Evaluating Systems Change

Many social innovators – and the funders and policy makers that support them – prefer programmatic interventions (e.g., programs and services) to address such complex issues as unemployment, racism, and poor health. No surprise: such interventions are concrete, manageable and may result in relatively immediate, tangible results.

Despite the merits of programmatic interventions, they are rarely able to turn the needle on complex challenges across communities or populations. The authors of a systems approach to youth unemployment issues in the U.S.A note the following:

> Some workforce development programs have been able to help a relatively small number of young adults in the labor market. But [these programs] have not yet changed a labor market system so that it produces better employment outcomes at significant and sustainable scale for that segment of the population (Plastrik et al., 2003, 4).

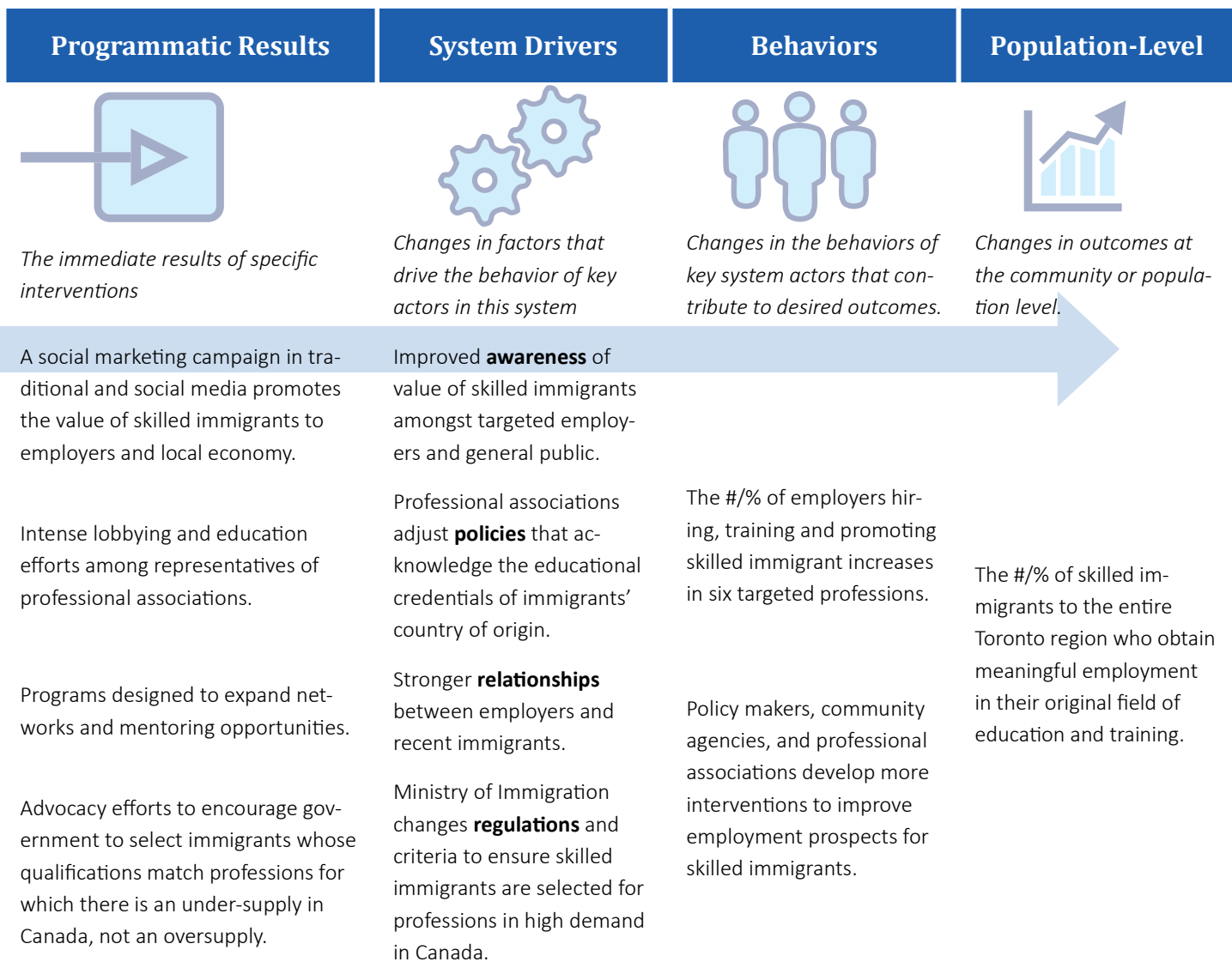Social innovators serious about realizing large-scale change in complex issues need to weave together programmatic and systemic interventions. Programmatic interventions can help people dealing with some type of vulnerability, like unemployment. They help beat the odds. By contrast, systems interventions help change the odds so that fewer people need to experience that vulnerability at all.

Outcomes

There are at least four distinct but interrelated outcomes to consider when evaluating efforts to change systems:

- **Programmatic Results** – the immediate results of specific interventions.
- changes to **Systems Drivers**.
- changes in the **Behaviors** of system actors.
- changes to **Population-Level Outcomes**.

The diagram on the page following offers examples of all four, in relation to the work of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). It is a platform that enables agencies, government and businesses to collaborate around initiatives that improve the integration of skilled immigrants into the regional labor market.

