

BUILDING OUR FOUNDATIONS

SI Canada's first year

REFLECTIONS FROM 2019

Foreword

Dear Innovators,

We're so pleased to be sharing this review of our first year at Social Innovation Canada with you. It's been a learning curve for me this past year, having formally stepped into the incredible field of social innovation in Canada. I'm still learning, every day, and particularly from the inspiring work happening in all corners of this country. New words, new ways of *knowing* are part of the efforts that many of us are undertaking to get even better at our work: I've learned a whole new vocabulary since stepping into this role.

When we set out on this work last year, an important focus for our team was to start slow, to learn, listen and build on the work that had been established through the first decades of the movement in Canada. I've made it my own personal mission to help those of us who are newer to this space to feel at home and to be better equipped by using the lenses and tools of social innovation to achieve the social change we want. I'm still working hard to find the words to explain this work to my 5 year old and my mother. But, we know that we're here to unlock our potential to bring forward change for the better. .

We have much more work to take on. We've spoken a lot about the need for new bridges and for new collaborations. But, we know that none of those efforts will land unless we make this work genuinely inclusive for all communities: that those of us with competing ideas about how to make change can be listened to and supported.

Many of us know that the answers for many of today's challenges lie in our communities: it's why our network model has focused on following the work and energy of local community leaders. It's why we want to bring people and organizations

together who are working tirelessly to strengthen their communities. What we each need most right now is to be supported, to be seen, to be acknowledged as we work together to build new ways to ensure we survive and thrive.

And, what comes next for Social Innovation Canada?

- Our capacity building work: social r&d, learning communities and curriculum
- Our spotlight on social innovators: online platform and resources
- Our community building: bringing people together in their communities and online to ensure we have what we need to deliver our collective ambition of putting people and planet first.

We're continuing to build on these foundations so we can advance an agenda to align for action. In this coming year, we'll be announcing how we want to work collaboratively on:

- transitioning to a new economy
- addressing the affordable housing crisis
- Indigenous relations

A huge thank you to the stewardship group, the regional weavers and our learning community leads. To my team: Shayna, Chloe, Gabriel, merci. And lastly to the Social Innovation Institute for giving this work the platform, home and leadership to inspire new ways of working.

With thanks and deep admiration,



Chi Nguyen
Director

Who is SI Canada?

Founded in 2018, Social Innovation Canada (or SI Canada) is a groundbreaking national initiative designed to do the much-needed work of a) connecting existing social innovation practitioners, b) providing them with necessary resources, and c) building their capacity for real change. SI Canada also seeks to elevate this vital work across Canada and beyond, all while breaking down barriers to access, and creating a more inclusive environment for all existing and potential change-makers.

Through late 2018 and into 2019, SI Canada embarked on its initial foundational phase, ambitiously establishing a new pan-Canadian network and embarking on the mission to support social innovators across the country. It's been an incredible 18 months of growth, relationship and platform-building—spaces and places for learning and experimentation were created, networks, connections, and resources were established, and we actively explored how SI Canada can continue create a more broad-based, inclusive, and accessible sector.

Included in this report are just a few of this project's early achievements and milestones that have reached during this establishing period. This foundational work couldn't have come to fruition without the energy, wisdom, and devotion of our partners and stakeholders across the country, and the generous financial support of the McConnell Foundation, Employment and Social Development Canada, and Suncor Energy Foundation.

"We've got this all-star team, and they're really helping us co-create the model we want to carry forward, with the goal of really serving people... How do we resource them? How do we connect them? How do we connect them to each other?"

**— Kalen Taylor, Manitoba Weaver
Social Innovation Canada**

How did we do in our first year?

The primary focus of 2019 was building a strong foundation and laying the comprehensive groundwork for SI Canada's national initiatives.

Central to the program's design was a desire to support both current and future social innovation activities, to be receptive and responsive to individual stakeholder needs and initiatives, and to maintain a strong connection to a coherent national platform.

Fundamentally this approach meant striking a fine balance between a clear and focused overall vision, while also embracing change and addressing the intrinsic value of local priorities.

"Through Social Innovation Canada we're creating a platform for engagement, but that engagement is being driven by emerging issues within communities, and communities are identifying what they want, and who they want to get to know. We can start to help facilitate those relationships, hopefully for long term engagement."

**— Jo Reynolds, Ontario Weaver
Social Innovation Canada**

SI Canada by the Numbers

- 6 regional 'nodes' with 8 regional 'weavers' hosted 62 regional convenings and engaged 1,613 participants
- 1 online digital platform was developed
- 2,544 readers of the monthly SI Canada newsletter featuring stories about great Canadian innovation, new initiatives and opportunities,
- 5 Communities of Practice were engaged, including the Social Labs Community of Practice which hosted 14 online convenings engaging 316 participants
- 1 National SI Curriculum Program was co-created by 277 people and organizations
- \$3.4 M was raised to support Canada's social innovation ecosystem
- 1 National secretariat team was established

First Year Foundational Groundwork: The 4Cs

CONVENING

Six regional 'nodes' were established and activated by strategically chosen community 'weavers,' individuals who were skilled in researching, mapping, and connecting local innovators. The goal was to create peer circles, raise capacity, awareness, and funds to support, pilot and carry out social innovation activities.

COMMUNICATIONS

SI Canada's digital presence (website, newsletters, social media, etc.) was established, including, among other assets, 11 newsletters and 42 blog posts, and a platform to support and help innovators find resources, tools, and each other was implemented.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Learning communities were established and supported, lead with the intent to connect existing social innovators and encourage their collaboration locally and across the country.

CAPACITY BUILDING

A national practitioner-focused social innovation curriculum was developed, offering modules and best practices designed to meet people where they are at and to help professionalize the sector.

An emerging network of Regional Nodes & Weavers

Six organizations from across Canada put up their hands to participate as the inaugural “nodes” of the SI Canada network. These organizations were selected because of their strategic direction and potential for alignment with SI Canada. “Weavers” are the individuals actively connecting community conversations, and mapping assets, needs, interests and constraints.



Radius SFU (British Columbia)

RADIUS builds programs to collaboratively develop, test, and accelerate innovative responses to tough social problems. Drawing on this leading edge work, we also offer training, events and educational opportunities to build collective capacity to respond to the challenges of our time.



ABS Connect (Alberta)

ABS (Alberta Social Innovation) Connect is a collective of Alberta-based organizations and individuals who want to address the root causes of today's most pressing issues and believe this requires working and learning together.



Social Enterprise Centre (Manitoba)

The hub for social enterprise activity in Manitoba, SEC providing resources, workshop information, news, and other events or opportunities to support social enterprise practitioners, developers and stakeholders.



Centre for Social Innovation (Ontario)

CSI aspires to be the best place on earth to be a social innovator. We offer coworking, community and acceleration services to people who are changing the world. Members get special rates on meeting and event spaces, promotional opportunities, networking and community, free consultations with experts, access to capital, and much more.



Maison
de l'innovation
sociale

Maison de l'Innovation Sociale (Quebec)

"A not-for-profit organization located in Montréal, the MIS is an important player in Québec's social innovation ecosystem and a decisive lever in the emergence and development of projects with a strong positive social impact, among citizen collectives and government organizations, universities and the entrepreneurial community. We support leaders of social and environmental development projects across Quebec, primarily in their initial stages, through risk assessment and impact analysis."



Inspiring Communities (Atlantic Canada)

Inspiring Communities supports the growth and vitality of the field of systems change in Atlantic Canada. We provide a nest for experimentation, develop leadership in the field, and cultivate a culture of learning and evaluation for social change initiatives. We are helping to shift communities and changemakers from a mindset of competition and scarcity to one of collaboration and abundance so that systems can change for greater social impact in Atlantic Canada.

About the regions

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Making Safe Spaces in Social Innovation

Radius SFU has been working to build and connect a broad community network—and not just among those who are already comfortable calling themselves social innovators. Laura Cuthbert Gaayisaad, the SI Canada Weaver representative in British Columbia, says she is most proud when she sees people show up in a place where she's worked hard to make them feel welcome—newly established social innovation spaces and conversations that they may not have previously seen themselves in, or that may have excluded them in the past.

"Every time someone new shows up who has never accessed social innovation, they've never accessed SFU, they've never heard of McConnell, they've never heard of SIG, never heard of any of these things—and they're there because they're doing progressive work, and they're there because we invited them to be there and they're equal, and at the table...(That's) my main goal."

**- Laura Cuthbert Gaayisaad, Radius SFU
SI Canada Weaver**

ALBERTA

Sowing The Seeds

ABSI Connect's big success this year was their ambitious spring gathering, an event that brought together over fifty changemakers from across the province. There were countless connections made discussions started that day, under topic headings ranging from how to better engage students, how to better support young changemakers to grow their skills, examining different finance mechanisms, bringing together Indigenous and Western ways of working, and helping to bridge current divides.

"I heard, months later, in conversations, that a lot of those folks ended up collaborating on an initiative further down the road."

**- Naomi Mahaffy, ABSI Connects
SI Canada Stewardship Group**

About the regions

MANITOBA Community-based Indigenous Solutions

The acknowledgement of the power of Indigenous innovation is what is driving most of the initiatives the Manitoba team is embarking on, and a large part of that work means finding young, emerging, Indigenous leaders and inviting them to be part of a governance group. An inspiring collection of changemakers have been meeting regularly—visionary thinkers working on some of the most exciting social innovation projects from around the province, and together addressing a diverse and wide-reaching set of vital issues.

"We spent our first year convening these conversations, and what came up for us again and again...there's a ton of innovation work happening in Winnipeg, the most interesting parts are coming out of the Indigenous community, and are solving and addressing really deep-seated problems within the entire city. It's in the Indigenous community where we're seeing those solutions coming from. I think that's the real strength of Winnipeg in the social innovation sector Canada-wide. So after a year of talking, we decided that we were really interested in focusing the work of this node primarily on going and supporting Indigenous leadership in the social innovation sector."

**- Kalen Taylor, Purpose Construction
SI Canada Weaver**

ONTARIO A focus on inclusive economies

A cornerstone of the work being done in Ontario is the hosting of "practitioner's circles"—vibrant, in-person gatherings that bring together a wide range of individuals doing the work of social innovation across the province. It's a welcoming and productive space that allows change makers to share their knowledge and make vital, long-lasting connections. These groups work across difference, under the shared acknowledgement that there are urgent social issues that they will not improve under current systems, and that there needs to be a shift in the way we think about solving them.

"The Inclusive Economies Circle (for example) has come together to look closely at a wide variety of topics—from community benefit agreements, to workplace integration, to employment social enterprise. They've shared information on worker cooperatives, participatory cities, and community-owned wealth. They have reviewed leakage studies, furthering their understanding of how much income is leaving smaller communities rather than staying inside them. We became quite practical by looking at initiatives that have really made, or started to make a big difference."

**- Jo Reynolds, Centre for Social Innovation
SI Canada Weaver**

About the regions

QUÉBEC

Putting a focus on inclusion

A not-for-profit organization located in Montréal, the Maison de l'innovation sociale (MIS) is an important player in Québec's social innovation ecosystem and a decisive lever in the emergence and development of projects with a strong positive social and environmental impact, among citizen collectives and government organizations, universities and the entrepreneurial community.

MIS supports social innovators across Quebec, primarily in the early stage of their projects, through risk assessment and impact analysis. It collaborates with project leaders to highlight the causes that make a social or environmental problem persist; generate ideas to remedy it; eliminate the obstacles between an idea and its implementation; and deploy it as a vector for systemic transformation. In short, it aims to generate, capture and accompany ideas that call for rethinking our ways of doing things so that they are compatible with the future of humanity.

"Contributing to the diversity of the social innovation ecosystem and the inclusion of new and unusual suspects; having productive dialogue between social innovators in Québec and those across Canada: these are our priorities for the coming year."

**- Mélanie Bisson, Maison de l'innovation sociale
SI Canada Weaver,**

ATLANTIC CANADA

Creating a New Approach to Regional Collaboration

Inspiring Communities in Nova Scotia has been working to answer the question of what it means to discover, craft and curate a Social Innovation ecosystem in a given region. Newly formed in October of 2018, the Dartmouth-based team has built their organization from the ground up—and have partnered with Social Innovation Canada during their own foundational year during the process.

"It's been a big task for us to start to think about Atlantic Canada. There hasn't been a history of working across provinces. I think this year we have developed some really good, strong relationships across those four provinces, and people are really excited, and have bought into the idea that we need to work more closely regionally."

**- Annika Voltan, Inspiring Communities,
SI Canada Stewardship Group**

Indigenous Social Innovation Gathering

One of the key messages that came out of the 2018 consultation phase was the need to explore how Social Innovation Canada could best support Indigenous Innovation. SI Canada began to do this vital work by collaborating closely with Diane Roussin, Project Director of the Winnipeg Boldness Project, and passionate community leader. Diane brings her in-depth knowledge of Indigenous issues and solutions to the SI Canada stewardship group.

The secretariat secured funding from the Suncor Energy Foundation, enabling SI Canada to engage Diane Roussin (Winnipeg Boldness Project), along with Melanie Goodchild (Turtle Island Institute), and Jessica Bolduc (4RS Youth Movement) to co-host a workshop for Indigenous Innovators. The workshop invited participants to share what they felt they needed to do their best work in the field, and what role they saw settlers playing in terms of collaboration with or support for that work. The four-day workshop took place at the Banff Centre for the Arts in late July 2019, with twenty Indigenous innovators in attendance.

"A lot of this 'innovation' is really—from what I heard from an Indigenous community perspective - turning to really old values and really old ways of working. We're talking about breaking down barriers. We're talking about being in relationships instead of sitting in silos. We're talking about listening to community knowledge. None of that is actually that innovative. We've just been listening to the wrong people."

**= Kalen Taylor, Manitoba Weaver
Social Innovation Canada**

The Indigenous Social Innovators group shared the following feedback with the SI Canada at the completion of the workshop:

- Indigenous social innovators require and are committed to creating indigenous-led spaces to build leadership and capacity and are best placed to determine and direct resources dedicated to Indigenous innovation.
- There are Indigenous leaders and organizations open to meaningful partnerships. However, non-Indigenous people cannot be the primary beneficiaries from Indigenous wisdom and innovation. The knowledge, resources, and benefits that come from Indigenous communities must serve these communities first.
- Building this movement of Indigenous social innovation must happen at the right pace: this work should not be rushed or have artificial timelines imposed.

Communities of Practice: Prototyping different approaches

During 2019, SI Canada tested and evaluated a variety of approaches to supporting communities of practice. The secretariat provided active facilitation and programming support for some, while others were given administrative and communications support.

Currently, there are five pan-Canadian communities of practice working within the network:

- **Social Innovation Labs, Co-facilitated with Claire Buré (Mars Solutions Lab) and Chloe Waretini (SI Canada)**
A monthly community of practice that hosts peer-input processes, open dialogues and “share and tells,” all highlighting real-world strengths and challenges, while using a labs approach to social innovation.
- **Labs Evaluation, Led by Mark Cabaj, Here 2 There Consulting**
Two working groups of strategic advisors and practitioners convening to crowdsource and inform developmental evaluation, and how the approach can be better used and implemented.
- **Social Research and Development, Led by Jason Pearman, McConnell Fellow (now transferring to SI Canada)**
Through ESDC's Investment Readiness Program and The McConnell Foundation, a field-building program that includes demonstration projects, coaching and new resources is getting underway. Builds on the McConnell Social R&D Fellowship work from 2017-2019.
- **Transformational Leadership, Led by Cheryl Rose, Banff Centre for the Arts**
A group of systems change practitioners took part in a series of sessions focused on their learning and peer support. A new cohort of practitioners for 2020 will be opened up to continue to explore “transformational leadership.”
- **Corporate Social Innovation, Led by Allyson Hewitt, MaRS**
Stakeholder engagement and new coalitions were a strong focus, each with the end goal of helping corporate partners better align with the 2030 SDGs.

What comes next?

The Continued Growth of Successful Regional Activities

Several of the initial SI Canada regions are currently evolving their structures and resourcing practices based on first year learnings. Across the network, connecting activities will continue to strengthen the local ecosystems and networks led by our six regional partners.

- BC will expand and pilot new efforts on the Future of Work;
- Alberta will launch a pilot cohort program that affirms connections and supports rural changemakers and Indigenous communities;
- Manitoba is will expand its Indigenous governance circle to co-design and support its regional activities;
- Ontario will resource a new Francophone weaver to assist in mapping and supporting Francophone social innovation initiatives/networks outside of Quebec;
- Quebec will host a two-day regional convening that will bring a variety of divergent perspectives from the sector together for collaboration and growth;
- Atlantic Canada will focus on bridge-building across sectors, shifting narratives and influencing the redesign of restrictive policies; and
- SI Canada remains open to various partnership opportunities with Indigenous social innovators and aims to seek additional resources/reallocate existing resources to support Indigenous participation as a unique community within the network.

Launching the Common Platform

With the soft launch of SI Canada's online community platform, we are implementing testing by regional SI Canada community members and community of practice participants. The platform will be ready for a broader public launch in late spring 2020.

Communities of Practice

There is current interest in supporting two new communities of practice—one focused on expressive organizing and expanding opportunities for the transformational leadership CoP. Additionally, new resources secured for the Social R&D community of practice will give the field new opportunities to continue to convene to advance this work.

