a recognised characteristic of not-for-profit organisations. As the proverb elegantly captures, *“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”* – and it’s certainly the case that no moderately complex social challenge is likely to be solved by one stakeholder alone.

In talking with Saving Brains Innovators, an extraordinarily deep stakeholder knowledge quickly becomes apparent. This is not knowledge gained through customer surveys or short focus groups (although they might help), but rather through lived experience of thousands of hours spent in dialogue and collaboration with people, building relationships while working on real life challenges. Words like ‘empathy’, ‘trust’, ‘credibility’ and ‘sincerity’ appear throughout our meeting notes and transcripts. Innovators have learned to see the world through the eyes of their stakeholders.

Despite (or perhaps because of?) this depth of stakeholder engagement and knowledge, there are numerous questions and concerns raised by innovators. *“How do you scale the long-standing relationships that are necessary to build trust?”*, *“How do you engage governments when they are so complex and multi-levelled?”*, *“How do you best communicate with different stakeholders who might not share a common interest?”*.

There are no simple or universal answers to such questions, but Saving Brains innovators clearly focus on stakeholder relationships in their everyday thinking, as these quotes illustrate:

- **Leadership:** *“Leadership is about scaling relationships”*.
- **Sustained focus:** *“Trust and credibility (between community and programme) comes from a longstanding relationship”*.

This sustained leadership focus translates into many hints and tips from innovators about working with stakeholders:

- **Listen:** *“Do not start the conversation with a preconceived idea of what they might want. Rather, listen and try to accommodate what comes out of that conversation as things that would be of value for them”*.
- **Understand:** *“Motivation is essential for meaningful participation that results in sustained impact. Seek to understand what participants want and value”*.
- **Adapt:** *“We learned we need to flip messages. We are trying to minimise violence, but we found that stakeholders didn’t value that as much as we do. Instead, we’ve learned to talk about bigger things. All adults want their kids to succeed, so we now message around kids succeeding ... for which minimising violence is a means to that end”*.
- **Be open:** *“Communicating the success stories and positive outcome is useful but credibility may also come from communicating about the failures and learning”*.
- **Engage:** *“Involve local leaders from all levels at the start – from planning to implementation”*.
- **Reframe:** *“If you’re already in the middle of a project and didn’t properly engage a stakeholder, then work out how to make where you are now like a new beginning”*.

This high level of stakeholder focus and engagement is the ‘entry level’ assumption for this thematic brief. How do successful social innovators take their stakeholder engagement to the next level? Read on ...



COMMENTARY: What are your reflections on Perspective 1?

Your Comments

[Type here]

PERSPECTIVE 2: I'm not at the centre

Try this simple multiple-choice question: **How would you feel if a government minister took to a stage, claiming credit for the impact achieved by the programme you built?**

- a) You'd scowl and clap slowly.
- b) You'd smile neutrally and privately put the record straight.
- c) You'd clap enthusiastically, seeing it as the price to pay for government support.
- d) You'd be inwardly proud. You helped write the minister's speech and invited some of the journalists.

The stance our innovators would advocate is clear from their advice in the sessions: *"Throw away your ego". "Prepare to disown your innovation". "Step back and let others take the centre stage". "It's a message of tough love to suggest that YOU may be the biggest obstacle to the scaling of YOUR programme!"*. Or to put it another way, *"People become the biggest barrier for scaling up when they fall in love with their solutions and not the problem"*.

Of course, the thousands of days and hours invested in developing an innovation might understandably create a gap between how innovators would like to think they would act and what might happen in reality. *"The more you grow, the more people become involved. The more the innovation needs to take a life of its own. As the initiator, my influence reduces, and the bigger systems become more powerful. I want to keep it ... but I don't want to keep it"* said one innovator.

How do innovators deal with this? *"As leader one needs to have the ability to step back and disown the intervention if one is to truly create an impact"* said another innovators as they reflected on the

challenge, adding: “disowning doesn't mean giving it up – it's about sharing responsibility (and credit) for the programme vs. thinking about getting government to ‘buy in’ or ‘uptake’”.