Programmatic Results	System Drivers	Behaviors	Population-Level
The immediate results of specific interventions	*Changes in factors that drive the behavior of key actors in this system*	*Changes in the behaviors of key system actors that contribute to desired outcomes.*	*Changes in outcomes at the community or population level.*
A social marketing campaign in traditional and social media promotes the value of skilled immigrants to employers and local economy.	Improved **awareness** of value of skilled immigrants amongst targeted employers and general public.		
Intense lobbying and education efforts among representatives of professional associations.	Professional associations adjust **policies** that acknowledge the educational credentials of immigrants' country of origin.	The #/% of employers hiring, training and promoting skilled immigrant increases in six targeted professions.	The #/% of skilled immigrants to the entire Toronto region who obtain meaningful employment in their original field of education and training.
Programs designed to expand networks and mentoring opportunities.	Stronger **relationships** between employers and recent immigrants.	Policy makers, community agencies, and professional associations develop more interventions to improve employment prospects for skilled immigrants.	
Advocacy efforts to encourage government to select immigrants whose qualifications match professions for which there is an under-supply in Canada, not an oversupply.	Ministry of Immigration changes **regulations** and criteria to ensure skilled immigrants are selected for professions in high demand in Canada.		

Evaluation

An evaluation designed to assist social innovators change systems should reflect the adaptive nature of their strategy.

Characteristics of Strategy	Evaluation Principles	Sample Practices
Innovators often struggle to describe their strategies to change the systems underlying complex challenges – and often put together a laundry list of activities instead.	Assist social innovators to describe their strategy as clearly as they can, and craft evaluation questions for the parts that are unclear.	Map the systems underlying complex issues and develop a theory of change.
Innovators engage diverse stakeholder actors to develop and manage interventions.	Use participatory techniques to develop evaluation questions, and to gather, analyze and use data.	Outcome Mapping, Most Significant Change, Outcome Harvesting.
Innovators continually adapt their strategy to respond to shifts in context, new learnings and arrival of new actors.	Continually upgrade the evaluation so that it co-evolves with the shifting strategy.	Upgrade the evaluation design every time the strategy is upgraded.

There is often a lag time between innovators' activities and outcomes.	Provide innovators with real-time feedback on their progress towards intermediate outcomes.	Invest resources in tracking intermediate outcomes in the early years of a strategy.
Many system changes are difficult – even impossible – to capture with quantitative data alone.	Employ soft methods to understand quality of change, and hard numbers to assess the depth and scale of change.	Create outcome narratives that describe the context and qualities of change and hard data to represent the depth and scale of change.
The efforts of innovators generate a splatter of intended and unintended outcomes.	Seek out both intended and unintended outcomes and obtain diverse perspectives on the value of these outcomes.	Ask "What has changed?" rather than "Did we achieve our goals?" Reserve a portion of the budget to support retrospective evaluation of unintended outcomes. Get diverse perspectives on the value of outcomes.
Many interventions will not succeed for reasons within and outside the innovators' control.	Elevate "failures" as a sources of strategic learning. "Dig deep" to discover why things did not work out as intended. Surface the implications for strategy.	Customize the *The Failure Report* by Engineers Without Borders to each system change effort.
Changes in systems are typically due to a mix of factors, including factors beyond the activities of innovators.	Estimate innovators' contribution – not attribution – to outcomes.	Adapt the contribution analysis methodology to get a sense of the relative contribution of innovators to outcomes.
Progress on changing systems can be short-lived: systems can easily 'snap back' into old patterns.	Monitor the durability of system changes over time.	Identify bellwether informants – "system watchers." Check in with them periodically.
The success of one systems change may uncover the need for another system change.	Identify new insights, barriers and challenges about the systems innovators are trying to change and possible opportunities for future interventions.	Track and represent the interconnected system change efforts with Ripple Effect Mapping.

Key Sources:

Auspos, Pat & Mark Cabaj. 2014. Community Change: Managing Adaptively to Improve Effectiveness. *Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute Roundtable for Community Change.*

Earl, Sarah, Fred Carden & Terry Smutylo. 2001. Outcome Mapping: Building Learning & Reflection into Development. *Ottawa, ON: International Development Research Corporation.*

Kollock, Debra, Lynette Flage and Lori Higgens. Ripple Effect Mapping: A Radiant Way to Capture Program Outcomes. *Retrieved from: http://ext100.wsu.edu/stevens/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2013/12/REM.Complete.pdf*

Davies, Rick and Jess Dart. 2005. Most Significant Change: A Guide to Its Use. *Retrieved from: http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf*

Hargreaves, Meg. 2010. Evaluating Systems Change: A Planning Guide. *Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research Inc.*

Latham, Nancy. A Practical Guide to Evaluating Systems Change in a Human Services Systems Context. *2014. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation.*

MacKinnon, A. and Arnott, N. 2006. Mapping change: using a theory of change of guide planning and evaluation. *GrantCraft. Retrieved from: http://www.grantcraft.org/guides/mapping-change#highlights*

Mayne, J. 2008. Contribution Analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect. *ILAC methodological brief, available at http://www.cgiar-ilac.org/files/ILAC_Brief16_Contribution_Analysis_0.pdf*

Plastrik, Peter, Marlene Steltzer and Judith Combes Taylor. 2003. Changing Labor Markets: A Systems Approach to Reform. *Boston, MA: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

Wilson-Grau, Ricardo. Outcome Harvesting. Better Evaluation. *Retrieved from: http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting*