Beyond the Metrics : Redefining Accountability & Impact Measurement for Social Innovation Practitioners

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Maison de l'innovation sociale
SOCIAL INNOVATION CANADA
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Introduction

Impact evaluation in the context of social innovation has long been a source of tension. The frameworks most commonly used to assess impact were not built for the complexity, relational depth, and long time horizons that social innovation requires. As a result, the most meaningful contributions of labs and lab-like processes — such as relationship-building, learning, and iteration — often go undervalued.

This framework is our collective response.

Co-designed with eight labs across Canada, it provides tools and approaches that better reflect the unique contributions of social innovation practitioners and leaders to systems change, centering learning, relationships, and collective sensemaking around complex challenges as the basis for meaningful accountability. A secondary but equally important purpose is to deepen funder understanding of social innovation including the time, relationships, and resources required to sustain.

Accountability is at the centre of this effort, asking us to continuously return to the questions that matter most: who are we accountable to, and how do we build that accountability with them? The goal is not a fixed answer but a shared process that makes accountability visible and embedded in practice.

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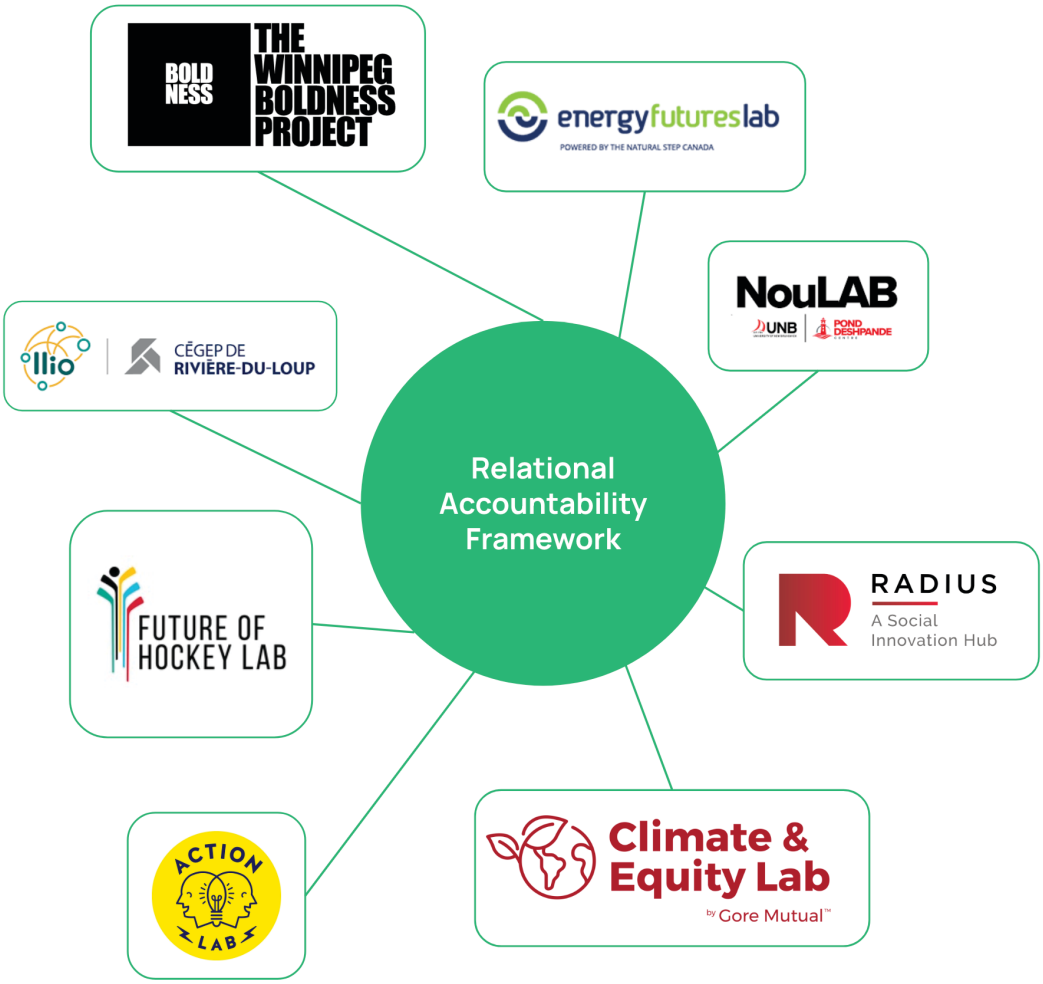
A work in progress:

Co-designed framework to better reflect the unique contributions of social innovation practitioners and leaders to systems change.



Deepen funder understanding of social innovation and strengthen support for its adequate resourcing.

The Framework Architecture

The Framework Architecture

How transformational change emerges

- The Framework
- The Ecosystem
- The Challenge Space
- The Process Actors

The Framework Architecture

How transformational change emerges

The framework is organized as a visual architecture with three concentric layers, read together as a model of how transformational change emerges through the interaction between context, actors, and a collectively constructed understanding of the challenge.

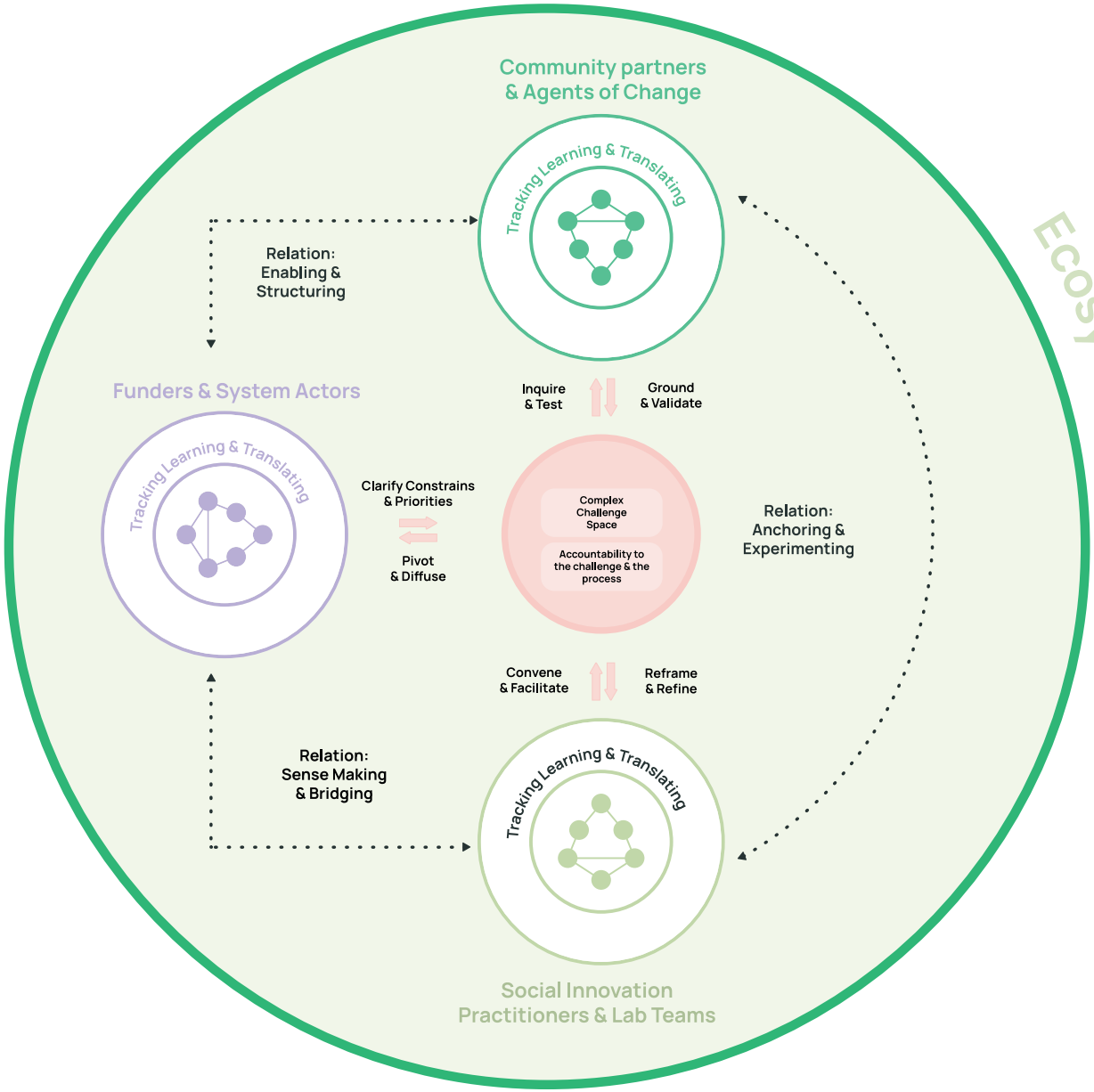
The Ecosystem forms the outermost layer. Labs and social innovation practitioners are embedded in physical, environmental, cultural, and political contexts that both shape and are shaped by the work.

The Process Actor Networks rest within the ecosystem as three interconnected circles: Community Partners and Agents of Change, Social Innovation Practitioners and Lab Teams, and Funders and Systems Actors. These are dynamic networks of individuals, organizations, and institutions that share knowledge and coordinate action. Actor groups share responsibility for tracking and translating change. At the outset of any initiative, this requires asking: who is positioned to contribute, and how can those contributions be more equitably shared and coordinated?

The Complex Challenge Space sits at the center. This is the shared problem all actors are working to understand, reframe, and address together. A key idea in this framework is that impact evaluation in the context of social innovation is a knowledge-building practice. Accountability means being responsive to what we learn as the challenge evolves — not simply reporting against pre-set metrics.

Together, these layers describe how transformational change emerges through the interaction between context, actors, and a collectively constructed understanding of the problem. As such, we are proposing this framework not only as an evaluation tool, but also as a relational model of change.

The Framework



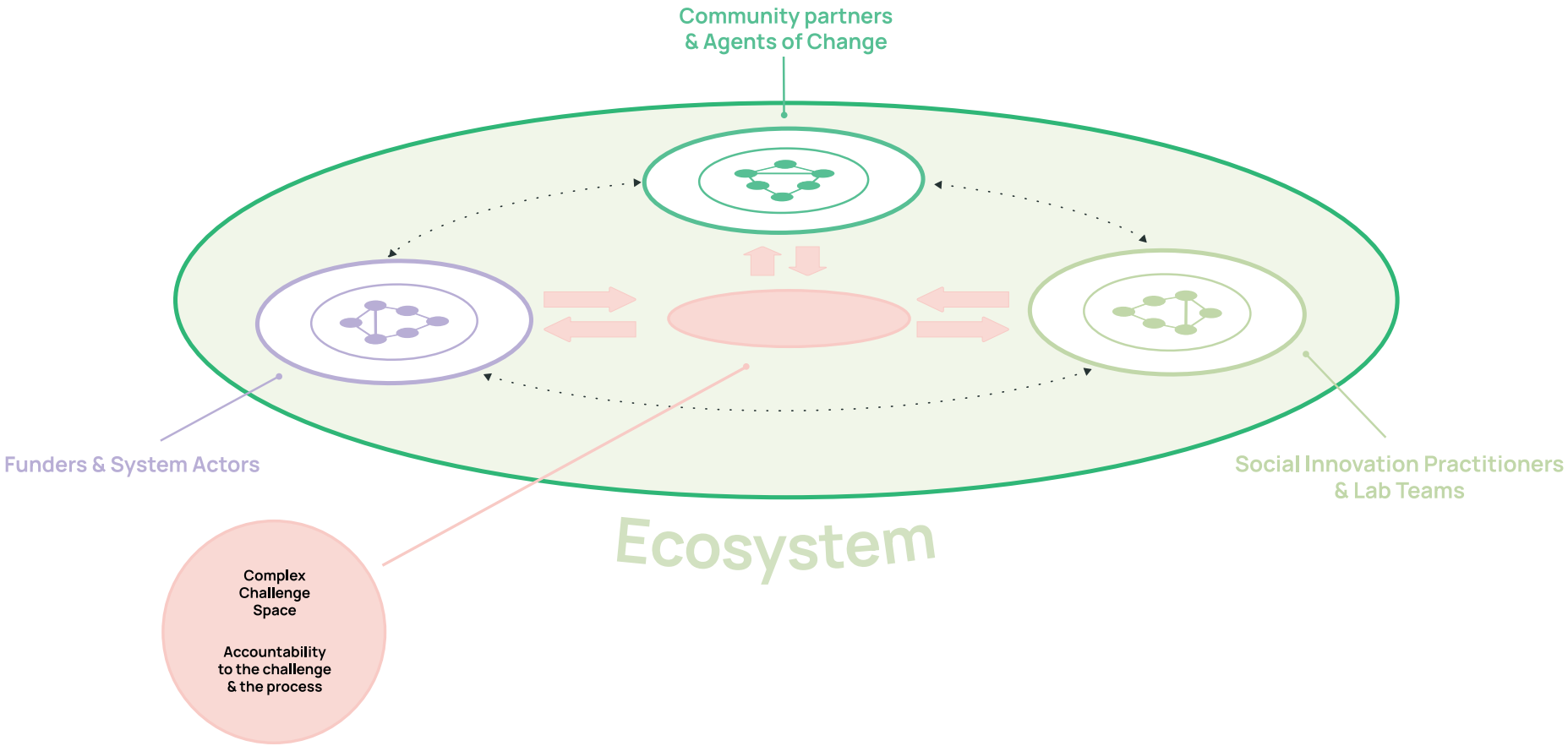
READING THE FRAMEWORK

Process Actors:
Diverse actors and institutions connected through relationships and knowledge-sharing

Challenge Space
Where learning is translated, aligned, and coordinated across boundaries.

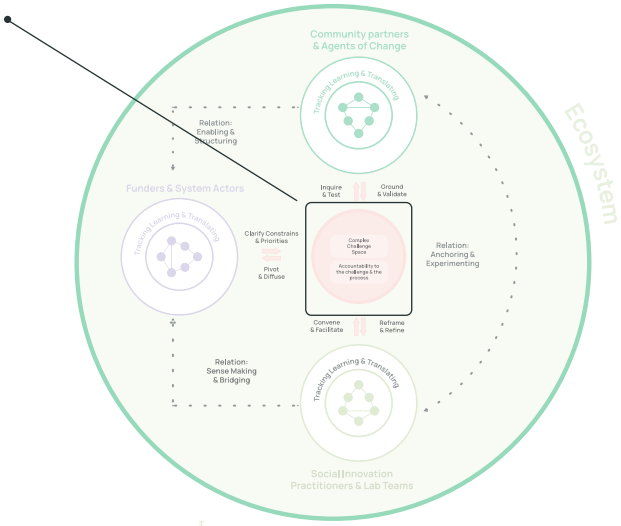
Feedback flows:
Direct relationships between process actors that enable feedback and learning across system.

Primary flows to & from The Challenge Space:
Knowledge coordinated, integrated, and applied to systems change.



The Ecosystem

The process actors are embedded in **environmental, cultural & political contexts** that both shape and are shaped by the work.