Capacity Building

Next steps include publishing the first SI Curriculum catalogue, continued piloting of the 'Introduction to Social Innovation' workshop in Alberta with ABSI Connect and at CSI New York, and a collaboration with Innoweave and The McConnell Foundation to develop new knowledge products and strengthen capacity and build practitioner knowledge. Additionally, we are now current launching a new field-program to support the work of Social R&D across the country. This new work will include new demonstration initiatives and resources.

Continue to Build Relationships with 'Unusual Suspects'

Transparency of both intent and language, and a clear focus on inclusive innovation is important to build trust among communities that have previously felt excluded from social innovation spaces. Questions of access and privilege will be addressed in response to direct feedback from practitioners.

What have we learned?

1. Our six regional nodes are the heart of the network

Without the on-the-ground regional activation of our six founding partners, this work would not be nearly as rich or authentic. The regional nodes have learned—and continue to learn—from each other, connecting local to national opportunities and vice versa, making this depth and complexity of perspective the strength of the SI Canada approach.

2. Building relationships with Indigenous communities is the key to our strength

Indigenous ways of knowing and doing have a strong rich history rooted in innovation and systems change. If an Indigenous node or SI Canada/Indigenous Social Innovator collaboration(s) emerges, that will be the decision and under the direction of the Indigenous community, and it will need to be Indigenous-led.

3. The importance of plain language

Direct feedback from regional nodes suggests that the language of social innovation is often inaccessible, each expressing the need to evolve current conversations and find appropriate shortcuts to help local practitioners and communities see themselves in this work. The aim is to build the conversation around those who participate, rather than simply projecting stagnant ideas or definitions.

4. Our inclusivity is vital and demands constant work

We need to move beyond just 'inclusive' social innovation, to 'equity-focused' social innovation. This means more than a shift in language, but instead a recognition and understanding that systemic inequality plays a significant part in many of the complex challenges we face. SI Canada must ensure that through our programming, our governance, and within our communities, we continue to ask how we can work towards greater equity.

5. Social innovation stories are needed now

People are looking for meaningful sources of inspiration and solutions, showing how we can each make a difference by putting people and planet first. These stories are most meaningful when they are grounded in real examples of people and places, and existing change. We are developing a more coordinated approach to collect and broadcast these stories from across the network, leveraging communication assets from within the network, aggregating and amplifying these stories so that practitioners are able to see themselves as part of a broader movement creating systems change.

What have we learned?

6. Our approach to governance needs to be flexible and responsive

While the SI Canada network is still new and evolving, and the current governance can have a tendency to cause participants to fall into old assumptions and patterns. Currently SI Canada is looking at ways to improve governance systems, clarify individual roles, direction, and leadership, and establish processes so that all players can more confidently move to action. We also need to improve on onboarding processes when it comes to bringing new members into the network, while also maintaining momentum for existing participants.

7. Doing and learning will improve our practices

We know that people are hungry to learn from each other, and are actively looking for a receptive community to help their projects move forward. Social Innovation Canada wants to make sure more people are aware of our emerging curriculum, communities of practice, and capacity building, all while featuring leaders in Canadian social innovation, and hosting critical, reflective conversations that are enabling practitioners.

8. Collaboration is the both the journey and the destination

Building a new practitioner network grounded in the regions of this country is both exciting and challenging. Collaborative work delivers strong results but also means addressing discomfort and working from a place of patience. The collaborative process helped to build relationships and strengthen trust among stakeholders and it was best served when it had a specific purpose or task with a clear agenda and goal.

Conclusion

This has been a strong foundational year with many encouraging signs of early success. Within this growing and evolving social innovation network, our participants have worked to understand how to build this new community together—and we know we are just getting started. We're seeing groundbreaking dialogue emerge among new and seasoned practitioners about inclusive economies, how to transition to low-carbon societies, and how to govern inspired by Indigenous knowledge. These conversations look to new ways of leading and learning, and examine possible solutions with a new strength and optimism.

Each of us who have found our way into this emerging network can see the vast potential that comes from being part of a transformative community, and are engaged because we see real evidence of collaborative change.

This emergent and inherently complex sector means that we will continue to have conversations that challenge us to learn how to better come together to solve systemic problems. As we begin our agenda setting and planning for the next phases of our work together, the assets we've created, the connections we've made, and the insights we've gained will help to guide and identify where the opportunities for greater collective impact lie.