How does this translate into day-to-day thinking about stakeholders? An enlightening exercise undertaken by innovators is to draw a stakeholder map, with each stakeholder linked to each other according to a need or ability to supply some type of support. Young children often draw a simplified image of the body with an oversized head and put themselves at the centre of the picture; innovators say that it is revealing to build out diagrams to progressively understand the number and complexity of the relationships, and ultimately to accept that they are far from the centre of the picture.

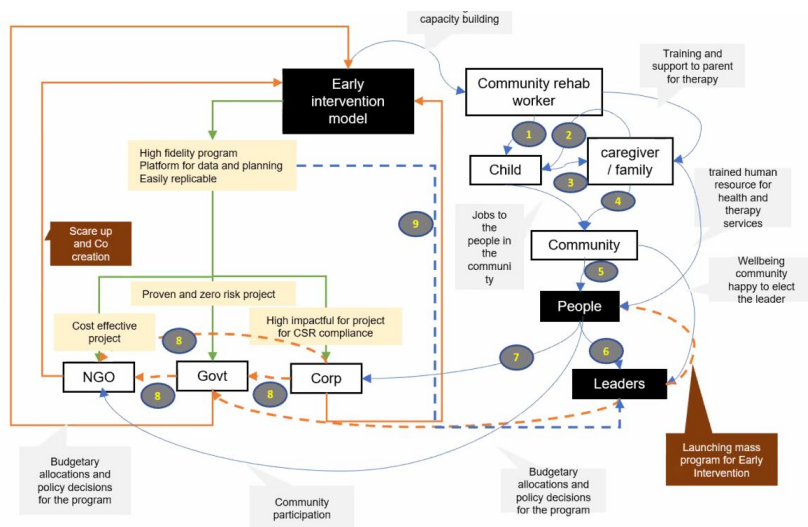


Figure 1: Example of an evolving understanding of stakeholder relationships; Amar Seva Sangam, India.

△ HELP! – does anyone have another example of a stakeholder map to share?

Perspectives change as the images develop; they typically become more circular and cyclical in nature. Hierarchies blur. Entities like “government” get broken down into numerous smaller departments and teams as you better learn about its structures, levels and politics. The innovator and intervention become one player among many.

But, if you're not at the centre of the system, who is? Saving Brains innovators warn against the dangers of anyone trying to control the eco-system. For example, one innovator warns that “sometimes the primary stakeholder becomes the donor. Donors need to be more egalitarian in how they view their stakeholders. They need to recognize that there are many more people in the network”. Another warned against “hierarchical models of stakeholders in which the donor who gives the most money is the highest placed”.

Once the innovator is no longer at the centre, it is possible to see the system for what it really is. A complex set of intertwined relationships which depend upon each other: “an eco-system, not an ego-system”.



COMMENTARY: What are your reflections on Perspective 2?

Your Comments

Ray and I have learned to use a similar, and someone different form of mapping, which might be called “influence mapping”. The critically important first step is to place the “issue” or question you are working on at the centre of the map - and this helps define the domain of interest. After that, you place the various actors and their relative “power” in relation to the issue. Finally, you create a set of lines that describe the current relationships between the actors (including you or your project). Its a strategic thinking tool that supports strategic action.

PERSPECTIVE 3: We’re all in it for the kids. Maybe not!

So, if there’s no one at the centre of the eco-system, then it’s at least clear that we all have a single perspective on why we’re doing this: it’s all about the babies, children and their families, right?

Well, maybe.

Certainly, every innovator describes a mission which calls them to a higher purpose. What could be more important than protecting the most vulnerable children at the time in their lives that they are most susceptible to danger and most open to learning? But a mission statement, however essential, is not the same as understanding the motivations of each stakeholder to engage.

Two people may both genuinely nod at the same mission statement but have completely different reasons for engaging. *“Human beings will always think ‘what is in it for me?’. Always keep that in mind when trying to bring value to stakeholders.”* said one innovator. For example, in addition to appreciating the value for children:

- The **government minister** may see the intervention as a way to demonstrate that the government is family-friendly in advance of an election where young parents are an important constituency.
- A **creche worker** may see the work as a future career step, but really essential to pay the rent this Thursday.
- The **doctor** may see the intervention as an interesting opportunity to conduct a research study.
- The **journalist** may see the intervention as a way to fill a column on a quiet news day, knowing that pictures of babies always sell well.