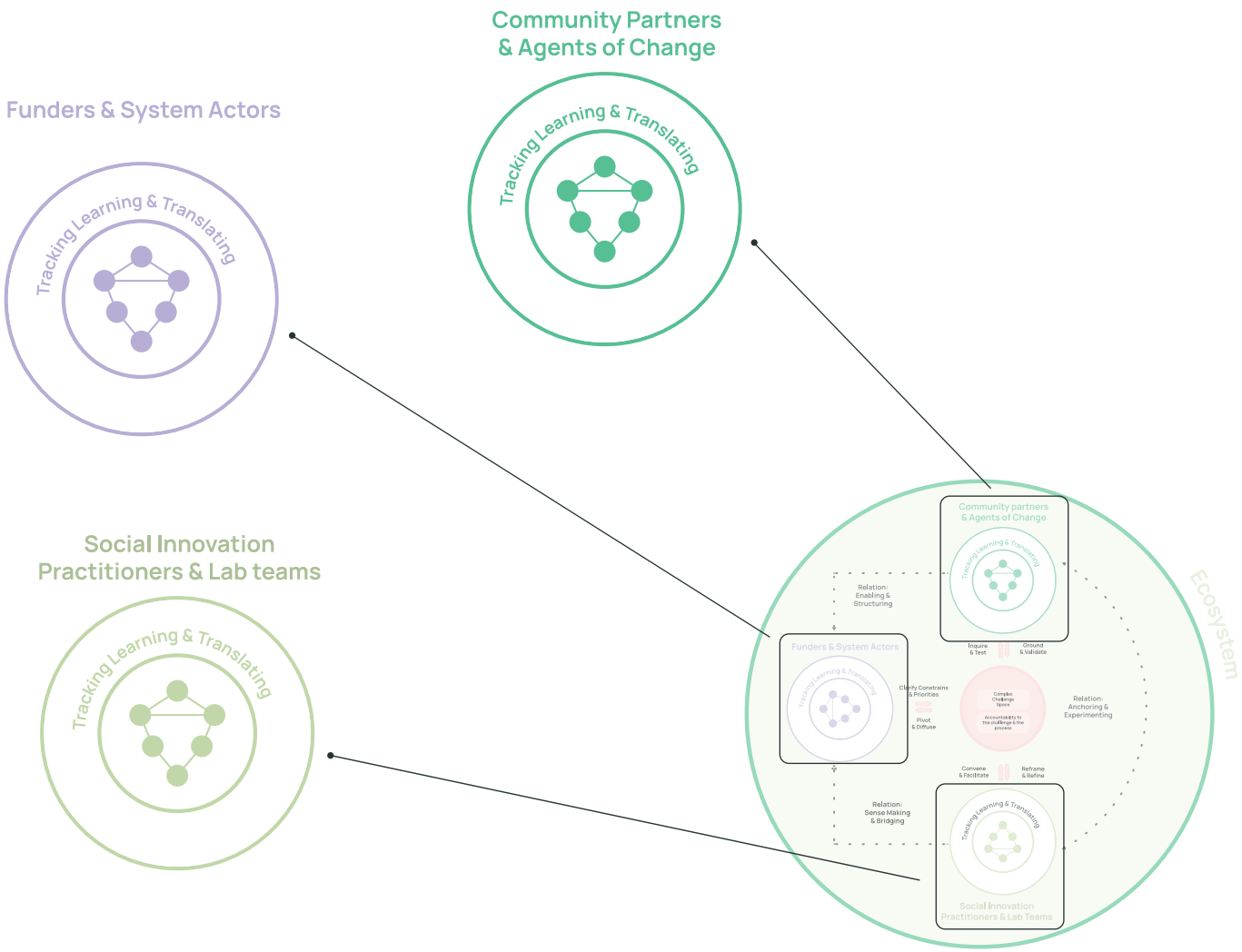


The Challenge Space

A key idea in this framework is that impact evaluation in the context of social innovation is a **knowledge-building practice**.

→ **Accountability means being responsive to what we learn as the challenge evolves.**

The Process Actors



The Process Actors

Actor groups share responsibility for tracking and translating change.

At the outset of any initiative we must ask:

→ Who is positioned to contribute ?

→ How are those contributions shared and coordinated ?

Three Foundational Principles

Principle 1.

Rooted in relational practices

Principle 2.

Centered on learning and the complex challenge at hand

Principle 3.

Defined by shared sense-making across actors and cycles of learning

Principle 1.

Rooted in relational practices

Social innovation unfolds through relationships. Shifts in these relationships — and the learning they generate — are often the earliest signals of deeper, systemic change. These shifts must be made visible and tracked alongside more conventional indicators, both as impacts in themselves and as enablers of broader system change.

The relationships between the three actor groups each play a distinct role in enabling transformational change:

Community Partners & Agents of Change → Social Innovation Practitioners & Lab Teams:

Anchoring and experimenting. Practitioners ground their work in lived community realities while testing hypotheses and adapting approaches. This helps ensure that emerging solutions remain relevant, responsive, and community-led.

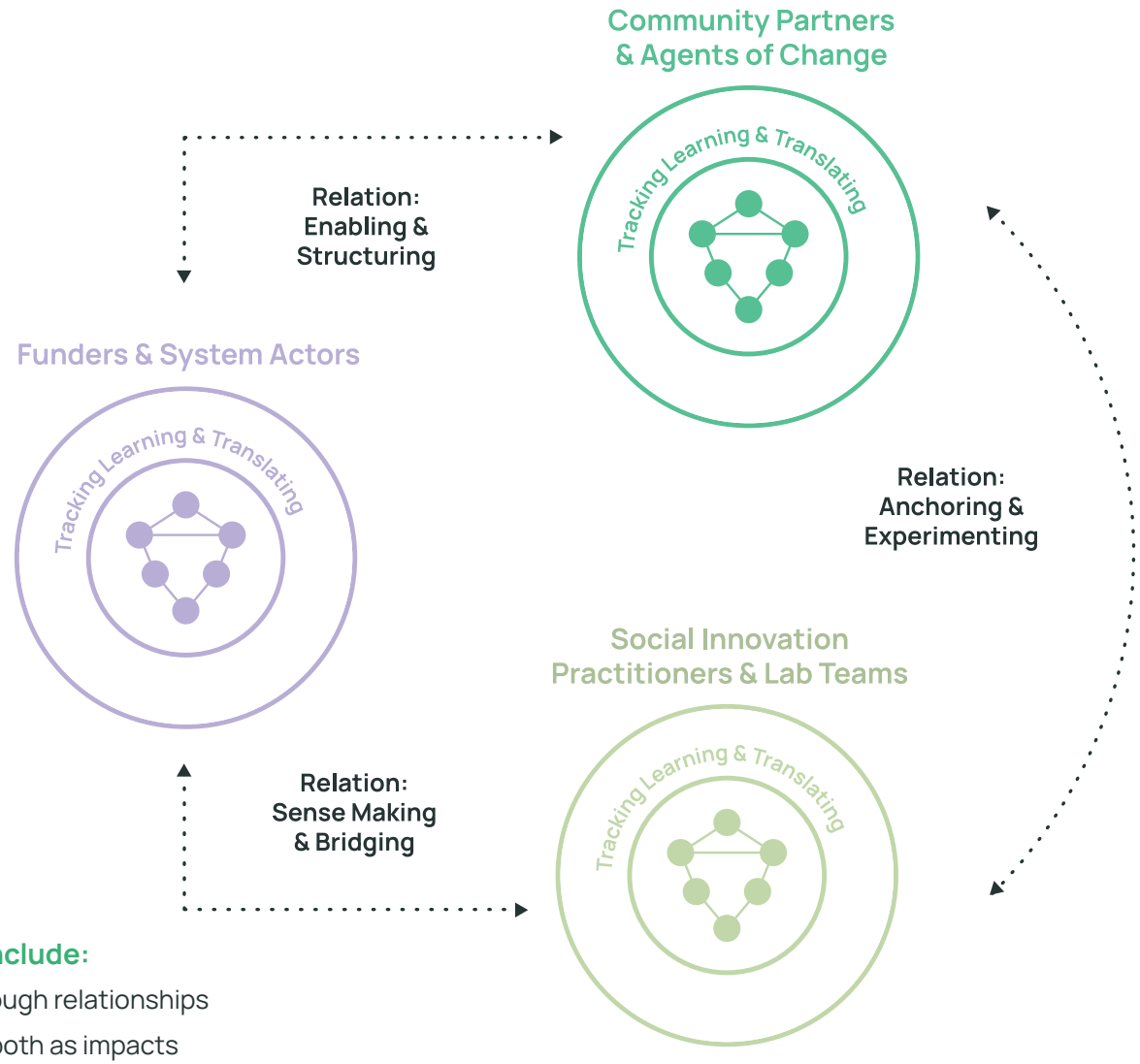
Social Innovation Practitioners & Lab Teams → Funders & Systems Actors:

