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Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation

How to access the entrepreneurial potential of people seeking asylum and refugees using a Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation Platform

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Gavin Ackerly
6/12/2015
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“Ubuntu [is] the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.” - Desmond Tutu
INTRODUCTION

This report explores world’s best practice in service user-led humanitarian innovation. It is a significant extension of my previous work on the Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation (SI) model (see appendix). The Churchill Fellowship has enabled me to achieve a profound shift in my understanding of the practical applications and possibilities of SI as a legitimate alternative to current humanitarian and development approaches. The report begins with an explanation of the SI theory and the 8 Principles of Practice. Beneath each principle there is a section ‘Methodology of Practice - Learnings from the Churchill Fellowship’ where I detail the relative methods of practice used by the organisations I visited.

Acknowledgements

In addition to the leaders of the humanitarian innovation and social empowerment movement I interviewed during the Fellowship, I would like to thank the following people:

• The team at the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for not only giving me the opportunity to further my work in the humanitarian innovation space, but for being a great support during my Fellowship.

• Louise Bloom, Researcher at the Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University, UK, who has guided me through the learning process during the Fellowship and has been a great sounding board for my thoughts and ideas. I’d also like to thank Louise and her colleague Romy Faulkner for travelling to Australia to study the SI model in action at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Melbourne.

• Baqir Khan – my good friend and collaborator. The many conversations we have had on the SI concept have completely transformed my thinking on this subject – and many others. Baqir is the essence of a humanitarian innovator. He combines a brilliant mind with a big heart and brings them both together in effective and creative action.

• My beautiful wife and son, Fiona and Liam Ackerly, who accompanied me for the first 8 weeks of the Fellowship. Having them by my side during this journey of learning really made the experience all that more special and life changing.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Description
The aim of the project was to further develop the Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation (SI) model. The particular area of focus was to gain wider knowledge of the methodology used in implementing service user led innovation practices within the humanitarian agency context. Through this knowledge, I hoped to transform SI into a replicable model that could guide humanitarian agencies through the process of unlocking the entrepreneurial and innovative potential of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Highlights
The Churchill Fellowship was a fascinating and inspiring journey, one that took me to the USA, Canada, UK, Europe and Africa, visiting 9 countries and 12 cities. Of the 14 world leaders in humanitarian innovation I visited, the following organisations had the most significant influence on me as a practitioner and strategist:

* Latino Health Access, Santa Ana California – Rosa DePrado and Shahab Mirzaeian educated me on LHA’s *promotore* model, which utilises the immense capacity of community members to take care of themselves and each other.

* The Forum, London – I thoroughly enjoyed meeting with the oracle-like Executive Manager, Zrinka Bralo. Amongst many things, she taught me the importance of ownership, rather than belonging, as a key to successful settlement.

* UNICEF Innovation Lab, Kosovo - meeting their leader, Josh Harvey, was a real highlight for me. He taught me that systemic problems are rarely solved by one-off, large scale systemic solutions, but through multiple individuals creatively overcoming the small scale challenges they meet.

* CIYOTA – Bahati Kanyamanza, Co-founder and Resource Director, had such an inspiring life story and approach to his work. He is a living example of what is possible if displaced populations are given the opportunity to define and control their own destinies.

Conclusion
People displacement is a growing crisis that will become one of the defining challenges of our time. The Symbiotic Innovation model is a viable alternative to the current approach to aid and development, which has largely failed to address the systemic problems faced by refugees and people seeking asylum.

Through my work, I will promote the understanding that humanitarian agencies need to reinvent themselves from their core so that they become tools for those they are there to serve, rather than a vehicle for their own sense of purpose. I hope to work with these agencies to implement the Symbiotic Innovation model that is detailed in this report. It is through this process that they will be able to hand back ownership of the solution creation and implementation process to the community, who have the best understanding of their issues and how to solve them. If solutions can be built and sustained by the community, then they will not only be more effective, their potential to scale up is almost infinite.
PROGRAMME

**Latino Health Access – Santa Ana, California, USA**

Interviewees: Rosa DePrado – Volunteer Coordinator  
Shahab Mirzaeian - Promotore

Latino Health Access is a non-profit organization founded in 1993 in Santa Ana, California. They reach out to residents in laundromats, garages, churches, and their recently-opened headquarters, to combat serious public health problems plaguing a community of uninsured and under-served families.

They train *promotores*, or community workers, to educate their own neighbours about diabetes, breast cancer, obesity, domestic violence, parenting and more. Each of their programs has been born from needs expressed by the local residents who subsequently engage their neighbours and friends.

**Youth Empowering Parents - Toronto, Canada**

Interviewee: Agazi Afewerki – Co-founder

Youth Empowering Parents has created a model that works efficiently and is easily replicated. It pairs adults with volunteer youth who speak the same language and then trains youth to deliver one-on-one tutoring to that adult in English and computer skills. The goal is to empower youth to become leaders within their own community and to provide adults with private tutoring education at no cost.

**The Forum - London, UK**

Interviewee: Zrinka Bralo - Executive Director

The Forum is a community hub that supports the integration of migrants and refugees. They are a centre for individuals (both British and non-British alike), organisations and newcomers who want to improve their communities.

Forum’s work addresses all aspects of the social exclusion of migrants and refugees with the aim of meaningful integration in the UK. They provide advice and support to individuals and community organisations, produce research and work in partnership to influence policy and facilitate better understanding and inclusion.

**Social Enterprise Academy (SEA) - Edinburgh, UK**

Interviewees: Sam Baumber – Chief Operations Officer  
Neil McClean – Chief Executive

SEA works at local and national levels, bringing together learners to share and learn together, at all stages of personal and organisational growth. With a successful track record in Scotland, they are now replicating internationally as a social franchise.
The Bridges Programmes - Glasgow, UK

Interviewee: Maggie Lennon – Director and Founder

The Bridges Programmes supports the social, educational and economic integration of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and anyone for whom English is an additional language that are living in Glasgow.

Recognised as an example of Best Practice in Scotland, the UK and Europe, Bridges works with employers and partners to ensure that their clients have the best possible support to help them into work (if eligible), education or further training. Through a variety of programmes and resources they help clients build their confidence by re-engaging them with their skills and also provide training, support, advice and work placements.

UNHCR Innovation - Geneva, Switzerland

Interviewee: Chris Earney – Co-Leader

UNHCR Innovation is constantly rethinking the way UNHCR works, while tapping into the spirit of innovation that already exists within the organisation. They aim to empower staff to work together with refugee communities to design innovative solutions to the challenges they face. They do this in three ways:

- They amplify innovations already happening within UNHCR.
- They connect innovators within UNHCR to time, resources, and each other.
- They explore innovations happening outside UNHCR. Rather than reinvent the wheel, they look for ways to adapt these to refugee challenges.

Urban Refugees - Paris, France

Interviewee: Sonia Ben Ali – Co-Founder

Urban Refugees supports refugee led organisations to develop their capacity to organise, plan and advocate for themselves. This includes: technical assistance and training, support in governance, fundraising and communication mapping. They believe self-reliance is key to promoting sustainable solutions.

SINGA - Paris, France

Interviewees: Nathanael Molle - Co-Founder
Guillaume Capelle - Co-Founder

SINGA promotes the emergence of spaces and meeting tools, exchange and cooperation between refugees and their host society to promote togetherness, cultural enrichment and job creation.
**UNICEF Innovation Lab - Pristina, Kosovo**

Interviewee: Josh Harvey - Lead

UNICEF is undergoing a transition, driven by an evolving development context and by disruptive thinking and technologies that promise to advance its service to children.

With this in mind, Innovations Lab Kosovo is helping UNICEF and partners rethink development. A unit of UNICEF Kosovo, the Lab is home to a multidisciplinary team including project managers, software engineers, advocacy practitioners, designers, social entrepreneurs, educators, communications and marketing specialists, and graphic and web designers.

**Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University - Oxford, UK**

Interviewee: Louise Bloom - Research Officer, Humanitarian Innovation Project

The Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) was founded in 1982 and is part of the Oxford Department of International Development. Their mission is to build knowledge and understanding of forced migration in order to help improve the lives of some of the world’s most vulnerable people.

**CIYOTA- Kampala, Uganda**

Interviewee: Bahati Kanyamanza - Founder and Resource Director

CIYOTA is a focal-point for the community where decisions are centralized and made democratically. In everything CIYOTA does, a sense of responsibility for community development is fostered. CIYOTA leaders strive to empower every individual, teaching them problem-solving and leadership.

Members at local, national and international levels share the principle of developing a united, self-sustained community. They empower their community by working with them to develop innovations. After the community members are trained, they are able to start their own workshops and to train other youth to undertake empowered action.

**YARID - Kampala, Uganda**

Interviewee: Robert Hakiza – Director

Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) is a grassroots, non-profit organisation. Its mission is to empower refugees, orphans and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) around Africa to overcome the burdens of deprivation and vulnerability to become healthy, educated, self-sustaining and contributing members of society.
REPORT STRUCTURE

Introduction & Overview of Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation Theory (SI) → How to Facilitate SI

→ 8 Principles of Practice

→ Methodology of Practice Identified during the Churchill Fellowship
HUMANITARIAN SYMBIOTIC INNOVATION (SI)

Introduction

The Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation (SI) platform, like all disruptive innovations, was first developed to address a pressing need – in particular, the improvement of the experience of people seeking asylum living in Australia. I was seeking a way to harness the entrepreneurial potential of these people to address the severe social challenges they were facing. In my opinion, the standard welfare approach used in the refugee sector was failing to deal with the scale and complexity of these challenges. I felt that if bold and creative solutions could be generated by the people seeking asylum themselves, not only would these approaches be more effective, they would be immensely scalable.

The two previous papers I have written on SI: Symbiotic Innovation - The Third Way (Ackerly, 2014) and Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation Theory and Practice (Ackerly, 2015) were both presented at the Humanitarian Innovation Conference at Oxford University in 2014 and 2015 respectively. This report expands on those papers by exploring the methodology of practice I discovered during the Churchill Fellowship.

In this document, the term entrepreneurial is used predominantly in a social context. While the successful social entrepreneur uses many of the same innovative approaches of their business minded counterparts, they are less driven by money and more by a return on investment in the form of social cohesion and human dignity.

In my experience, many refugees embody the notion of the social entrepreneur – having overcome incredible challenges to make it to the host country, saving themselves and their families. They bring with them a mindset, an enthusiasm, a type of resilience that makes them incredibly valuable to the humanitarian agency and society as a whole. And while they live in our communities under the oppression of draconian regimes, they continue to show the type of creative spirit that one requires to sustain themselves against all odds. Sadly, until now, they have been a greatly underestimated resource in the humanitarian sector.

Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation (SI) seeks not only to change this, but the entire paradigm in which humanitarian work is undertaken. SI sees the service user as an equal and essential part of the solution creation and delivery process. Fundamental to the concept is the idea that the service provider and service user are sharing a journey toward a common goal. The abilities and insights of each are held in equal regard – and are shared via a mutual learning through mutual action approach. The purpose is to develop synergies between diverse mindsets to achieve highly effective and innovative humanitarian solutions.

SI may go beyond just the world of refugees and displacement, the writing is on the wall for all of us when it comes to the future of universal welfare access. Ageing populations and the growing acceptance of market based health and wellbeing systems means it is inevitable that community will have to look more and more to itself for assistance – as it once did. I believe the SI model can make that transition a positive one.

Although I had written two papers on the SI model, I was faced with years of trial and error to refine the practical execution of its 8 Principles - which are detailed in this report. It was with great fortune that I was awarded the 2014 Churchill Fellowship which enabled me to see firsthand the practical work of world leaders in the user led innovation and empowerment movement. In essence, I was able to draw from their years of passion, creativity, hardship and failure, to see at the coal face world’s best practice in this field. The experience not only greatly improved my professional
knowledge; it gave me an immense sense of confidence that models such as SI are the future of social assistance.

It’s imperative to understand that the original Symbiotic Innovation model was not developed on paper, but through thousands of hours of practice during the nine years I have worked on the front line and behind the scenes with people seeking asylum and those who have dedicated their lives to assisting them.

Overview of SI Theory

It all begins with a question: What is the role of the humanitarian service agency in relation to the community it is there to serve?

If one was to take some time to consider this question, they might come up with an answer like: The agency takes responsibility for those functions necessary in community which the community itself is unable to manage.

I believe this would capture the philosophy of most agencies in the social and humanitarian services sector. However, if we were to consider things a little more, we’d most likely agree that our actions do not occur in isolation and that there are always unintended outcomes. This is especially true of the work we do because our actions unfold within the intricate ecosystem of a person’s life or within the lives of their community. But what if the work we are doing is actually creating deeper problems than it is overcoming? What if we were to ask ourselves, “At what point does taking over these vital functions of community begin to undermine its fundamental structures and ability to look after itself?”