- The **volunteer** may see the intervention as a fun opportunity to socialise with other volunteers instead of being stuck at home alone.

Perspectives like these can combine and align with the core mission (see perspective 4 below!). Some stakeholder groups may not even be recognised or see themselves as stakeholders. Their knowledge of the mission statement might not even exist. For example:

- The **father** might want to engage as an active parent but find it difficult to attend parenting classes on a Monday morning, and be unwilling to be the only man involved.
- The **taxpayers lobby group** might view additional government expenditure on early years as another wasteful and ineffective fad of a minister.
- The **large local employer** might not really care about child development, but they might want parents of young children back at work without too many distractions.
- The **building company** that renovates the early childhood centre might view it as an opportunity to use up stocks of old brightly coloured paint!

Some motivations may lead to opposition to strategies with seemingly obvious benefits. For example, in the case of Kangaroo Mother Care (a low-cost intervention that saves lives through skin to skin contact after birth), it was suggested by one outside observer that private hospitals might prefer to use incubators even when they are less effective, because technology generates higher fees. What would it take to change the motivation and incentives for this stakeholder?

As one innovator argued, *“understand your opposition, and then work out what it would take for them to get a ‘win’ too!”*.



COMMENTARY: What are your reflections on Perspective 3?

Your Comments

[Type here]

PERSPECTIVE 4: Win-Win-Win

In sport, it's all about who won and lost. In business, it's all about a 'win-win' deal so that the customer comes back next time. So, what is the perspective of social innovators? It's 'win-win-win'!

Why three (or more) wins? Because, we have a plethora of stakeholders to make the eco-system work. If we don't "*maximise the gains and reduce the pains for each, then why should they keep coming back?*" asked one innovator.

This approach is illustrated by an ongoing debate among the innovator community about working with volunteers.

"Fundamentally unsustainable" says one innovator; *"The only way we could have scaled to this level"* according to another. The difference might be down to understanding and responding to different motivations. For example, if volunteers volunteer because they seek meaningful social contact with other volunteers, then the design of the intervention might be the difference between them volunteering repeatedly or stopping. Do volunteers work alone or together in small groups? Is there social time built into mealtimes or breaks? Are there events 'outside work' when volunteers can get together socially?

However, perhaps it's not social contact that's important – but recognition within their community, leadership skill development opportunities, or a small stipend. Perhaps there are sub-groups of volunteers who value each of these potential benefits differently? A stipend may seem a frivolous waste of money to a volunteer who seeks social connections – whereas to another, it could be a critical enabler to making the volunteering feasible. Whatever the answer, a volunteer-based programme without the right 'win' for volunteers is unlikely to be sustainable or scalable.

What happens if a 'win' for one stakeholder is a 'lose' for another? One innovator described such a scenario: *"Three years ago, the Mayor made pre-k universal by providing additional funding to public schools. This was great for kids in the city, but a disaster for the private kindergartens that were already working and had pioneered quality provision that created the original demand from citizens"*. Rather than benefit from the experience and capacity that already existed in the city, the design of the policy created a win/ lose scenario which ultimately slowed implementation and reduced overall quality compared to what might have been possible.

Let's go back to perspective 2 – "I'm not at the centre" – for a moment. What happens when the innovator removes themselves out of the centre of the stakeholder web? Are there virtuous circles of stakeholder 'wins' which don't require every 'win' to be delivered from the centre? For example, an innovator told us of their experience that government ministers wanted to be associated with good news stories that were highly visible to the population. By working out what the media wanted in a story, it became possible to create a 'win' for the media that then provided a 'win' for government ministers. The innovator didn't need the media attention, but it scored a 'win' when government ministers received the publicity they needed.

Sometimes, the 'win' might be less obvious. *"Where do costs show up if we don't do it?"* asked one innovator, suggesting we look at sectors like schools, police and social services which often have to pick up the costs when parts of society are dysfunctional. Could these sectors be stakeholders and advocates for change? What's the cost of inaction for these stakeholders?



COMMENTARY: What are your reflections on Perspective 4?