Sense-making and bridging. Practitioners translate experimental learning into insights that funders and institutional actors can act upon, while also advocating for what community-based learning reveals about systemic needs and barriers.

Funders & Systems Actors → Community Partners & Agents of Change:

Enabling and structuring. These actors help create the conditions (resources, policies, legitimacy, and institutional support) that make community-led change possible and sustainable over time.

Social innovation unfolds through relationships



Early signals of change include:

- → Learning generated through relationships
- → Shifts in relationships (both as impacts in themselves & as enablers of system change)
- → These shifts in relations must be made visible and tracked alongside more conventional indicators

Principle 2.

Centered on learning and the complex challenge at hand

Accountability means being responsive to what we learn as our understanding of the challenge evolves. Impact evaluation in the context of social innovation is a knowledge-building practice.

Knowledge is built through three core practices: creating shared clarity around the challenge; aligning understanding across actor groups on how to coordinate effectively; and adjusting approaches and recombining capabilities as understanding evolves across the system.

Six recurring action modes describe how knowledge circulates between the challenge space and different process actor groups. Each actor group engages in a two-way dynamic: one mode oriented toward sensing and interpreting the challenge space, and another oriented toward acting back upon it:

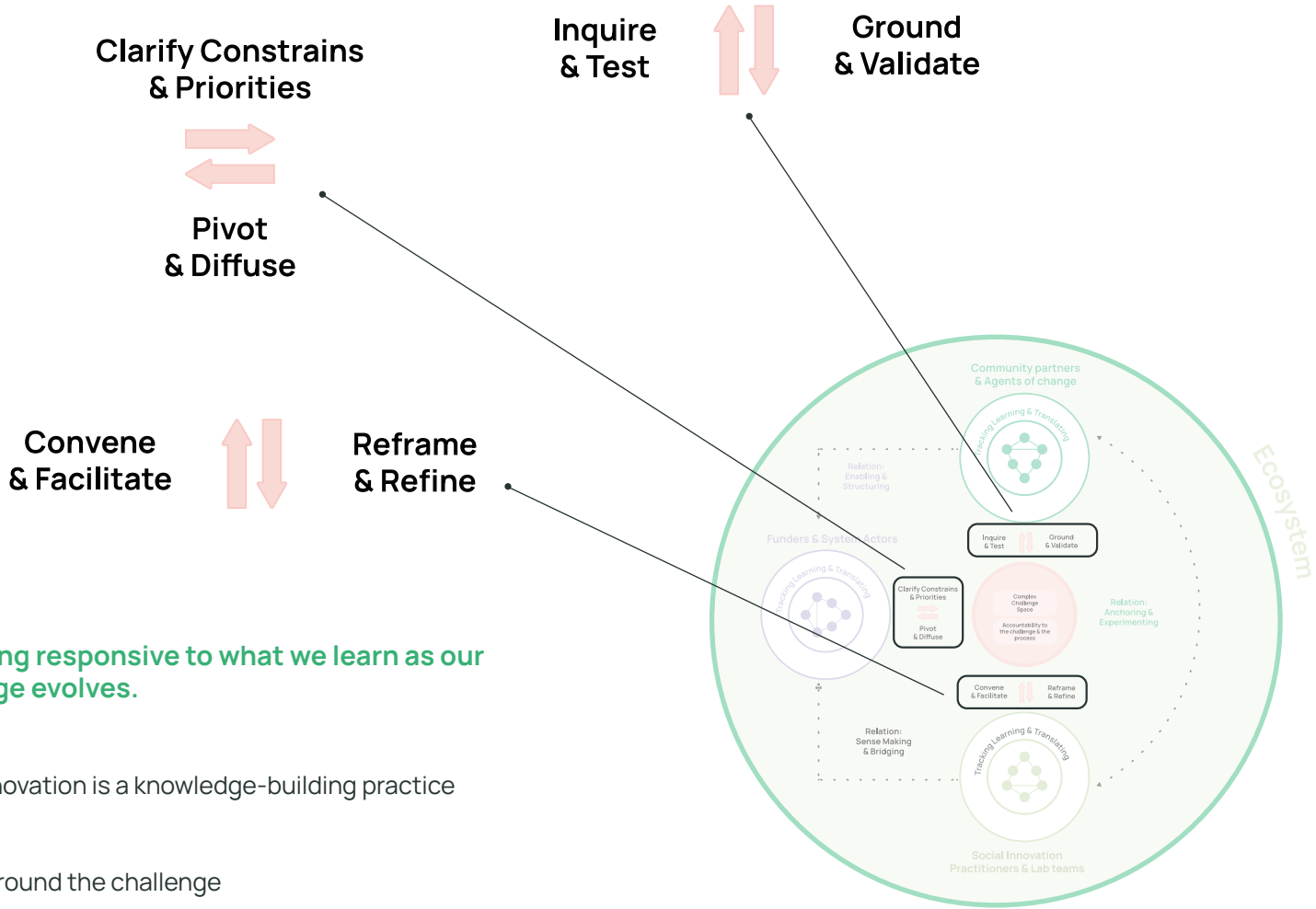
Community Partners & Agents of Change inquire and test within the challenge space, then ground and validate emerging responses.

Social Innovation Practitioners & Lab Teams convene and facilitate across actors, then reframe and refine collective understanding and direction.

Funders & System Actors clarify constraints and priorities emerging from the system, then pivot and diffuse approaches across contexts.

These are not sequential steps, but recurring practices enacted by different actor groups from their own position within the ecosystem (see diagram below). Together, they support collective learning, adaptation, and coordination around the challenge space.

Principle 2.
Centered on learning and on the complex challenge at hand



Accountability means being responsive to what we learn as our knowledge of the challenge evolves.

Key idea:

Impact evaluation in social innovation is a knowledge-building practice

How knowledge is built:

- → Creating shared clarity around the challenge
- → Aligning understanding across actor groups on how to coordinate effectively
- → Adjusting approaches and recombining capabilities as understanding evolves across the system

Principle 3.

Defined by shared sense-making across actors and cycles of learning

Each actor group tracks different dimensions of change and makes them legible across the system. Currently, a structural gap exists between what happens in practice and what is recognized as impact — many contributions remain invisible.

Bridging this gap requires shared sense-making across actors on how change unfolds through relationships, time, and systems. The tools in the next section provide practical ways to support this process, making relational and learning-based contributions visible and translating insights across scales in a way that supports decision-making and coordination.

How Practitioners Can Use This Framework

Tool 1

Asset mapping: understanding what each actor brings

Tool 2

Aligning around the complex challenge

2.1 — Time and scale matrix

2.2 — Successive matrix snapshots: tracking portfolio evolution

Tool 3

Approaches to visual storytelling: translating the process of change

3.1 — Narrative mapping

3.2 — Storyboarding change pathways

How Practitioners Can Use This Framework

These tools bring shared sense-making across actors into practice by making visible how change unfolds across contributions, time, scale, and system pathways. They operationalize the framework's principles through complementary lenses on relationships, time, learning, and systems change. Together, they form a lightweight but coherent evaluation system designed to support reflection, coordination, and accountability without imposing a rigid reporting burden. Each tool can be used independently, but their value is greatest when used in combination as a cyclical practice of sense-making over time.

Tool 1

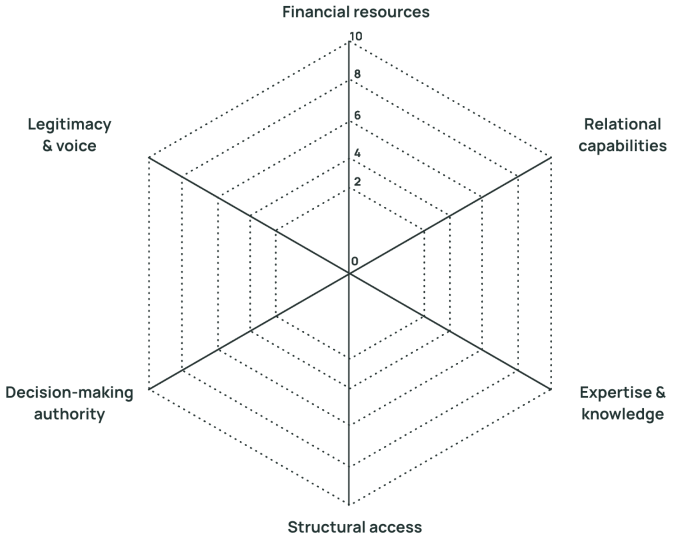
Asset mapping: understanding what each actor brings

At the start of a project, social innovation practitioners need a shared understanding of who is involved, what each actor brings, and how this shapes collaboration. This tool creates a foundation for productive conversations about gaps, imbalances, and opportunities. Labs and practitioners work with key actors to make visible six dimensions of assets:

- financial resources (funding, budget control)
- relational capabilities (trust, networks, community ties)
- expertise and knowledge (technical skills, lived experience, domain knowledge)
- structural access (connections to policy and institutions)
- decision-making authority (who has final say)
- legitimacy and voice (whose perspectives are valued and heard).

Actors may bring significant strengths in some dimensions while being constrained in others, and those constraints may shift over time. Revisiting this mapping at key moments helps practitioners surface evolving dynamics of power and participation.

Asset Mapping
Understanding What Each Actor Brings



Dimensions:
→ **Financial resources** (funding, budget control)
→ **Relational capabilities** (trust, networks, community ties)
→ **Expertise & knowledge** (technical skills, lived experience)
→ **Structural access** (connection to policy, institutions)
→ **Decision-making authority** (who has final say?)
→ **Legitimacy & voice** (whose perspectives are valued?)

Guiding questions:

Who holds which types of assets, and how does this shape collaboration ?

Where are the gaps or untapped opportunities ?

What assumptions are we making about each other's contributions at the outset of the project ?

Tool 2

Aligning around the complex challenge

2.1 — Time and scale matrix

This tool helps practitioners develop a shared picture of where and when change could occur. It is a diagnostic tool for clarifying where efforts are concentrated, where uncertainty remains, and what realistic versus aspirational impact looks like. Importantly, all actor groups operate at all three scales simultaneously; the matrix helps make that distribution visible and legible.

The matrix has two dimensions. Time horizons (adaptable to every lab's context): Now, Near, and Far. Scale of impact: Micro (direct relationships, participation, voice, capacity-building, relational and attitudinal shifts within the lab process); Meso (coordination across organizations, networks, and practices that enable collective action); and Macro (systemic and structural change, including policy, norms, and institutional shifts).

Guiding questions:

Which aspects of the challenge are we addressing now, and which may unfold later?

Who is responsible for tracking which aspects of change?

Are we and our partners aligned on where we are ultimately trying to get to?

2.2 — Successive matrix snapshots: tracking portfolio evolution

This tool builds on the Time and Scale matrix by revisiting it at regular intervals as a living snapshot of the portfolio. Placed side by side, successive snapshots reveal how activities shift and actor contributions evolve over time; where new forms of impact are beginning to appear; where the portfolio may be stalling or moving in unexpected directions; and transition moments where the actors, skills, and relationships that carried the project to one stage may not be sufficient to carry it to the next. Anticipating these transitions, and asking what new forms of partnership or capacity they require, is one of the most practical uses of this tool.

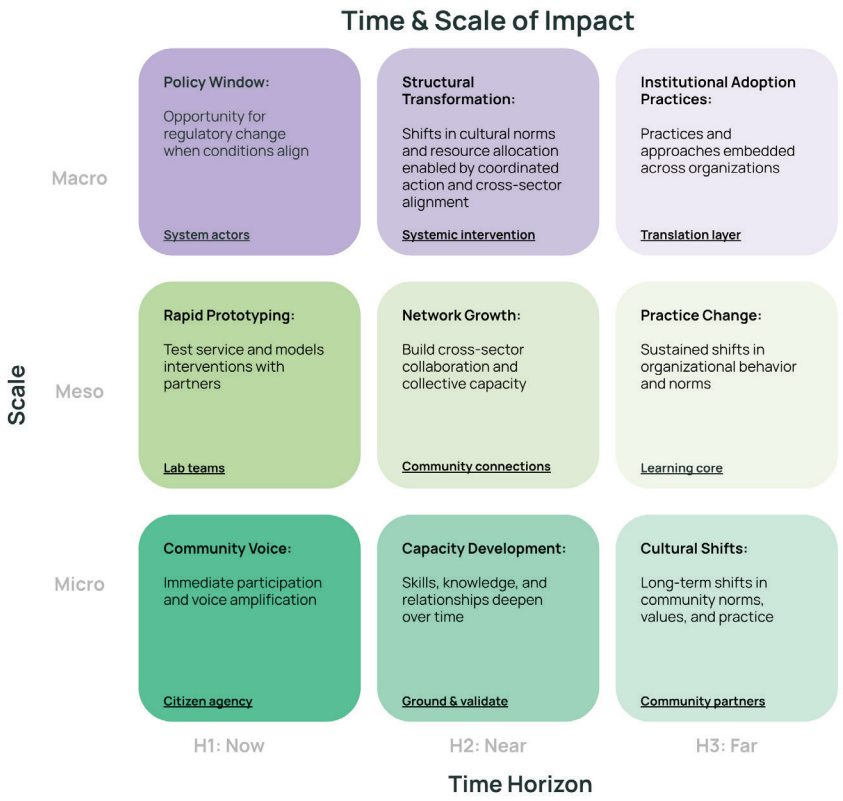
Guiding questions:

What has shifted since the last snapshot, in activities, actors, or areas of focus?

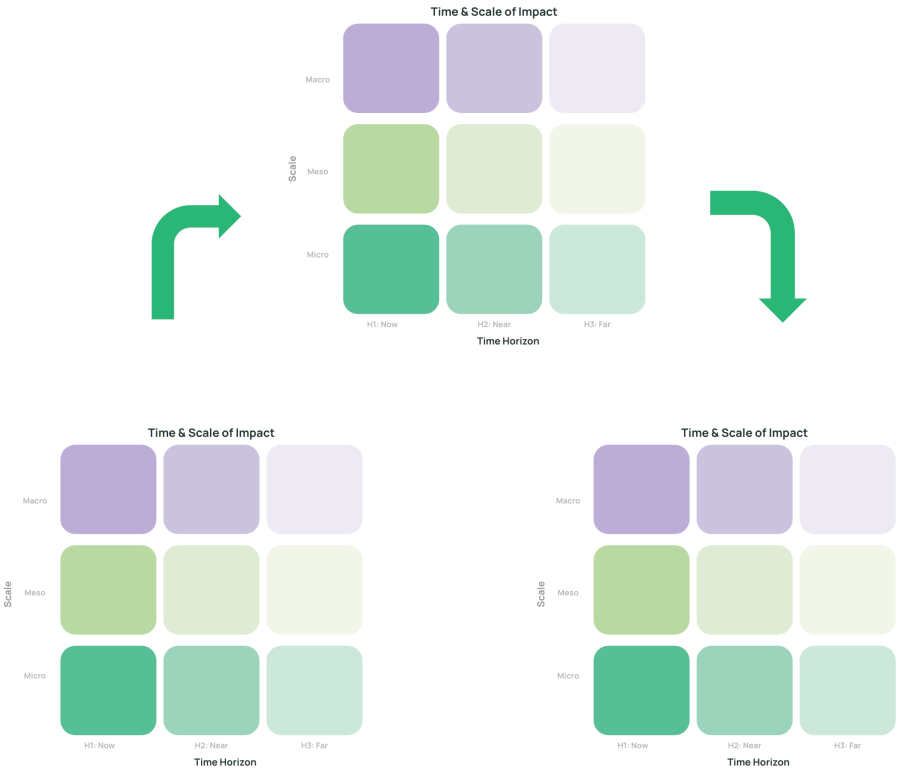
Where are we seeing effects beyond the initial scope?

Are we set up to navigate the next transition?

2.1 — Time and scale matrix



2.2 — Successive matrix snapshots



Tool 3

Approaches to visual storytelling: translating the process of change

3.1 — Narrative mapping

This approach makes visible how collective understanding, coordination, and strategic direction evolve throughout the social innovation process, including the shifts, tensions, and learning moments that shape how a challenge is interpreted over time.