To answer a question like this, we need to look through a wider lens at our relationship with the people we are there to serve, the service user community.

It’s important at this point to define what is meant by the terms such as “service user community” and “the agency”.

- **Service User** in the context of SI means people who we usually describe as a client group. In terms of a **Service User’s Community**, this can include everyone from their immediate family unit through to others in their wider social networks who are experiencing similar disadvantage. Service Users are human beings first and foremost, and I only use this term to enable a technical discussion.
- **Change Agent** is used to describe a service user who has become a service provider. This language is important because it identifies people through their function, rather than their need.
- **The Agency** is a generalized term for any humanitarian organization that delivers direct aid/assistance to the service user community.
- **Facilitators** are what we traditional know as agency workers who are working within the Symbiotic Innovation model. Again, here the language encourages a more equal working relationship between the service user and service provider.

To understand the agency’s relationship with the service user community, we need to first understand what the agency is and why it exists. We need to take a moment to look deeper into the purpose of our agencies and the wider impact they have on the world. It’s easy to take for granted that the work we do is vital to the world, simply because there is no one telling us otherwise. We
reinforce our sense of importance through our vision and mission statements, as well as outcome and output measures.

However, most of us recognize that something is seriously wrong with the current community aid/assistance system. I don’t know of a service agency that isn’t overwhelmed and struggling to attend to only a small percentage of the demand that they know is out there. As funds grow scarcer and competition gets tougher, overall demand for assistance continues to increase. In fact, if you were to look at the system from an engineering point of view, you could say that the model we are using is not built for purpose. It is the wrong solution for the problem.

At the heart of the SI philosophy is the assertion that the fundamental structure of the current humanitarian model is flawed. It has been my experience that this is an unpopular assertion to make, but one that needs to be explored if we are to begin to make serious headway into reducing the poverty and injustice experienced by refugees who find themselves in need of our assistance.

**What is the agency and why does it exist?**

At our base we are problem solvers, solution creators and implementers. Social workers and community development professionals are really humanitarian innovators at their core (even though this is rarely recognized). It is just as innovative to find ways to move a refugee from homelessness and despair to having stability and hope, as it is to build a safe cooker for rural communities living without resources. Both of these parties use similar processes of creative adaptation.

There are many things that the current agency approach does very well, including utilizing the resources of our networks, fundraising, project management, finance and navigating statutory responsibilities. We also have an organizational memory through which we are able to continually improve our work. All these attributes make us of great value to the service user community, who, in the context of the host country, are generally lacking experience and knowledge in these areas.

Our major flaw is how we engage with the communities we are there to serve. As is explored in my paper *Symbiotic Innovation – The Third Way* (see appendix), the organizations we work for today evolved from the institutional / mission style approach to addressing disadvantage. And while there has been a great deal of improvement over time, this agency-centric structure has remained the same, as has the basic message to the community on why we exist: “Our purpose is to fix your problems.”

Obviously this is a bold and noble mission, but looking at it in a practical light, it is a misguided (and ineffective) one. The agency model can never successfully address the needs of community, because community as a system is simply too big and too sophisticated for a small group of outsiders to negotiate. The notion that a professionalized and removed party such as the agency can solve the ills of community by assuming involvement and responsibility is like trying to solve climate change with an air conditioner. Logic says it won’t succeed—no matter how hard we try to make it work.

The only people who can change the community are the community members themselves. The service user knows what they need better than any organisation, expert or social/community development course. To prove this fact, all you need to do is ask yourself, “Who knows best what your needs are?” And, “Who is the best person to decide how to meet your needs?”
What keeps this old model in place?

In the paper *Symbiotic Innovation – The Third Way* (Ackerly, 2014), I explore two key factors:

1/ The professionalization of social work which resulted in it becoming a sector and an industry which had to rely on outside “experts” to build and maintain standard approaches. On this point, it is important to recognise that not so long ago, social welfare work was the responsibility of the community as is still the case in many countries today.

2/ Our (and our governments’) tendency to follow norms and tradition – we do it because it’s the way it has always been done.

In addition to these two factors, I recently became aware of a third force at play - our belief that we are doing good. The person putting in another unneeded water treatment plant is doing a good thing by trying to supply clean water. The social worker who is reluctant to enable their client to lead the solution process is doing this to protect them. In isolation, these acts are good in nature. And because we set the criteria to measure the success of our good work, our outcomes nearly always hit the mark. And naturally, we also have the data to prove it. It’s almost impossible to break this type of thinking because it’s so intrinsic and self perpetuating.

Let’s go back to the question, “At what point does taking over these vital functions of community begin to undermine its fundamental structures and ability to look after itself?” The answer is it happens from the very beginning, because removing responsibility from community lies in the DNA of what the agency is and why it exists. What compounds this further is that the service agency is fundamentally structured to keep itself in existence.

In purely pragmatic terms, the only way the service agency can begin to break the status quo and start making serious inroads into disadvantage is to reconstruct itself from its core. It needs to move from its place outside or even above community and reposition itself as part of community. Only from this point can the agency begin to mobilize the most efficient and effective resource, the community, and begin to really make headway into combating disadvantage. But to make a change this big, one requires a road map - and this is the purpose of the Symbiotic Innovation model.

Symbiotic Innovation (SI) is a model where service users are integrated into the management and delivery of humanitarian services. Rather than the service agency seeing users as external parties, it sees their participation as integral to its internal operations. The practice of service user and service provider working together in an equal and interdependent relationship means each is able to influence the other in the development of innovative solutions toward their common goals.

The SI concept was mainly developed through my work with asylum seekers at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) Innovation Hub in Melbourne, Australia. “The Hub” was founded on the belief that the most effective service model is one that utilises disadvantage to create advantage. Specifically, if one were able to create a program structure that harnesses the potential of the service user community to meet its own needs, disadvantage would begin to undermine itself, and real inroads could be made in tackling large systemic challenges.

SI enables the agency to build an organic and adaptive relationship with the service user community in such a way that it no longer undermines community functions, but instead strengthens them. The model borrows from the approach engineers use to build systems that deliver scale and effectiveness. The specific area is called *control theory*, where small systems influence larger systems through feedback loops to create effective and large scale change (see Appendix). Translated into a
humanitarian context, it describes how the service agency’s role is to enhance the capabilities of the larger, more sophisticated system of community to innovate its own solutions. Through mobilizing the service user community, the SI model is able to scale up innovations efficiently. This is achieved through a *mutual learning through mutual action* approach which is detailed in the next section.
HOW TO FACILITATE SYMBIOTIC INNOVATION

There is an important distinction between “facilitating” and “implementing” Symbiotic Innovation. Symbiotic Innovation, like any type of innovation, cannot be enforced from the top down or by any one person or group as it is an organic process. People need to be led by their own interests, ideas and creativity and any attempt to control the scope of these will have a negative effect on the overall outcome.

Our role in facilitating SI is to implement a model which creates the conditions that are conducive to SI’s occurrence. This is why the SI model incorporates the concept of emergence in its framework. Emergence explains the phenomenon where something novel arises out of a seemingly chaotic environment that is governed by certain principles. Websites like Wikipedia are good examples of emergence. Here, basic principles set by the website creators bring about an environment for previously unconnected participants to interact with each other to build something ordered, something new, something greater than the sum of their individual contributions.

In the service agency context, control theory (see appendix) provides the principles required for the emergence of Symbiotic Innovation. To put it simply, if we implement these principles within our programs - SI will occur naturally.

The 8 Principles of Practice of Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation

As discussed previously, Symbiotic Innovation is based on the engineering stream called control theory, which describes the process where dynamic systems rely on and influence one another. To understand the principles required for SI to occur, we need to break down the practical functions of control theory. Through this, we are able to identify eight distinct elements which become the principles of SI facilitation within a service agency context.

The 8 Principles are intrinsic to the SI approach. The act of people from the service user community being involved in service delivery, strategic planning or even management is not uncommon – and in themselves these activities do not constitute the SI model. The 8 Principles give SI a form, a structure rather than it being just a term. Without this it would be too easy for the agency to wrongly say/believe they were “doing SI” and to mistake it for a simple participatory development model.

The 8 Principles also give us a language to develop the SI model within and outside the agency. As it is built on control theory, the timeless and natural process of collective and adaptive creativity, we are able to identify the functional elements of the model – the Principles. Having this language allows SI to go through its own iterative process by enabling us to identify what is working and what is not and adjusting the model accordingly.

Ultimately, the 8 Principles make up what might be called a sacrificial model that is there to be tried, tested and picked apart in the name of building a better way of working more effectively with the communities we assist.

I will explore each of the following principles through detailing their associated methodology of practice, which were initially identified in my paper Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation – Theory and Practice (Ackerly 2015). I will also discuss the new methodology I discovered during the Churchill Fellowship.
Principle 1 - Shared Purpose

Overview

This is the *Why* behind what we want to achieve. A shared purpose can connect a diverse range of people, both intellectually and emotionally, around a concept or cause. A shared purpose is not just about identifying problems to be overcome – it’s also about having a common vision of the impact we are trying to achieve and what success looks like beyond those challenges.

A major challenge in identifying a shared purpose is that it is too easy to assume we all want the same things. This is particularly the case in top down approaches to assisting people. At best, we include service users in strategic and operational planning. However, we generally leave them on the outside when it comes to the purpose, the *Why*, behind the services we offer. Their opinions, needs and wants are generally fed back to us through focus groups, surveys and anecdotes. Their input is constrained by our uninformed vision of what we believe is a shared purpose.

Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship

We need to explore, at times deeply, the *Why* behind what we are doing – and we need to include the service users in this exploration. We also need to create mechanisms for service user community members to identify what their challenges are and their ideas on what is needed to address these challenges – so that others from within and beyond these communities can cluster around a shared purpose.

- **The importance of coming together around a purpose rather than a deficiency**

  One method of practising *Shared Purpose* is encouraging people to bond around a vision of a better future rather than a common deficiency. When I think about what defines the dysfunction of the welfare sector, it is ideas such as creating group counselling programs for ‘complex clients’. If you unite people around what their problem is, rather than what they are interested in or passionate about, they will most likely always see the possibilities for themselves within the construct of this limiting notion.

  In support of this, Bahati Kanyamanza, Founder and Resource Director of CIYOTA, a refugee led organisation in Kampala, believes developing a positive sense of the future is key to people being able to break free of the stereotypes set for them.

  ‘The big thing we do is we change their minds. We say, “Don’t look at the problems surrounding you, but look at the opportunities available to you.” We prove to them that we are human beings like others, that we can get good grades; we can do the farming, and then solve our own problems. This has really helped our young people to be successful,’ Bahati explained.

  Zrinka Bralo from The Forum in London believes that uniting around a deficiency can also create problems for the group dynamic and undermine long term success. During my visit, she recalled the process her organisation went through in its early days:

  ‘The (original) idea was that they would create a shared resource where they could learn from each other and get support. This is the traditional community development model where you have staff and you have spaces for offices and meetings – the challenge was not having a physical space to come together. They raised half a million pounds for this building. Then they fought for five years, because they never really organically came together around
an idea, they came together around a shared need. And the need was based on the lack of resources. So they all wanted a piece of the pie and there wasn’t enough of the pie to go around. So they were constantly fighting.’

Bahati had a similar experience in CIYOTA’s work with youth in the refugee camps of Uganda. He rented a house outside the camps and brought a number of young people from different national and tribal backgrounds together to find ways to assist them. Challenges arose as the participants started turning on each other—blaming one another for the reason they were now refugees. I surmise that this occurred because they were brought together based on the fact that they were refugees lacking hope and direction and at the beginning there may have been no clear shared purpose to unite these young people.

Being an innovative and adaptive organisation, the CIYOTA team then developed a program that educated the group about the situation in their countries of origin. They explained that the violence they had fled was due to issues such as nepotism and tribalism, and the fact that the people fighting didn’t see each other as fellow human beings. By participating in the CIYOTA program, the young people would work together toward a future without violent conflict.

This re-direction developed a sense of shared purpose amongst the young people. The objective of them coming together was not only to improve their lives through education, but to improve the community as a whole through leadership, entrepreneurship and non-violence. The result of this would be a better outcome for everyone—no matter what background. Therefore, the young people now had a motivation to appreciate each other as peers in a mutually beneficial endeavour. This meant that if their peers were doing well, then everyone was benefitting.

➢ The Shared Purpose needs to develop organically from the individual level
It is common for agencies and governmental departments to use data to decide what the big issues are for a community. They then go about setting up groups with a particular purpose—such as tackling family violence or unemployment. What they don’t understand is that, in these cases, they are reducing the community members to mere passengers and undermining their resourcefulness.