Your Comments

[Type here]

PERSPECTIVE 5: Value an undervalued stakeholder

Many of the Saving Brains innovators also focus on creating ‘wins’ for an undervalued stakeholder group, beyond the obvious primary beneficiary. This is possibly the biggest perspective changer

because it fundamentally redefines the scope and scale of the impact that can be achieved. When an undervalued stakeholder is valued more, the whole system can get re-invigorated around the raised levels of dignity, engagement and ambition. Infusing more respect has the potential to create new and important actors and advocates. Let's look at some examples:

- **Youth Leaders for Early Childhood Assuring Children are Prepared for School (LEAPS, Pakistan)** realised that their programme could value and benefit from working with underemployed young women. Local cultural practices made this challenging, but by asking the local community to select a young woman who has finished High School, they were able to create community buy-in. The student gets trained to be a pre-primary teacher, receives an income so that her family benefits, and becomes a focus of community pride as a result.
- **Ana Aqra (Lebanon)** offers a bus service for learners to reach their local community centres. They asked for volunteer mothers to help supervise children on the buses. Once at the community centre and waiting for the return journey, it was an obvious step to invite the mothers to come into the classrooms, starting a process of learning and empowerment that not only better supports the children, but strengthens confidence and skills for mothers.
- Creating 'wins' for others can be baked into the model. **SmartStart (South Africa)** developed a social franchise model which supports 6,000 mothers to create and run a small business in their own home, generating additional family income. *"Instead of doing everything ourselves, we*

are creating value at multiple levels and giving many more people a reason to work with us".

- **Community Empowerment Lab (India)** realised that the biggest obstacle to uptake of quality Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) was a lack of respect for mothers. In hospital systems that treated mothers poorly and without respect, what motivation was there for mothers to stay in the hospital and learn the KMC techniques with their newborn? This understanding led to a focus on frontline nurses. These were the people who needed to show respect ... but this was only ever going to happen if nurses first experienced respect themselves. Nurse training, development and support became a core focus for KMC because of this insight.

These examples all illustrate a new level of respect for human dignity. By valuing and respecting people who were invisible or low-status beforehand, the innovators are catalysing a profound shift that benefits the children and the whole community, and that creates 'win-win-win' energy that is sustainable.

Making these multiple 'wins' more explicit is an important part of understanding the true potential of an innovation. *"We already add value to many stakeholders, but we often don't name it in the way we talk about our programme"* according to one innovator. Innovators challenged each other to think more clearly about how 'wins' ripple through the system, especially to the least advantaged groups and frontline workers – *"to name it, shout it, and be proud of it"*.



COMMENTARY: What are your reflections on Perspective 5?

Your Comments

[Type here]

CONCLUSION: Eco-system builders.

When we write a thematic brief, we don't have a predetermined answer or conclusion. Instead, we aim to harvest the experiences of the innovator community, play it back, reflect and then draw conclusions. So, having described the discussions that happened, what are the core points to be gleaned? Three things stand out (so far):

- The way in which social innovators view, understand and work with stakeholders is different from and much more sophisticated than it might first appear. Many have truly adopted a different perspective.
- The shift in perspective towards eco-systems is subtle but critical. Once the innovator (or the innovator's baby) is not at the centre of the picture, it becomes possible to really focus on creating multiples wins throughout the system, even-- and especially -- for undervalued stakeholders who would otherwise have been the least likely to benefit but who can energize the whole system in new and more effective ways.
- These five perspectives layer upon each other to create a re-energised system for scaling which engages and benefits a much wider group of stakeholders. When an innovation is truly of value to multiple stakeholders then sustainable scaling becomes much more achievable.




COMMENTARY: Overall Observations

Your Comments

[Type here]

APPENDIX B: Vignettes and examples

A vignette is a “brief evocative description, account, or episode” that demonstrates the challenges and success of your work.  **HELP!** We are looking for short, concrete, real-life experiences (~200 words) to illustrate each of the perspectives identified in this brief.

Please add an example below and mention which perspective it illustrates. We will incorporate it in the body of the text shortly ...

[type here]

APPENDIX C: Acknowledgements

Image sources

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is_the_glass_half_empty_or_half_full%3F#/media/File:Glass-of-water.jpg
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cup_or_faces_paradox.svg