To understand this we should ask ourselves, ‘Do I need data to tell me what my problems are?’ If the government or an agency came to your home and said, ‘We have collected this data on you and have decided what your key problems are and we are now going to set up a group to deal with them’, how empowered and enthusiastic about the process would you feel? Further to this, what kind of culture does this create in our society? One where people need to rely on an outside institution to identify and solve their problems? One where certain groups must wait their turn for the ever changing focus of governments, researchers and funding bodies to come their way? As concerning as this sounds, it is exactly how the current agency model works. However, change is occurring in certain parts of the world where leaders of the innovation movement are realigning their purpose with that of communities they are there to serve. One of these organisations is UNICEF in Kosovo.

Josh Harvey from UNICEF Innovation Lab, Kosovo believes that the solution creation process needs to begin at the level of the individual. ‘We encourage the young people to come together around the issues that they want to work on and that is kind of the uniting thing,’ he said. He asserted that the optimum process is about getting down to the level of a rights holder and what their individual experience of a big challenge might be. ‘We encourage young people; in fact, we insist that young people look at the challenges that they, their
family, their peers, and their communities are experiencing... so that they’re responding directly to individual needs of rights holders,’ Josh said.

A Shared Purpose not only unites people, it focuses their mutual ambition toward positive aims and outcomes. It builds hope and sets people’s hands, hearts and minds to work on creating a better future. It is the beacon that guides the group through the challenges they will face along the way.
**Principle 2 - Integration**

**Overview**

SI involves the combining of two entities, the agency (generally made up of the host community) and the service user or service user community. These parties are integrated in a *mutual learning through mutual action* model that allows them to become interdependent. This gives rise to the *shared experience* - the cornerstone of the SI model.

The value of the shared experience is that it:

- Encourages a shared awareness and cumulative understanding and creativity
- Breaks down cultural differences and creates hybrid cultures
- Creates a source of dynamic feedback (see Principle 6)

Integration in its most effective form occurs through people clustering around a shared purpose. However, a shared purpose can itself emerge from integration, particularly the type that occurs through necessity or order.

The challenges to successful integration are the bi-polar traps of tokenism and unrealistic expectations. In my experience, tokenism is quickly picked up by people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are only too familiar with insincerity and hollow words. It is the number one common denominator when it comes to the failure of integrated workforces, followed closely by unrealistic, one size fits all recruitment and people management systems. We need flexibility rather than textbook driven thinking to successfully integrate diverse people as equals into the workforce.

Of course we all need the direction and the boundaries that help us to progress and adapt. All of us are on a lifelong learning journey. Equality is not about removing management hierarchies – but in accepting that every opinion has validity and needs to be heard.

**Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship**

- **Integration requires participation to lead to ownership**
  
  The Principle of Integration is less about participation and more about equal ownership. It’s about changing the current paradigm that a service user *belongs* to the agency, which is often reinforced by terms such as, ‘They’re our client’. It is accepting that the agency is a tool for the people facing a challenge and that the agency belongs to them as much as it does us.

  A situation that occurred at the ASRC Innovation Hub highlighted this concept: On starting their day, the Innovation Hub staff found that the keys to open cabinets which hold valuables such as laptops were missing from the key drawer on a manager’s desk. After a time of searching, they realised that a *change agent* (service user who is also a provider) had removed the keys from the drawer, opened up the cabinet and obtained a number of computers to run the daily computer training classes he had set up. He had then forgotten to return the keys.

  Instead of the staff being annoyed at this incident, they were inspired by it, as it was a small but significant symbol of the success of the Symbiotic Innovation model. The *change agent* had felt such a level of ownership of the hub space that he had taken it upon himself to take the keys, in the same manner as all the other *facilitators* (staff and volunteers), and go about his daily business.
This act was small and from the outside might seem trivial, but for those of us who have worked many years in agencies that have strict access protocols and hard delineation of entitlements for ‘our clients’, it was a giant leap forward.

Zrinka Bralo from The Forum, London, made an incredibly insightful statement on this topic. ‘Being a citizen is not about a piece of paper,’ she said. ‘It is in everyday action. And being a citizen is not about whether you belong. It’s about what belongs to you. So if I’m treated with no respect and I have no dignity, then nothing really belongs to me here. So it’s not about my confidence. I can be super confident… but if I don’t have that relationship with my environment of people around me, then I don’t belong because nothing belongs to me.’

The four levels of participation

Participation is a term that is used in so many welfare settings (most often in an obligatory sense) that it has almost lost its meaning. One of the mental blocks for me in developing the SI model was in understanding how to encourage the type of participation that leads to a sense of equal ownership. It was a key reason for my visit to an organisation that I see as a world leader in community participation, Latino Health Access (LHA) in Santa Ana, California. LHA uses a powerful promotor model which involves training people from the community as health workers and as key staff within the agency.

During my visit to LHA, the volunteer coordinator, Rosa Deprado, explained the four levels of participation: ‘We strongly believe that if people aren’t participating, it is because you have not developed a mechanism for their participation and as an agency you have a responsibility to create ways of participation,’ she said.

‘The first level of participation is where people are coming for a service, such as diabetes classes, healthy weight classes or youth programs. They need a service because they are suffering from some situation. They come and the promotores start a relationship with that person. And in that relationship the promotores know the moment to invite the people to go to the next level of participation,’ Rosa explained.

At level two, Rosa said that the promotores invite the new service user to start doing some small things such as setting up the kitchen for meals. At this point, their place in the process starts to shift to a more positive, empowered footing. ‘The people are prepared to see how they can help others and the process of healing keeps going by helping others,’ she said. ‘And the people get involved with other people in the same situation. They may even volunteer in the same support group that they attend.’

Rosa said that the third level of participation is where the people who volunteer, and who are still participating in services, start to think about particular projects to run by themselves. ‘They may want to start some presentations about violence in their building. They undertake a project of hope and action. They don’t really need us, they can start by themselves. We can help them with things like training or maybe they can join their initiative with one of ours,’ she explained.

When people reach the fourth level Rosa said they begin branching out as leaders in the community. ‘They start to do something like being part of a coalition, or open an agency, or start to fight for policies. They are strongly focussed on creating change in the community,’ she said.
Rosa wrapped up the process: ‘So participation begins with ‘I need to change myself. I come here to find better ways of living and then I start to help others to change and then I start to do bigger initiatives to have a better community.’

From Rosa’s explanation, I devised the following Four Levels of Integration as a basic structure that maps the journey from participation to ownership:

Level 1 - Health and Wellbeing

Level 2 - Empowerment

Level 3 - Leadership

Level 4 - Community Voice

At LHA, these levels are seen as the practical way that clients engage in the organisation. ‘The first level of participation is where people are coming for a service, such as diabetes classes.’ At this level the clients are only invited into the services, with relatively little inclusion of their own ideas or effort. At level two, however, ‘they invite the people to start doing some small things, such as set ups, cooking…’, in this way the clients are getting more involved in the activities – more than as simply a receiver. At level three, the clients volunteer, and ‘start to think about particular projects to run by themselves’ taking on leadership roles. At level four however, the voice of the community is integrated into the services ‘strongly focused on creating change in the community.’

The four levels of Integration will not always be linear. Firstly, people will come into the organisation at different levels of participation/integration depending on their circumstances and capacities. Secondly, people who have progressed beyond Level 1 may experience other primary health and wellbeing issues along the way that may force them to return to the ‘first’ level.

As such, the Four Levels of Integration might also be represented as the following continuum:

➢ Integration requires a healthy working relationship

The relationship between the facilitator (traditionally known as the agency staff) and the change agent (traditionally known as a client) is a vital key to the success of the SI model. However, this is an area of much concern (and even fear) for many agency staff when considering the SI approach. Their question is: how can you build and maintain a relationship of equality where a client is also a colleague?

I think it is important to remind ourselves that social welfare and development work, as we know it, was the domain of community members throughout history. It has only been in recent times that the professionalization of this area has led us to believe that ordinary
people helping other ordinary people is risky and to be discouraged, and that there should be strict processes and protocols around people sharing their personal problems with each other.

Yes, there were problems back in those times – but instead of trying to solve those problems, we threw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak, and sought to dissolve a largely successful system. What’s worse, is that we replaced it with something inferior – that in the end, had significantly higher risks associated with it because it was run by ‘experts’ who could not be held accountable for their actions.

It is easier to understand the nature of the SI relationship if we are able to strip back the interaction to its bare bones and see it as two people working together toward a shared purpose. Then we can focus our attention on how to build the most effective working relationship.

One thing I need to add here is that the current agency model has been around long enough to create, and reinforce, a saviour - victim mentality on both sides of the service user/provider relationship. Therefore, this area requires some careful direction from those responsible for implementing the SI model.

As in all effective working relationships, a strong, equal and honest relationship between the facilitator (service provider) and the change agent (service user and provider) is essential. For the agency, this may have an impact on staff professional development and even recruitment. SI requires the agency to employ facilitators, not saviours. Maggie Lennon from The Bridges Programmes, Glasgow - a cutting edge refugee employment program, gave her views on effective working relationships.

‘There are a lot of people out there who play the “poor asylum seeker” and “poor refugee”. If you exist in a victim culture where people are always doing things for you – you get used to it,’ she said.

Maggie believes that this culture is so pervasive in the refugee sector that when people finally reach programs like Bridges, they experience a culture shock. ‘There is a bit of learning curve for them (people from refugee experiences). We say, “We are not going to do things for you but assist you to do things for yourself.”’

‘Recruiting staff can be difficult because we get a lot of people who want to do the warm and fuzzy type of stuff,’ Maggie said, adding that her staff need to find the right balance to be effective. ‘On one hand, they do have lots of empathy and they are kind and do take people’s stories to heart. On the other hand, they know what needs to be done for them – which is saying, “I am not going to do you any favours if I do it for you.”’

Integration requires a non discriminating approach to privacy and confidentiality

Often lauded as the defining reason equal participation/ownership should not occur within the welfare setting, the issues of privacy and confidentiality were high on my list of areas to explore during the Fellowship. That said, as the SI model was being implemented at the ASRC Innovation Hub, it became clear that we had double standards for service providers and the service users when it came to how private information was managed.

Some complained that implementing the SI model would mean that they wouldn’t be able to talk in an open space about clients if they knew there were other clients (operating as change agents) also working in that space. It was also argued that these change agents
should be restricted from closed off spaces such as the finance room, as the walls were thin and they could overhear intake sessions. Ironically, this was despite the fact that there had been non-clients working in the finance room for over eighteen months. The underlying notion was that sharing private information about service users amongst many unconnected staff and volunteers was tolerable, unless of course these people were also from refugee backgrounds.

Shahab Mirzaeian and Rosa Deprado from *Latino Health Access* – leaders in user led approaches, both believe that private information should only be shared when it is absolutely necessary to the doing of one’s job. They also believe there should be different levels of access depending on the functional position a person holds, such as a counsellor compared to someone who is setting up the kitchen. However, they believe the rules should be the same for everyone regardless of their background and whether they are, or are not, currently participating in the service of the agency.

To me this is a logical answer to the question of how privacy and confidentiality should be managed in a symbiotic relationship. We need to lose the assumption that just because we have not had a refugee experience we are therefore somehow better equipped to deal with information about refugees – when, if we were to honestly reflect on that idea, it would appear that the exact opposite is in fact the case.

**The Practice of Integration is about transformation as much as function**

There are many benefits to the practice of Integration, such as workplace and teamwork experience, cultural understanding, as well as communities learning to work alongside each other. However, there is also a symbolic component that in many ways is more powerful than these outcomes. A key learning of the Churchill Fellowship was that when ordinary people join together to solve problems, or when service users become service providers, there is a transformative element to these events that goes well beyond the functional transaction between two parties.

Being greeted by a person from a similar life experience is a transformative experience for the person who is attending the agency or service for the first time. The new arrival can see themselves in that welcoming person. And a narrative begins that the agency believes in them and sees them as more than just a client or service user, more than just a burden, or a number to be pumped back out the door at the end of the session. There is no bigger self esteem builder than someone believing in you.
**Principle 3 - Recognition**

**Overview**

Recognition, put simply, is about recognising what resources and solutions already exist. The first place we should look for these is in the populations we are there to assist. The aim of Symbiotic Innovation is to develop solutions that live and thrive in the community. Therefore, we should focus first on what strengths and solutions already exist in these communities. It is far more effective to support successful solutions that have been created by the community, rather than exert the energy to construct solutions from scratch.

**Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship**

- **Recognise valuable patterns of interaction**
  Recognition of the community as a highly functioning system is a cornerstone of the SI model. It requires a shift in the deficiency paradigm that is so intrinsic to the current agency model. It requires us to focus our attention on those things that are working in the community just as much as those things that aren’t. We need to spend more of our time searching for those patterns of interaction that are getting results and less time building our own solutions for others.

  One of the most innovative programs I came across on the Fellowship was *Youth Empowering Parents* (YEP), Toronto. The founders of the organisation recognised that children actually developed their ability to speak a new language a lot faster than their parents. And in addition to this, they were also likely to be more technologically savvy. In fact, it was common for children to teach their parents language and computer skills. YEP decided to add value to this existing pattern and started up a program that developed children’s teaching skills. Agazi Afewerki, the co-founder of YEP, explained the process he and cofounder Mohammed Shafique went through:

> ‘*My parents, Mohammed’s parents, and the parents of many of our friends all had the same experience. They’d go to computer or language classes but when they got home, they’d ask their children for help. It was odd, because we would try to figure out why they were asking us for help rather than their teachers, who are certified professionals. Ultimately, it came down to one question: If you are going to learn a new language or skills, who would you rather learn it from, a person with multiple university degrees who is wearing a suit, or an unintimidating child who speaks the same language as you?’*

  Azazi said.

  Agazi and Mohammed set up YEP and put together training courses which assisted children to further develop their teaching skills and connected them with parents and other adults needing their assistance. The program became a great success and now has over 800 matches.

  I believe the brilliance of the YEP program is that its creators drew the idea from a pattern of interaction that already existed naturally within the community. They then used their skills and resources to add value to it. Instead of spending time and resources reinventing the wheel, they were observant and open-minded enough to recognise what was already working.

  Further to this, Agazi and his team also recognised the role that children played in connecting cultures and helping develop their parent’s understanding of the prevailing culture. ‘A *lot of adults who are relatively new to the country tend to form these cultural*
clusters,’ he explained. ‘They stay in their own networks. There are more than fifty languages spoken (in the regions we work in) but their friends are all still from their own culture. It’s not uncommon to find someone who’s been here for ten years and are still unable to integrate.’

Agazi explained that while these existing cultural networks are important to the adult’s wellbeing, they do not offer exposure to the wider experience of life in the host country. This has an impact on their ability to further develop their language and life skills. ‘And those are the challenges of having those cultural clusters, which are great, in that they tie into Canada’s philosophy of multiculturalism, but the consequences are evident,’ he said. ‘Youth, on the other hand, are a different story. There’s a school right across the street and if you walk in, it’s really diverse with every single culture interacting. And as the children grow, they have a lot of knowledge of their own culture and the Canadian culture. And they are able to bridge that gap,’ Agazi said.

As Agazi’s work highlights, positive interactions, where community members are assisting one another, occur in the everyday lives of people facing hardship. The SI model asks us to recognise these patterns and gain a better understanding of why and how they work.

- **Recognising that an Individual is not the same as their problem**

  The agency model, as it stands, encourages us to see the people we work with as deficient or broken. Our organisations claim to ‘help asylum seekers’ or ‘the homeless’ and we become indoctrinated into seeing people as a problem to be fixed. It is hard from this viewpoint to recognise the extraordinary capacities of the people we work with – simply because we rarely create a relationship, or an environment, where these things can be demonstrated.

  It is important to note that I am not talking here about the traditional strength-based approaches used by social workers and counsellors. This is more a macro-narrative approach which relates to a person’s identity within the symbiotic relationship and even within the wider world in which they participate.

  Rosa Deprado from Latino Health Access explained that the foundation of the working relationship is laid in the first meeting between the service user and the service provider. It is in these initial meetings that we are building the platform from which that person will approach their challenges from that day on.

  Rosa explained, ‘For example, the mental health system is just pointing at the lack of mental health, the problem. So you are no longer Rosa now, you are Depressed or you’re a Diabetic. So it’s like your identity is attached with your problem. So you are the problem.’

  Rosa said that at LHA they like to recognise people in their resources and skills. They do this by starting the conversation off from a positive place. ‘When you try to talk with a person, no matter what is the problem, you ask that person, “What’s your name? Do you have kids? How old are they? What do you enjoy about your kids? What are your values?” It’s like in a different frame. So maybe you are the first person that is asking that mother about something different than their illness, in the first step. So she starts to think about herself like someone with more stories. And that is crucial, because if I can see myself as a mother, I can tame my diabetes. But if I see myself as a Diabetic, there is no hope. Diabetes has a lot of bad stories attached to it, but being a mother is different,’ Rosa said.

  Rosa said that it’s important that our point of entry into a service user’s life is at a positive level, because our conversations will likely define how that person sees themselves in relation to their challenge. ‘We have a lot of stories about ourselves,’ Rosa said. ‘and the one
that is asking you about your life is the one responsible for creating that story. Because if you ask me just about my problem, I’m going to tell you just about my problem and I’m going to create that book of my life. But if your first question is about me as a mother, you are going to have a beautiful story about myself. From that you can ask me about my pain,’ Rosa said.

When it comes to unlocking the entrepreneurial potential of people, we need to assist them to build a positive narrative about their lives and help create an empowered base from which they can address their challenges. For example, if I am trying to start a business as a father and successful business owner from Iran, I am going to have a better chance of success than I would if I saw myself as just another unemployed asylum seeker.

- Recognising the power of the lived experience

Shahab Mirzaeian is a Promatore at Latino Health Access. He is an incredibly interesting man. His life story is one of immense struggle and hardship. But instead of this being a barrier to him helping others, he sees it as an advantage. During our conversation, he told a parable which highlighted his approach.

‘There was a guy who was digging a hole and eventually he realized he dug a hole so deep that he couldn’t get out and he’s calling out. Finally, along comes this rich guy, and the man in the hole yells, “Help me! Help me!” So the rich guy throws him some money and says, “Here, go buy some help.”

And then a second guy comes by and the guy in the hole yells, “Help me! Help me!” To which the second guy says, “Let me think about this for a second.” And then he jumps in the hole with him. The first guy says, “You’re an idiot. Now we’re both stuck!”

The second guy says, “No we’re not, because I’ve been here before, I can find a way out.”’

For Shahab, the lived experience goes way beyond just having empathy, it is a highly effective tool in supporting others to overcome their challenges.

‘It is using that experience, that’s what helps me help others. Because I have been on the streets and I have been an addict. I have been a refugee and I’ve been a veteran. I’ve lived so many different aspects of life,’ he said.

‘Knowledge is not as simple as book smarts. It has to do with everything in life. There are different kinds of intelligence. There are book smarts and there are street smarts. And using my street smarts and what I went through is a very powerful tool for me,’ Shahab said.

Shahab explained that those who are experiencing hardship respond better to the help of others from a similar lived experience. This is because when the promatore says that a better way is possible, they themselves are the living proof that this is true. They haven’t just read about how to overcome these challenges but they have actually found their way through to the other side.

I like to explain Shahab’s belief in the power of the lived experience by using the example of climbing a dangerous mountain. If I was going to climb Mount Everest, the person I’d want guiding me is someone who is most like me and who has made it to the top safely, rather than someone unrelated to me who has only ever read about the climb in a text book.

Shahab further supported this notion when he said, ‘People don’t see hope in people that are successful and have always been successful. People see hope in people that been down on
their luck, who have been down at the bottom of everything and had to build their way up to where they're at,’ he said.

➢ Recognising “The Expert” in the room
Further to Shahab’s views on the power of the lived experience, is the recognition that people are the experts in their own lives. And if we don’t respect that, then we are only seeking to empower ourselves. The role of the agency worker is a facilitator, a technician – and we can have expertise in these areas, but as Rosa Deprado explained, not in the lives of others.

‘Changing paradigm hurts,’ she said. ‘So this is very difficult because we have been trained to tell the people what to do. So it is difficult to try and think that the person actually comes with a solution, but maybe the solution is not a common one.

‘You think that you need to start from one point that is a common sense, but then common sense for you has to do with your personal history. It’s not a common sense. It’s your intuitions and has to do with your experience. And if you don’t give space to everyone’s experience you’re going to lose money. And we know that. How much money are we investing and are we throwing away trying to help people in Africa and Latin America, trying to help kids? And it’s just fake. But it’s not the intention which is the problem, it’s that you believe that you are up here and the people are down here. Why, because you had the privilege to go to university?’ Rosa said.

Rosa also talked about the conflict of interest that exists in the current agency model which fails to recognise that the people themselves are the solution to their own challenges. ‘If I want to keep my work as a family therapist, it’s better for me to tell people what to do because it empowers me. And they are going to keep coming to me. And they’re going to pay for my car, right? So it’s a great idea to make them feel disempowered,’ she said.

Rosa added that a desire to control others might also lie at the heart of those maintaining the current agency model. ‘It is something very risky to let the people know that they have the power, that they have the knowledge.’
Principle 4 - Creation

Overview

The Principle of Creation relates to solution development as a process in itself. It is not uncommon for today’s humanitarian innovators to work from technical models of innovation when seeking creative solutions. I don’t entirely agree with this approach. The reason being is that long before these models existed, everyday people were achieving major advancements in technologies, products and services. Human beings are incredibly creative and industrious creatures. Look around you right now. Wherever you are I’m sure you’ll find some evidence of solution focused creativity or innovation. The fact is most of it was not created by a person using an innovation model. What really drives innovation is that old mother of invention, necessity.

Journalist Toby Shapshak in his TED talk: You don’t need an app for that, starts his presentation with a picture of the world taken at night from space. Africa sits strikingly dark, due to the little access to electricity people have. He tells us that the map shows us where innovation is happening globally. Shapshak asserts that real innovation is occurring where there are real problems - not in the “fortunate” countries clustered with bright lights, but in those “dark” places such as Africa where adversity is forcing people to adapt and create.

Shapshak’s talk highlights the strength of the SI model. The SI system is integrated with those people who have a real reason to innovate – the service user. This is especially true of asylum seekers and refugees, people from different cultures and ways of thinking, with a proven track record of ingenuity and resilience. Their qualities are the most conducive to creative solutions to large scale problems.

Our role within this principle is to bring our native, technical expertise to the table – to be proactive in informing the service-user of the resources we possess, or have access to, which they can draw upon to create solutions. How we do this needs to be continually revised with the guidance of the service user.

Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship

- Big things start small
  Great solutions generally come from people who are trying to find a way to overcome a problem that they themselves are facing. Adversity pushes people through to new realms of thinking simply because the consequence of not overcoming the challenge will have a direct and, at times, significant impact on their day to day lives.

This is possibly the key reason that the refugee sector has generally failed in its attempts to tackle the large systemic problems faced by refugee communities. The fact is you can’t sit around in an office dreaming up large scale solutions. As Josh Harvey from UNICEF Innovation Lab in Kosovo said, ‘That’s not how it works.’

‘I think that that type of thinking falls victim to this mentality that the development community has, that fundamental change is anything other than the aggregate of small change, of small progress,’ Josh explained. ‘I have seen nothing in Kosovo or nothing in my time working around the development space to believe that there is a solution that is the equal of a systemic challenge. There is no systemic solution to a systemic challenge, this includes even the most beautiful, elegant things such as M-Pesa, the mobile money program in Africa,’ Josh said.
The M-Pesa phenomenon started in Africa sometime before 2002 when people spontaneously started using their mobile phone credit as an alternative for money. They would trade their ‘airtime’ during business transactions and transfer it to family and friends who would then sell it.

Josh highlighted that the mobile money revolution didn’t begin with community development professionals sitting down and mapping out how they could completely change how money was exchanged in countries like Uganda. It started with individual farmers who had an immediate problem they needed to solve. They required a better way of transferring funds, so they started using minutes on their mobile phones as a proxy for cash because, unlike cash, they could transfer minutes electronically.

Josh explained that by focussing on one big solution to solve one big problem, we are missing the multitude of little solutions that may one day add up to the big answer we are looking for.

Josh said, ‘It is where we, ourselves, are discontent with the kind of Soviet era 5-year plan that often pervades development work. I personally subscribe to this idea of the psychology/psychiatry approach called “solutions focussed therapy”. The idea of a miracle question, asking, “We’re not going to solve unemployment but let’s think if you wake up tomorrow morning and unemployment is solved, what’s the first way that you would notice that?”’ Josh said.

Josh believes the agency can move beyond looking only for the big answers. ’What’s the systemic solution to unemployment in Kosovo? What’s the systemic solution to the issue of interactive dialogue in Kosovo? If there is a solution, it is enormously hubristic of the development community or public institutions to think that we’re going to design the one solution, the one intervention, to rule them all. Rather, let’s focus on empowering individuals to solve their challenges. That’s not saying let’s solve challenges that are unique to an individual. We’d never sponsor or support a young person to solve a problem that only they face. It needs to be something that is being experienced in community. But let’s support them to solve the way that that challenge, that systemic issue, impacts on them,’ he said.

➢ The importance of power equalisation and emotional safety in co-creation

The Social Enterprise Academy in Scotland utilises a unique approach to assisting people to create solutions to their challenges. They call it practitioner led peer learning. The most important element of the approach is to develop a strong sense of safety amongst the group of people who have come together to learn how to solve their challenges.

During our interview, SEA’s Chief Executive, Neil McLean, drew the Quadrant of Safety and Challenge (illustrated below) to illustrate the difference between traditional models and practitioner led peer learning.
‘When groups first come together to learn as peers,’ Neil said, ‘they are at the low level of safety and low level of challenge. What often happens in traditional learning contexts is people are introduced to a high level of challenge before there is a high level of safety within the group. What we say is, we have to go to the high level of safety first and then move to the high level of challenge. And that is where the real learning takes place.’

This safety first approach, would be extremely beneficial for people who have experienced trauma and dislocation – such as people with a refugee experience.

Sam Baumber, Chief Operating Office with SEA, believes that intelligent preparation is key to creating a safe and inspiring environment for great ideas to surface in a group setting.

‘Participatory type work only works if you have the right people in the room,’ he said. ‘If you just try and fill numbers, it’s not going to work. You’ll have disruption and lots of trust issues. It works really well when you’ve got people coming together who are joined up on some level – wherever that level is.’

Sam said SEA’s programs connect people who have a common purpose, such as social entrepreneurs wanting to do start ups, or Chief Executives or those from the same geographic location.

‘Knowing the purpose of what you are doing is the starting point for me for safety,’ Sam said. ‘The room is then set – we always use a circle of chairs. Some people drift to a horseshoe of chairs and we really try to push them back into that circle. Because drifting out of the circle means you lose the equality. There is something really powerful about it. There’s no board table in the middle. No desks. It has to be a circle.’

The reason for this circle formation, Sam said, is that it encourages people to feel empowered to engage openly with the rest of the group, on an equal footing. He then drew a diagram of the traditional ‘one to many’ network formation, which has the ‘teacher’ or ‘lecturer’ – the source of knowledge in the centre (illustrated below) which he described as ‘one directional – didactic.’ He then explained the network formula which measures the power of a network by how many connections there are between all the people in the network.
Sam says that by using the circle formation, the power of the network increases exponentially because the group are able to interact and build off of one another in a dynamic, multi directional way. See diagram The result of this is highly synergetic outcomes.

**Learning formations**

Sam says having the right facilitator is key to this process. SEA’s model is based on having a practitioner who has significant experience in the area of focus, but who is able to let people arrive at their own conclusions without telling them the answer.

‘That is one of the things in using the practitioner tutor,’ Sam said. ‘Where you have a peer facilitating peers – you should almost not be able to spot who the facilitator is in the group. It’s an important part of peer led learning, you need someone facilitating it who understands the context well, but who also is responsive to what’s going on in the room. So if the people in the room want to go in a certain direction that is different than the session plan, the facilitator follows the way the group is going.’

Sam said the model is built on the belief that if you create the right environment, people will find their own solutions. And in fact that is the best outcome, because they will have complete ownership of their solution. ‘If an ‘expert’ is used to impart technical knowledge, it is only part of the programme, vitally the facilitator then helps the group reflect on that information and think through how it is relevant and to put it into action for themselves. It’s about understanding what’s in the room. Instead of talking to people, it’s about facilitating practitioner, peer learning. This is a fundamental difference between the SEA model and traditional education and training.’

Neil McLean reinforced Sam’s point. ‘We make sure that the facilitator allows discussion to flow and doesn’t take a didactic approach and doesn’t tell people what to do. Usually the challenge one person has, two people have already solved themselves. It’s about facilitating those discussions and those support groups and those networks. It isn’t just about the 12 people in the room, there’s a 13th project that emerges from these people helping each other, which is quite powerful.’
Neil added that the other members of the peer group are encouraged not to give answers to the person trying to solve the challenge, but to ask questions which will stimulate that person’s thought process. Again, maintaining the person’s ownership of their solution.

Sam subscribes to the concept of “Head – Heart - Hand” when working with people to create solutions. ‘You can also understand it as: mind set, value base, and technicalities,’ he explained. ‘What people often do is they say what is a social enterprise? Then they try and define it in technical terms like legal structure. And it misses out the whole mind set which is the idea that you’re solving social issues with a business or risk appetite. And the value base is, it’s not just an ethical business, there’s something fundamentally different about the way you want to change the world. Driving into those three areas helps you to unpack your assumptions about an idea.’

The Head, Heart, Hand approach could be a highly effective way of developing solutions alongside people from different backgrounds – because it would help all parties to uncover their own assumptions. One of the great challenges for us in the humanitarian sector is that we typically go straight to the practicalities of an idea/solution. We set up different programs and typically only think of them in technical terms, such as staffing, budgets and space, etc. The Head – Heart – Hand approach encourages us to look first at the why behind what we are doing and the values base the idea is built on, before we launch into the practical aspects of making it happen.
Principle 5 – Influence

Overview

“Action with Responsibility - Responsibility with Authority”.

Now action must happen! As I was developing the SI model, I became very aware of our desire to have change agents (service users) find their own solutions, but was struck by how quick we are to dismiss their ideas when they don’t fall into our accepted ways of doing things. Let’s face it, when these moments come along, we’re not meant to ‘get it’. That’s the point of having the other’s perspective in the first place.

If we give people a responsibility to find an answer, we need to give them the authority to put it into action - otherwise we’re best going back to doing it all by ourselves. Responsibility without the authority is tokenism. Inversely, with authority comes responsibility – change agents (a service user who is also a provider) have the responsibility to be open to technical advice from those with cultural and technical expertise. This is a symbiotic approach – we rely on each other.

Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship

Influence in action

The power of action as a teacher, a connector and bonder, and even as a healer was one of the big lessons for me during the fellowship. Action can even be transformative, such as the act of two people working alongside each other for each other. There is no more important principle in SI than the ability for the change agent to be able to influence the agency, their community and the wider world around them. Action is the foundation of self-empowerment.

➢ Action is the best way to start

One of the great challenges of the agency model is the bureaucracy required to maintain itself. Its cumbersome system of processes limits the ability of people on the ground to respond quickly to the needs of the community. For each new program or project to be implemented, an operational plan must be developed which is then scrutinised by management and funders. Often the ideal moment is lost by the time a decision is made.

The business world was once the same. However, now there is a growing acceptance of the ‘act first - plan later approach’ called the Lean Startup Method. The idea is that the entrepreneur can bypass the traditional planning phase and move from having an idea, straight to putting it into action. The way they do this is by developing what is called a minimum viable product. This prototype is then tested on the market and if it is suitable, the entrepreneur goes into the planning phase to scale up.

The humanitarian sector can learn a lot from the Lean Startup approach. Encouraging change agents to try their ideas on a small scale is the best way to find out if their solutions are viable. Volunteer participation is the resource friendly way to develop a minimum viable program in the humanitarian space.

Robert from YARID, Uganda, explained how his organisation got off the ground: ‘We didn’t know what we could do because we had no resources,’ he said. ‘But we had good ideas and we felt we had to do something positive for young refugees living in the community. So we came together and started with activities that were easy for us to do so that we could put
people together on the spot. So we put together a football game – which wasn’t about just playing football but a way to get people together so that we could discuss the issues affecting our lives. One of the peak issues that came up was the language barriers. Many of the people couldn’t speak English or even one of the local languages. So we decided we would set up an English class.

Robert said this adaptation through dialogue process was used throughout the building of YARID as an organisation. “What can we do next?” was a common discussion we would have,’ he said, adding it was putting these ideas into action that then brought other people to help because they could see that change was occurring and wanted to be part of it.

➢ **Action is the best teacher**

*The Bridges Programmes*, Glasgow, use an effective *learning through action* approach when it comes to running vocational EAL (English as an Additional Language) classes. They recognise that language skills improve far more rapidly when they are immediately applied in a context. The Bridges EAL team worked with a local healthcare provider to develop an EAL curriculum that was specific to that workplace. The students would attend classes to develop their Vocational English skills and then were able to put those skills into action as trainees in the workplace.

Many people learn through *doing*. It is the tangible experience of physical action that gives them a context for the information they are absorbing. When I started out as an employment worker with people from asylum seeking backgrounds, I was always surprised at how quickly their language improved once they began employment. Later, I came to understand that the reason for this was that the workplace made them practice their English in a real-life, physical context.

This learning through action approach could be applied to other EAL classes. Instead of having 12 people sitting in a room with a teacher standing at the front, we could turn classrooms into places that replicate real world environments and interactions commonly experienced by the learners.

➢ **Action is transformative**

Throughout the Churchill Fellowship, the transformative power of action was a common theme. One small action was the beginning of just about every success story. As was discussed previously in Robert’s (from YARID) case it was the simple act of playing a game of soccer that bonded people together and created that first step toward great things.

For Zrinka Bralo from *The Forum*, it was small political actions that transformed people seeking asylum from passive victims of government policy to people who were holding the government to account. Zrinka’s approach highlighted the transformative journey that action and influence can take people on. ‘*We get people into action,*’ she explained. ‘*First on small actions so that they figure out where their community is so they start organising, and then I take it a step further and then join them into local actions and then national action.*’

‘One of the smallest actions we did was to organize a meeting in the House of Commons with a bunch of people here facing detention with their children, to write letters to their MPs and then the action is to go to the box and post a hundred letters to these MPs and the Home Secretary and take a picture of that and post it on line. And then ten people get an answer in the mail. And they say, ‘Wow’, Zrinka said.
Zrinka explained that the biggest action she encouraged her members to undertake was a citizen’s march where thousands of people came to Trafalgar Square. The action resulted in changes to an immigration bill and the release of children out of detention. ‘We take people on this journey all the time,’ she said.

For Nathanael Molle and Guillaume Capelle, Co-founders of SINGA in Paris, positive actions between new arrivals and the host community is essential to transcend the current negative discourse surrounding refugees. Some years ago, they started working with entrepreneurs (from refugee backgrounds) and quickly realised that the major barrier to the success of these start ups was a lack of local mainstream networks. In trying to solve this dilemma, they discovered that there were no places where refugees could meet French citizens on an equal footing. It was also clear to them that to change the way the public perceived refugees, French people also needed a space where they could meet people from refugee backgrounds.

‘The laws that government, these days, are able to pass which are unjust and based on misled perceptions, are based on the fact that the population today doesn’t care,’ Nathanael said. ‘The fact that in France the only time we hear about refugees is when there is a law in immigration or when there’s a boat sinking in the Mediterranean or when there’s a problem in Calais. Obviously if the only thing people hear about refugees are negative stories, then a population that has never been exposed to these people will not relate to them.’

Guillaume defined what I believe is a highly intelligent shift in thinking about what the purpose of the agency should be. ‘Our mindset is we are not doing this for refugees, we are doing this for society, working with refugees. This is very important because when we are organising events we are not talking about refugees, we are talking about our events, about football, yoga, business building. These things are of interest to most people and so we are inviting everybody to our events, not just refugees. We want to connect people on these common passions. We call them weapons of mass reconciliation,’ Guillaume laughed.
Principle 6 – (Dynamic) Feedback

Overview

As is explained in my paper, Symbiotic Innovation: The Third Way (Ackerly 2014), the feedback loop is central to the Symbiotic Innovation concept. There are two types of feedback loops: positive or reinforcing, which gives the system the ability to scale, and negative or balancing which ensures that interventions created by the system are timely and relevant. It is the latter with which we are concerned when talking about the principle of Feedback.

In the engineering world, the effectiveness of a system is directly related to how fast information is fed back to the control mechanisms so they can alter their interventions accordingly. In the humanitarian sphere, it is common for us to place more importance on action rather than impact. We run focus groups once a year (if we’re lucky) or someone does a study while a project is underway.

These feedback processes are limited in their effectiveness for a number of reasons:

- They are devised by an outsider who has a removed understanding of the service user group
- They are drawn from the opinions of a small group of participants at a single moment in time
- The information is drawn through a power over relationship, which has a negative effect on its quality.

Databases and performance indicators have an important role to play in dynamic feedback, but they are largely based on quantitative information. Nothing beats the information drawn from the voices of the people themselves. Through the principles of integration and recognition, we need to ensure these voices are heard every day and whenever we are making strategic and significant operational decisions. In fact, whenever we are deciding on criteria and measures of our success. They are the voices of our “customer” and in any other field they would set the bench marks for us.

The Symbiotic Innovation model relies on a good negative or balancing feedback system which should draw its information from multiple points to ensure it is getting a true picture of what is occurring. In this light, we need to ensure we are listening to a diverse range of voices, especially those of the newest service users and even those who are not using our services (for which there might be a significant reason).

Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship

➢ The best feedback is a dialogue
The principle of (Dynamic) Feedback is not about surveys and databases. It’s about a dialogue between people working together toward a shared purpose. Through Integration, the facilitators (agency workers) are continuously exposed to the people experiencing the outcomes of their work. The vehicle of feedback is a relationship of equality and openness, one that values the input of the change agent (service user). This continuous dialogue helps us to hone our skills and to tune our approaches to suit the needs of the people we are there to serve.

Latino Health Access is a world leader in this approach. They have strong systems in place to ensure that reflective dialogue continues to occur between the promotores and the leadership team. Every so often, the organisation stops to reflect on its work. And because
the workforce is integrated with the service user community through the promotor model, this reflection creates a powerful feedback mechanism.

Shahab Mirzaeian, a promotore, explained why these dynamic feedback processes are so important. "The importance of reflecting is the fact that the needs of the people consistently change, so the way we provide our services needs to evolve. It's an evolution of how we do things. For example, if we're trying to take down a wall and we're just hitting it with a stick then nothing's going to happen, unless we step back and re-evaluate ourselves and see what would be the proper process to do our jobs," he said.

"So when we meet, we discuss different cases. Obviously in confidentiality, but we discuss certain aspects of the cases and we are trying to bounce ideas off each other. I might have dealt with someone that was dealing with depression and I've tried something that works. And maybe my co-worker tried something that didn't work and so we'll bounce it back and forth. It's very much similar to the phrase: "What's good for the goose isn't necessarily good for the gander." In this field of work you need to consistently evolve. You need to consistently understand what works properly and what does not," Shahab said.

Shahab believes that constant dialogue and inquiry is the most effective way to ensure the agency staff do not get complacent. "We have to step out of the medical model," he said. "The medical model is one where you tell people what's wrong with them and you say, “Here take this and you'll be fine.” Here, we don't say that. We say, “Try this and let us know how it works for you.” This is because in individual case by case management, you can't put everyone in one big basket and say, “This is what's going to work for all of you.”

"And that's the importance of reflection," Shahab said. "Because when we reflect we see the individual, their cultural background, what age they are, what their social status is. When you're talking about dealing with refugees that are seeking asylum, we have to look from where they're coming from, because what's good in our eyes might not be good in their eyes."

Shahab explained how working with other people with a lived experience can be a powerful information source to improve the facilitator's professional skills. "We all come from different backgrounds and have had different experiences that can help us help each other," he said. "For example, when it comes to addiction, there are a number of people here who have suffered from addiction, so therefore, when we have certain questions, we will consult with them."

Rosa said, that the quality of the relationship between people working together has a big influence on the quality of the feedback. "You need to invest time in the relationship," she said. "It's interesting because we're always in a hurry, because we need to wear three or four hats at the same time and we need to do a lot of jobs. But we have experienced that if we don't have time for the retreats, for talking with each other, the productivity goes down. We can't be useful if we are feeling bad or if we have problems with another person. So we try to invest time in the relationship between us," she explained.

"It's difficult because it's a balance," Rosa said. "We know that we need to spend time in building the relationship with each other, but at the same time, we have goals and we have work to do. But if you take out that part in order to have more time for your goals, you are not going to find your goals because you are not creating and investing time in the team."
Rosie believes that facilitators need to be open to feedback from the change agents (promotores). ‘If you have a problem with me, you can talk with me and it’s not a punishment because I’m the coordinator and you can’t talk with me. It is an open door policy. We try to give each other feedback and try to do it in the best way,’ she said.

Rosie conceded that building and maintaining these types of relationships is not always easy. And even at LHA they don’t get it right all the time. ‘...sometimes it’s two steps forward and one step back!’ she laughed.
Principle 7 - (Self) Regulation

Overview

As previously explained, SI can’t be applied from the top down nor can it be regulated by one particular party. Therefore, solutions must have the space to be able to develop through strategic trial and error. For SI to thrive we need to create a space where risk and failure is not just accepted, it is expected.

The ability to find out what doesn’t work is sometimes more important than knowing what does. This is because when something works we are more inclined to take it for granted. When something doesn’t work, we are hopefully forced to look at why it isn’t working and learn from it. This continual adjustment of approaches is why dynamic feedback is so important. We shouldn’t have to wait a year to find out if we are failing. On the other hand, we must also give solutions time to develop through this valuable learning curve, rather than shutting them down when they don’t look exactly like we had hoped.

Self Regulation is really about trust, support and time. It is about accepting that we (as people from the host community) are not always going to ‘get’ what is occurring, or why the change agent (service-user who is also a provider) is going down a certain path in their solution development. But then that’s really the point. If we did ‘get’ everything, there would be no need for the change agent’s involvement. The reality is we are on as much of a learning curve as the change agent is – and we have to give our own selves time to adapt. That said, having a good understanding of the process of innovation can give the facilitator and the change agent a language to use when discussing where a project is sitting and how it might be improved.

Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship

- Regulation is accepting the experimental nature of the innovation process
  Every one of the leading humanitarian innovators I interviewed accepted that failure is an essential part of solution creation process. However, most agreed that the wider humanitarian sector is highly conservative when it comes to risk appetites and trying new approaches. This makes it difficult for the innovators to gain the freedom they need to break new ground. There was also a common view that a lot of the conservatism in the agency originates at the funder or donor level, particularly when it comes to government and other public institutions.

  It is the experience of Chris Earney from UNHCR Innovation that corporate funders have a better appetite for risk and are able to understand that creating new solutions to old problems requires the taking of chances. He said that their major funder, the Ikea Foundation, understood that mistakes and failures were an important part of the innovation process.

  According to Chris, the relationship with the foundation is such that failures can be spoken about in an open and transparent way. He believes that having these sorts of trusting relationships with donors gave UNHCR Innovation the financial support they needed to try ideas that sat outside of the box.

  The SI model requires us to largely handover the solution creation process to change agents (people who are both service users and providers), which, in my experience, seems a radical approach to many people. Not only do we, as facilitators, need to be comfortable with the
iterative process, we need to build relationships with our donors that also support these endeavours.

Sonia Ben Ali, from Urban Refugee, Paris believes that agencies have a significant role to play in educating donors about the changing landscape of humanitarian and development work. In Urban Refugees’ case it was not about the importance of risk and failure but about changing donors’ perceptions on the matter of urban based refugees. Sonia’s example shows that change in the global humanitarian mindset is possible, but it requires a new dialogue with donors.

Sonia explained that more and more refugees are moving into urban areas. And this phenomenon is putting pressure on the infrastructure of the host communities. The answer was to inject funding into the infrastructure of the host community such as schools and hospitals – so that there was an actual benefit to having refugees residing in their cities. However, she also explained that the major humanitarian and development agencies could often not support this logical approach because there were limited funding streams available for this type of intervention.

‘We realised that we had to support the refugee population as well as the host population,’ Sonia said. ‘It can’t be one at the expense of the other. To do that, you need the funding from the donors to be flexible enough to target the host population. The donors have two pipelines of funding, they have the humanitarian and they have the development pipelines. The development pipeline can only be used for non crisis situations, for long term planning. The humanitarian pipeline is really only for emergencies. Usually with a refugee crisis the funding is going through the humanitarian pipeline. Most of the humanitarian system is built from this crisis funding. That is why we have these massive refugee camps,’ Sonia explained.

The problem, according to Sonia, is that now most of the situations causing displacement are protracted. The average time a refugee will spend in exile is 17 years. Refugees wanting more than a life in an overcrowded and dangerous camp are moving to the cities and living amongst the host community with limited or no support.

Sonia said those organisations that wanted to respond to the urban refugee situation were more often than not unable to do so due to the rigid funding streams. They somehow needed to justify to the donor organisations that the money coming through the humanitarian pipeline, dedicated for crisis work, should also go to the host population to relieve tensions between the two communities. They bypassed the large refugee agencies and started educating their donors.

‘As a result the donor community started to shift,’ Sonia said, ‘because it was not in the interest of donor countries, on a geostrategic level, to let those situations create tensions between the refugee communities and the host populations. Donors shifted first and last year there was, for example, a meeting with the UK Department for Development and Humanitarian affairs to develop an urban approach. And now they have a pool of money just to support urban refugee situations,’ she said.

- Regulation requires a long-term relationship
  Regulation doesn’t mean a completely hands off approach. However, there should always be an exit plan in the innovation process. This plan can involve reducing the agency’s assistance to the change agent over a period of time.
Josh Harvey explained the approach taken by UNICEF Innovation Lab in Kosovo: ‘Our role should be one that systematically reduces our participation with the service user,’ he said. ‘In the beginning, there is an intensive period, but at some point that period ends and so does that level of support. In everything we do we should be preparing people to carry on the legacy of the value that came out of our relationship together. It should be in everything we do that the value can be passed onto another. And that the person will at some point be independent of us.’

The ultimate objective of SI is for the service user to become a provider, not just in the agency but out in the community where solutions can thrive free of agency bureaucracy. During this transition phase, agencies need to collaborate with the change agent to develop a coaching style arrangement to ensure sustainability and best outcomes.
**Principle 8 - Reinforcement**

**Overview**

Reinforcement is about strategic support for those things that work. Here we’re not just talking about new solutions. It could be something that already exists but requires nurturing. Positive patterns of interaction and support happen organically within community. What we understand as “service delivery” (one entity imparting its skills or resources to another lacking in these aspects) is already a common part of everyday interactions between members of the service user communities. Such examples are informal child care, English lessons, financial assistance, housing, employment, etc. The role of the service agency is to understand how it can reinforce these interactions to thrive - either through skills development or providing resources, rather than taking over responsibility for these arrangements itself.

Ultimately, the SI model is a decentralized approach to assisting communities. Its main aim is to create an environment where solutions or service delivery can be passed from one person to the next through personal networks. In this way, it utilises and adds value to organic patterns of interaction within the community. The use of these types of patterns means that any effort applied has very little inefficiencies.

An example of the inefficiencies of the current centralized agency approach is the funding chain. At the beginning there is a funder who passes an initial amount of funds to an agency to assist a certain community or beneficiary. The agency, due to its statutory responsibilities and internal operations, requires a bureaucracy to operate – the bigger the agency, the bigger the bureaucracy. This bureaucracy requires resources to function and, in some countries, corruption within these agencies causes even greater drains on the initial input. Overtime the bureaucratic chain and the distance between the funder and the intended beneficiary gets longer. The effectiveness of the initial input is greatly reduced as a result.

The use of decentralized assistance approaches such as personal networks, however, reduces the need for bureaucracy and limits resource drain. This is why mechanisms such as crowd sourcing have become extremely popular. People want to know that their money is going along the most direct route to the beneficiary.

The most efficient use of resources in the social sector is when a community member helps another community member. There are very little losses and the action itself creates value far beyond the single transaction. This is why, as agencies, we need to be proactive in recognizing and unlocking the potential of the community as a resource far greater than us.

Reinforcement generally means committing agency resources to service user led projects/programs. This is possibly our strongest show of faith in SI and the service user’s ability to find and implement solutions. It is “putting our money where our mouth is” so to speak. Committing resources will have an obvious influence on workloads and the organization’s budget and these things will need to be factored into strategic and operational planning.
Example 1 – Remittances: Recognising and Reinforcing a positive pattern through Symbiotic Innovation

According to Australian Government figures, 70 percent of refugees have sent remittances at sometime in their lives. Remittances can pull recipients out of dire poverty and fulfil the sender’s sense of duty to those left behind. However, the ongoing process can also shackle the sender to poverty and the recipient to dependency.

Reza, an asylum seeker, found a job in Australia. It was expected that remittances back to his family would begin. Reza told his family that he would not send remittances but would buy them one car to be used as a taxi. Ultimately the family built a very profitable business and Reza was free to use the money he earned to rebuild his life.

This true story shows how the principle of Reinforcement can work. The existing pattern of sending remittances is functional but has a limited positive effect. However, the remittances process is highly effective in relation to money spent and money received. This is because it largely takes out the middle man and ensures that the money is going where it should.

Symbiotic Innovation asks us to recognize what already exists and reinforce it where we can. We should look at the remittances pattern in this light and utilize it for development purposes - building capacity of service users like Reza to send capital, networks and business opportunities back to their families. This type of decentralized development technique would ensure that resources would be used most efficiently.

Example 2 – The Symbiotic Relationship

Ali was our first asylum seeker to take on a management role at the ASRC. He was a touchstone for me in the development of the SI theory. He gave me invaluable insights on how the theory was relevant to asylum seekers like him. He gave me the confidence that I was on the right track.

Ali was also a resource for nearly every asylum seeker that came into our Dandenong centre. The Australian staff would greet these people when they arrived and ask how they were, to which they would usually reply – “Fine, where is Ali?” On meeting with Ali they would raise their real issues in their own language (Ali spoke seven languages). Ali would later feed back to us trend information about re-occurring issues that were being communicated to him. Through conversations, we’d improve Ali’s knowledge of the Australian context of the issues raised. This would include the systemic and cultural technicalities of our agency. Ali became a fundamental part of our service delivery and we became a vital contributor to his knowledge, enabling him to deliver more effective assistance to his community (he later volunteered in our human rights legal team.)

Through this environment of mutuality and interdependence, Ali felt able to look critically, as both a service provider and user, at the ASRC’s service provision. He identified a need for our staff to be able to speak basic Farsi to our non-English speaking clients. He then put together a language course which staff at the centre keenly undertook.
This was an important example of SI. Through his shared experience with us, he was able to identify how we could improve our service. The environment was such that he could also feel confident in raising this and was encouraged to try his solution out. The benefit of the language training was beyond just utilising asylum seekers skills to improve our skills. It had a greater impact, because as we improved our skills, we were better able to improve our interconnection with other asylum seekers. This allowed them to participate at a deeper level in our centre. Our interdependence created an accumulative awareness and benefit.

Methodology of Practice – Learnings from the Fellowship

- **Reinforce what already works**

  Organisations such as Youth Empowering Parents – which have scaled up existing interactions in the community (see Principle 3) are an excellent example of the Reinforcement principle.

  Josh Harvey, UNICEF Innovations Lab Kosovo, uses the same approach: ‘*If someone is already solving the challenge in a way that sticks out for the rest of the individuals who were facing that challenge, then we scale that up,*’ he said.

  Reinforcing successful and existing patterns doesn’t have to just happen at the individual level. Larger patterns, such as informal and formal groups and movements can also benefit from reinforcement.

  Sonia Ben Ali from Urban Refugee explained that her organisation exists to reinforce refugee led networks globally. ‘*There are these informal and formal groups created and managed by refugees,*’ she said. ‘*In places like Malaysia those informal networks are the ones providing most of the assistance to the urban refugee populations. However, there is no or extremely limited reinforcement of these networks supplied by organisations such as the UNHCR,*’ she said.

  ‘*We (Urban Refugees) want to reverse the approach and we want to start from what already exists, instead of building up something ourselves. We want to work from what is happening in the community, refugees know what they need. They know what their challenges are. And then only after we have consulted the communities, can we start building a system or reform the existing system. There may be no need to create new organisations but to change the way existing organisations work, with the feedback from the communities,*’ Sonia said.

  Reinforcement is about the efficient practice of building from the success of existing community led endeavours, and seeing the scaling up of these endeavours as equal to, or even a priority over, our own ideas and solutions. Reinforcement takes the novelty and lip service out of the current innovation movement. It is where we demonstrate our deep commitment to the notion that people know what’s best for them.
CONCLUSION

People displacement is a growing crisis which will become one of the defining challenges of the next century. The Symbiotic Innovation model is a viable alternative to the current humanitarian agency centric approach which has failed the people for whom it was created to assist. This failure is largely due to the fact that the agency of today is a cumbersome bureaucracy that has placed itself both in the centre of people’s lives functionally, but also at a distance from people in terms of professionalism and culture. As explored in my paper *Symbiotic Innovation: The Third Way* (Ackerly, 2014), the agency utilises a model of assistance that was drawn from a centuries old missionary/institutionalised/colonialist approach to assisting people who are experiencing disadvantage. As a result, it has largely overlooked the community members themselves as being the experts in identifying and addressing their own unique challenges.

During the Churchill Fellowship, I was exposed to the common belief of both refugee communities and agency workers that the current humanitarian assistance model is more about the preservation of the agency for its own purposes, rather than it being a vehicle for the self-determination and prosperity of displaced populations. This is not to say that this situation was brought about by malicious intentions, but rather through a lack of alternatives to the current system and a deep-seated resistance from sector stakeholders to relinquish their professional power in the name of change.

The Symbiotic Innovation model, bolstered by the practical learnings of the Churchill Fellowship, is a road map for those agencies and workers who are willing to give up their positions of power to enable a more self-empowered future for people fleeing trauma. The 8 Principles of SI and their Methodology of Practice (as detailed in this report) are the basis of a new structure from which agencies and communities can work together toward more effective and dignified outcomes.

The Churchill Fellowship demonstrated to me that a new direction for the humanitarian agency is indeed possible. However, it will require today’s humanitarian organisations to reinvent and rebuild themselves from their very core. This will involve meeting and acting with communities on their terms and relinquishing ownership of the solution creation and implementation processes. It is simple logic that the people who are experiencing challenges should be our first port of call in the search for solutions. This is because solutions that can be built and sustained by the community will not only be more effective, they will be immensely scalable.

**The Future of my work in Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation**

On returning from the Fellowship, I accepted a role as the Executive Manager of the SpiritWest Foundation, which is the community arm of the Western Bulldogs, an Australian Rules Football team. The Western Bulldogs (and the SpiritWest Foundation) have their home ground in the metropolitan west of Melbourne - one of the fastest growing regions in the southern hemisphere. The community in the West is also one of the most diverse in terms of national background and socio-economic status.

Currently, the SpiritWest Foundation’s services include refugee settlement, men’s health, and youth leadership. I have become very inspired by the power of sport to connect communities. I believe the SI model has great potential in this space and I am now working to understand how it can be rolled out in a regional context. In this aspect, the Churchill Fellowship has given me much to draw from. I look forward to sharing my learnings with the wider public and to raise the profile of SI as a model to be used and developed by the community. It’s an immensely exciting time.
The Future of the Agency

There is a growing understanding in the business world that the bigger an organisation gets the less agile and innovative it becomes. In a rapidly changing world, it is now more common for large businesses to outsource innovation to smaller, more agile enterprises. The theory is, if the product or service they prototype is deemed a success – the larger organisation can then adjust its infrastructure to scale up operations.

I believe the humanitarian sector faces a similar future. There is possibly no more turbulent industry than ours, as it must respond to events such as natural and man-made disasters, war and economic crises. In this environment, it is inevitable that those behemoth organizations, with their five year plans and two year budgeting cycles will become extinct – or at least largely irrelevant.

The future will see the rise of small, highly decentralized social assistance agencies that utilize local community resources through models such as SI. The new organisations will have small, localized hierarchies, whose measures of success will be set by the community members themselves – who will “carry” funding streams with them. These new organisations will not look like the agencies of today, either in their aesthetic or operational design. They will be dynamic and positive places where community is able to design and continually redesign bespoke services based on the changing needs of their local circumstances.

Eventually the sector will become a coordinated hybrid of services. Innovation and community engagement will be the domain of smaller organizations who are more able to engage and adapt to changing circumstances. The larger organizations will play a ‘slave’ role in areas where basic, large scale and long-term intervention is needed.

The catalyst for this change will come from the growing acceptance of market based approaches to health and wellbeing service provision, as well as challenges presented by ageing populations and people displacement.

I also believe that this change will come from the new age of enlightenment in which we find ourselves. There has never been a time in the history of the wealthy global West where young people have been so highly educated, organised and engaged in the concept of making the world a better place. During the Fellowship, I was constantly in awe of the intelligent, passionate, and committed young humanitarian innovators who will someday lead us to a better future.

Further to this, I doubt there has been a time in history when humanitarian workers have been so dismayed with the system in which they work. The current humanitarian / development model has had its time. Almost every person I met during the Fellowship expressed this belief to me, no matter what organisation they represented or where they sat in the management hierarchy – from the grassroots to the multinationals, from the field worker to the highest levels of management. We are all realizing something that the communities we serve have always known: there’s a better way. It just took the rest of us a while to catch on.

Finally, I would like to end with a question from Robert Hakiza, Co-Founder of YARID in Kampala, Uganda, and that is: ‘What can we do next?’ Robert and his colleagues with refugee backgrounds would ask each other this question with each milestone they reached. It resulted in the amazing organisation that is YARID.

‘What can we do next?’ is a question that lies at the heart of humanitarian innovation. It is one that I’m sure was asked by every one of the ground-breaking organisations I visited during the Churchill Fellowship. ‘What can we do next?’ asks us not to be satisfied with the status quo, no matter how
unbreakable it seems. It asks us not to accept redundant systems that warehouse people for decades in our camps and cities. ‘What can we do next?’ pushes us beyond our past achievements into new possibilities of mutual and symbiotic action. Working together, human beings can achieve anything. As people who believe that a better future is possible, we should be asking ourselves, and the people around us, every day, ‘What can we do next?’
APPENDIX

THE THEORY BEHIND SYMBIOTIC INNOVATION  
(From the Original Paper Symbiotic Innovation – The Third Way)

HOW THE CURRENT SYSTEM WORKS

Generally, the agencies deliver services to asylum seekers across the welfare - community development continuum. However, services are largely drawn from the welfare model of financial assistance and referral. In this approach, the service user is reliant on the agencies for access to financial assistance, advocacy and referrals to services. Other “secondary” agencies then assist “such as allied health services, accommodation, material aid, education and legal services and social networking”. (ARC 2014)

The agencies also work in a community development capacity “to steer refugee communities towards being self-sufficient, by helping communities to identify their service needs and then training community leaders to establish relationships with service providers and supportive partner organisations.” (BSL 2014) However, this approach only makes up a small portion of the overall strategy and is not funded through the Federal Government’s community processing program.

The community development approach focuses on building skills toward self determination in its service users. However, like the social welfare approach, the agencies retain their role as orchestrator of the intervention strategy, placing themselves between the service user and the solution creation process. This is common in humanitarian approaches where “there is a tendency for solutions to be brought from the outside.” (Bloom & Betts 2013) By continuing to see themselves at the centre of the process, the agencies maintain a transactional and supply chain relationship with the service user and reinforce their distinct identity as being separate to the people they are assisting.

To understand the prominence of the agency centric model, we must look briefly at its history. In the early days of Australian white settlement, welfare services were provided by the government. These services were delivered in institutions and aimed at specific “deserving” groups: hospitals for soldiers and convicts; asylums for the ‘mentally ill’; orphanages for abandoned, destitute or orphaned children. (AIHW 1993) By the 1820’s the government started experimenting with outsourcing its responsibilities. Charitable organisations, funded by government, offered support to the “deserving” groups while those who were deemed able to fend for themselves, were expected to do so. (AIHW 1993)

A century later, The Great Depression came and “revealed the inability and inappropriateness of the charitable model to cope with widespread suffering caused by social forces beyond the control of individuals.” This led to the notion of universal welfare, support provision based on need rather than one being required to belong to a particular disadvantaged group. Over time, society’s expectation of support increased along with the number and scope of services. To manage this growth, Governments took on the role of statutory bodies and relied on non-government organisations to provide their services. The agency model, as we now know it, emerged as the preferred way of providing welfare services. Usually operating with some subsidy from the States, providing residual services, offering food, shelter and advice to those whose needs were otherwise not met. Many of these agencies grew in size and sophistication, in terms of their fundraising capabilities and the professionalism of their workers” (AIHW 1993)

By the 1980’s, universal welfare was widely accepted in Australian society. The agency model was seen to be an economical and effective way of delivering these wide ranging services. The agencies
continued to grow in number, “supported by State and Commonwealth government subsidies. This led to new standards of accountability both to governments and to consumers.” (AIHW 1993)

Agencies, which had their foundations in the charity model and were originally designed to meet the immediate needs of specific groups, had taken over many of the responsibilities that had been held by community since society began. However, due to their fundamental make up, and the complexity and size of the system they were replacing, agencies were unable to adequately meet this challenge. This was compounded by the fact that the significant growth of these agencies meant they had become an increasing liability to the government and so their funding became subject to greater scrutiny. (AIHW 1993) With this came high standards of financial, legal and ethical accountability along with the professionalisation of the welfare services sector. (McDonald 2003)

As time went on, complex bureaucracy was created to meet the agencies’ wide ranging obligations. Innovation was generally discouraged, not necessarily overtly, but through systems and processes implemented to reduce exposure to risk. For each innovation to meet an obvious and immediate need, a complex process of risk assessment and decision making had to ensue. Even when these programs were supported they were generally tied to cumbersome risk-mitigation strategies. This further drained the resources of the agencies and reduced their capacity to deliver solutions in a relevant and timely manner.

The agencies of today are typically underfunded and overwhelmed. They cannot meet the day to day needs of a large number of the community they are there to serve, let alone the demands of large scale social crises. They are constantly forced to make decisions to either reduce the numbers of people they service, or to see more people through diluting their service delivery. (ACOSS 2013)

SYMBIOTIC INNOVATION - THE THIRD WAY

Symbiotic Innovation is based on an engineering principle called control theory which describes a situation where dynamic systems rely on and influence one another. (Aström & Murray 2009) In a humanitarian context, control theory helps us to understand how interventions can be greatly scaled up by enabling agencies to harness the immense potential of the community through an interdependent relationship.

While Symbiotic Innovation is not confined to the humanitarian sector, for the purposes of this paper, and in the asylum seeker context, we can see it as a stream of Humanitarian Innovation. The term Humanitarian Innovation is relatively new. It is used to capture the emergence of a movement by humanitarian organisations toward innovation as a central goal rather than an ancillary endeavour.

Innovation is described by Bloom & Betts (2013) as “a process of change and adaptation”. West’s (2002) description expands on this, explaining that the term innovation addresses those “behavioural and social processes whereby individuals, groups or organisations seek to achieve desired changes.” Innovation is an intentional solution creation process. It occurs on the personal and societal level. At times, it is just as innovative to move a victim of torture from feelings of helplessness to a sense of hope, as it is to address Afghani women’s isolation through a new social enterprise.

While it is generally concerned with approaches of scale, the term humanitarian can give the sense that we are solely talking about large community-based interventions in developing countries. This does not necessarily need to be the case. Firstly, humanitarian agencies operate on both sides of the global north-south divide. The asylum seeker challenge, for example, knows no borders. Secondly, as
with innovation, humanitarian work can involve interventions targeted to the individual as much as to their communities. The ability to implement micro and macro approaches is central to the concept of Symbiotic Innovation.

The Two Streams of Humanitarian Innovation

It is currently understood that there are two ‘worlds’ of humanitarian Innovation: *Top Down* where the agencies play the key role in creating solutions for communities in need and *Bottom Up* where the solution creation process occurs in the communities themselves. The two streams are not exclusive but sit on ends of a continuum – with a melding of the two into a collaborative approach. (Bloom & Betts 2013)

Top Down Innovation

*Top Down* Innovation is the predominant approach to humanitarian solution creation. This is where the agency from the developed world is the key actor and “focuses on upwards accountability to donors and traditionally takes a more “top down” approach in implementing solutions for affected populations.” (Bloom & Betts 2013)

It is understandable that the *Top Down* approach to innovation is the most established model. As explained previously, the agencies have funders, boards, governmental statutory bodies who they must answer to, all of which have expectations of accountability and how success should be measured. The agencies must be able to meet these expectations when seeking the resources and authorisation to maintain their operations. This can make it difficult to deviate from the norm and open up control of the solution creation process.

The agencies know their own world well but have considerably less understanding of the complexity within the disadvantaged communities whose needs they are there to address. This is why the world of *Bottom Up* Innovation is gaining interest in humanitarian circles.

Bottom Up Innovation

*Bottom Up* Innovation is concerned with understanding and fostering the existing innovative capabilities and systems of disadvantaged communities. (Bloom & Betts 2013) It accepts that people within these communities have within them a wealth of knowledge and skills that can be utilised to their benefit. There are many forms this might take. Examples include the 15 year old Sierra Leone boy, Kelvin Doe, who built batteries out of junk due to the fact that electricity in his town was unreliable, as well as the organic emergence of market based enterprises within many displaced communities.

*Bottom Up* Innovation is now seen as a means toward sustainable solutions due to the fact that disadvantaged communities will develop interventions that are relative to their current experience. The *Bottom Up* approach reduces the distance between the service user and the solution creation process, thereby limiting bureaucracy (and corruption) and increasing the relevancy and timeliness of solutions.

However, *Bottom Up* Innovation, in its more polar form, may struggle to deliver sustainable solutions. People living on subsistence may take on small business ventures that produce debts they are unable to service. They may also experience restricted access to more lucrative markets due to a
lack of networks or cultural understanding. In the case of asylum seekers, who usually reside in unfamiliar cultures, a lack of lived experience in the host country makes it very difficult to develop successful strategies for self reliance.

**Collaborative Innovation**

*Collaborative* Innovation is not a third stream but a combination of the *Top Down* and *Bottom Up* approaches. (Bloom & Betts 2013) An example of this is the co-development movement where organisations utilise the advice and funds of the diasporas when implementing projects in their country of origins. (Ionescu 2006) Co-development offers an intelligent joint approach to innovation. However, the agency often remains at the centre of the process, with the diasporas acting as consultants or as financiers. This relationship can also add another layer of bureaucracy which further drains the capacity of the agency’s system.

**Symbiotic Innovation**

Symbiotic Innovation is not so much a collaborative relationship approach as it is an interdependent one. It proposes that the relationship of equality and mutual exchange between the service user and provider is absolutely necessary in achieving the humanitarian goals of both parties. As previously discussed, Symbiotic Innovation is based on *control theory* which describes phenomena where dynamic systems rely on and influence each other. (Aström & Murray 2009) The particular mechanism used for this is called *feedback* – a small system which causes change in a larger one by returning a sample of the larger system’s output to its input. At the heart of Symbiotic Innovation lie two types of interdependent systems called *positive* (or reinforcing) and *negative* (or balancing) feedback.

*Positive feedback* is a process where the output of a system is amplified by returning a relatively small sample of it back to the input. A simple example of this is the process of heating a pool of water. Here the system heats the water by drawing a small amount through a heat exchanger. Each time the water passes through the heat exchanger, the temperature builds. During the process the heated water mixes with the majority cooler water and, through transference, raises its temperature. The process continues and the temperature of the pool rises to levels that would not be possible if the water was drawn afresh from outside the system.

In Symbiotic Innovation, the *positive feedback* method can be used to amplify social outcomes by building the capacity of individuals to affect positive change within their communities. In such cases, service users from a particular “community in need” are not only assisted, but recruited into the agency as workers. Through this *modelling* experience of delivering services and creating solutions, they develop skills which can be utilised to assist and improve the lives of other, secondary, beneficiaries - before those people reach the agency. When the secondary beneficiaries eventually do come into contact with service delivery, they are starting from a higher base than if they had not been influenced by the primary service user. It may also be that they never reach the agency as their needs have already been met. The result is the ability of the agencies to scale interventions to levels far greater than the established one directional services process.
The significance of the positive feedback system in a humanitarian context is the efficacy of outcomes. The agency's exposure to risk and resource drain are contained as the process creates no increase in the actual number of users accessing the service. Furthermore, as the vast majority of interactions are secondary and happen within the community, the process is not institutionalised or bureaucratized but occurs on a community level between members of families, friends and networks.

Positive Feedback - Shortcomings and Solutions

The positive feedback system has no innate intelligence and simply amplifies whatever change signal, or intervention strategy, is fed into the system. On its own, the positive feedback system can do more harm than good, depending on the nature of the intervention strategy. An example of this would be if the primary service user is ill trained or is given the wrong information by the agency to transfer to the secondary beneficiaries. These errors will be amplified throughout the system with significant negative impact. To ensure that the interventions are relevant and well planned, positive feedback needs to be complimented by its counterpart, the negative feedback system.

Negative feedback

Negative feedback gives the overall system its intelligence. Here we are best to again consider the analogy of heating the pool of water. The desired temperature is set on a thermostat which measures the difference between the desired water temperature and the actual water temperature. It feeds the measured difference (control signal) back to the control system which then increases or decreases the supply of heat. Overtime the water reaches the desired temperature and the system continually self regulates to maintain the equilibrium.
In Symbiotic Innovation, the negative feedback method is applied to the development and management of intervention strategies implemented in the positive feedback system. Service users are given authority to influence the intervention strategies. When these service users exit the system, new users come through and again influence the type of intervention strategies being fed into, and amplified by, the positive feedback system. This way, the interventions that are being amplified are constantly being regulated to meet needs of the most recent service user. The intervention strategies therefore remain timely and relevant.

Challenges with Negative Feedback

The negative feedback system is a closed system and therefore isolated from external information. Intervention strategies created by the negative feedback system are at high risk of not being anchored against the external reality. In the case of asylum seekers, who are often living in unfamiliar cultures, the intervention strategy needs to be calibrated against the outside world with which they are integrating.

The solution lies in opening the negative feedback system to people with a solid understanding of this new world – i.e: agency workers (established community). However, this is not a straightforward solution. Uniting these two groups to share authority within the negative feedback system has three key challenges:

I. Power differentials
II. Cultural differences
III. Role expectations
I. Power differentials

Power differentials exist in and have an effect on every aspect of human interaction. In fact they might be viewed as “a fundamental feature of social organization.” (Sligte et al 2011) Power differentials between individuals and/or organisations manifest in formal and informal, objective and subjective forms. While they are omnipresent in society, studies show that the presence of power differentials have a detrimental effect on group creative processes. (Tost 2011) It is therefore important that these obstacles are addressed in a system which fundamentally relies on innovation and creativity to continually adjust its intervention strategies.

The key reasons for the negative effect of power hierarchies are as follows:

The “Leader”, or person in the power-over position, generally has a false sense of the value of their own opinions over those of others. (Tost 2011) In addition, people who hold power will generally seek to maintain their position – and this in turn affects the openness of their communication and the overall quality of their interaction with subordinates.

The “Follower”, being identified as subordinate, commonly perceives that those higher up are more knowledgeable and able to make higher quality decisions. This often leads to the Follower withdrawing and deferring their decisions to authority. And while Leaders will generally seek to maintain their power, Followers tend to protect themselves from power. During interactive solution creation processes the Follower may refrain from fully participating due to concerns their opinions and ideas may not be those of the Leader and therefore might negatively affect their future prospects. (Sligte et al 2011)

The existence of power differentials creates a significant challenge for Symbiotic Innovation which relies on the ability of the agency worker and the service user to both offer their perspectives to the feedback system with equal value. According to Tost (2011), improvements in the creative outputs of teams are inversely proportional to the size and prevalence of structured hierarchies. Reducing or eliminating these formal hierarchies increases the ability of the team to communicate their ideas and opinions freely – and therefore creates a more fertile environment for joint innovation to occur. Where formal hierarchies are necessary, greater outcomes can be achieved where the Leader is frequently reminded of the instrumental value of his/her Follower’s opinions. (Tost 2011)

II. Cultural Differences

As with power differentials, cultural differences can have a negative effect on Symbiotic Innovation. The ability of two parties to interact in a constructive and equal manner may be hindered by issues such as varying approaches to interaction and problem solving (although this can also be a positive) and the perceived appropriateness of solutions. The situation is compounded by the elusive nature of culture which threads itself through a multitude of other factors affecting a person’s identity, including geographic and religious background, socio-economic status, social group identification, profession, gender and so on. For positive interaction to occur, the challenges presented by cultural differences need to be understood and addressed. However, culture is not a simple set of rules to be learned, but a lived experience.

“A culture can be understood from this perspective as a network of shared meanings that are taken for granted as reality by those interacting within the network. This view of culture proposes that a community of people tend to construct a common model or map of the world derived from their shared experiences and then use these pre-determined categories as a background or setting against which incoming experiences are interpreted.”(Zapf 1991)
The key here is the term shared experience. If cultural understanding comes from participation in the lived experience, high exposure to shared experiences between the agency worker and service user will greatly assist in adjusting to challenges raised by cultural differences. The shared experience also has a way of highlighting the commonality between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. (Elkin 1968) This serves to accelerate the sense of connectedness and mutual respect required between the agency worker and service user for successful participation in Symbiotic Innovation.

Furthermore, the shared experience between the asylum seeker who is the “new comer” and one who is an experienced “insider” can help with the cultural adaptation process. As Simich et al (2003) explain, “For refugees adapting to a new society, not only empathy and shared culture but also shared experience is important. ...affirmation support from those who have successfully adapted is critical.”

III. Role Expectations

Role Expectations shape our view of our place in the world. They are developed through a myriad of influences including power differentials, culture and personal experiences. In the case of asylum seekers, expectations might be set from past experiences with aid organisations and/or other authorities. While, as with cultural differences, these expectations can be adjusted through the shared experience, studies show that expectations that are set at the beginning “are critical in shaping the individual's long-term orientation to the organization” (Louis 2009)

An example of this is the asylum seeker’s usual experience during first contact with the agencies. The initial meeting is a one way, charity interaction that focuses solely on the service user’s immediate welfare needs. Therefore, the expectation of their role in this new environment is generally as a recipient rather than a contributor. After some time of having this role reinforced through further interactions, it is considerably more difficult to encourage a change in this perception. This is further compounded by the negative messages asylum seekers receive through media and certain voices from the wider community, that they are not wanted in the host country. This can have a profoundly negative effect on how asylum seekers perceive their role in this new society and their ability to interact in joint innovation processes that require their empowered contribution.

Successful integration of service users in the negative feedback system, in fact in all Symbiotic Innovation processes, requires that role expectations are clearly set from the first interaction with the agency. Service users should be encouraged to understand that they have an important role to play not only in their own empowerment but in the overall operation of the agency and wider community. To this aim, Symbiotic Innovation services may need to involve empowerment focussed programs and be quarantined from those that are crisis or welfare based.
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