Narrative mapping begins by identifying key moments that influenced the trajectory of the work. These moments may include pivots by project teams or partners, conflicts, new collaborations, community conversations, strategic shifts, key learning moments, or external events occurring across the ecosystem. Practitioners then map these moments sequentially to trace how understanding of the challenge evolved, how alignment and coordination between actors shifted, and how strategic direction emerged and was refined through practice.

This approach produces a sequenced temporal narrative map, typically represented as a timeline-based or sequential diagram, in which key moments are linked to shifts in meaning, alignment, and direction. It makes visible how understanding accumulates over time, how coordination patterns evolve, and how shared interpretation of the challenge is progressively constructed and adjusted through practice.

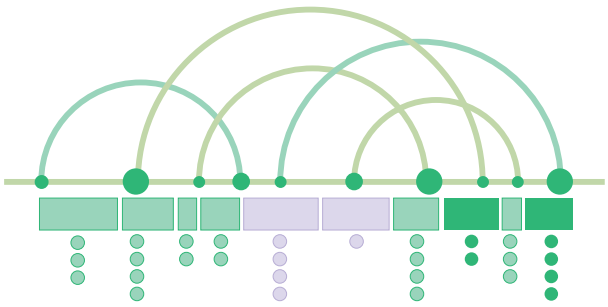
Guiding questions:

What key moments significantly shifted understanding or direction of the initiative?

How did interpretations of the challenge evolve over time?

How did coordination and alignment between actors change across phases of the work?

What forms of learning emerged at different moments in the process?



3.2 — Storyboarding change pathways

This approach makes visible how specific actions, relationships, and interventions generate change that travels across communities, organizations, networks, and systems over time. It focuses on tracing the mechanisms through which change emerges, accumulates, and produces effects across multiple scales, including both intended and unintended outcomes.

Practitioners begin by identifying a specific community-level change, shift, or outcome and tracing how it emerged over time. Using visual formats such as drawings, storyboards, flow charts, or other representations, they map the actions, relationships, strategies, and enabling conditions that contributed to this change.

This produces a multi-pathway systems map, typically represented as a flow-based visual, in which multiple interacting pathways illustrate how change is generated and amplified across scales. The emphasis is on mechanisms of change, including how interventions, relationships, and contextual conditions combine to produce both intended and unintended effects over time.

Community Sense-Making Partners co-interpret all storyboards and change pathways to ensure validity, identify blind spots, and prevent extractive interpretation of lived experience. This shared interpretation is central to relational accountability and grounding insights in context.

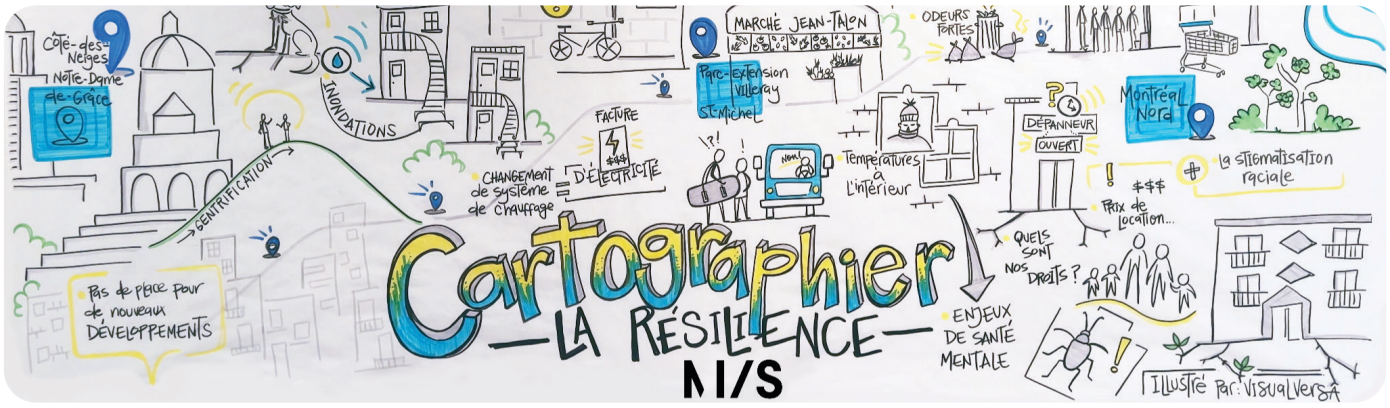
Guiding questions:

What specific change or outcome are we tracing, and how did it emerge?

What actions, relationships, or conditions enabled this change?

What intended and unintended effects are visible?

How do these pathways vary across contexts or communities?



Learning Through Sharing

Taken together, these narrative maps can also form the basis of shared public learning platforms and open data environments that make innovation processes more accessible and legible beyond the lab itself. These platforms can support collective learning by enabling practitioners, researchers, communities, and systems actors to explore how change unfolds across contexts and over time. By making relational dynamics, learning trajectories, and pathways of change more visible, they create opportunities for comparative analysis, further research, and the adaptation of insights to similar systemic challenges.

Conclusion

This framework is a living architecture, designed to evolve through practice. It is grounded in the idea that shifts in relationships are often both the earliest signals and the strongest drivers of systemic change.

Most frameworks used to assess impact were not built to capture these dynamics. As a result, the relational work that enables transformation often remains invisible: trust-building, coordination, experimentation, collective learning, and the gradual reshaping of systems over time. This framework proposes a different approach, one that treats accountability not as a static reporting exercise, but as a shared and evolving practice of sense-making across actors, relationships, and scales.

The tools it offers are designed to make these processes visible, legible, and actionable. Ultimately, they support a broader shift in how impact is understood: not only as measurable outcomes, but as relational accountability that unfolds within complex processes of change.

Beyond the Metrics : Redefining Accountability & Impact Measurement for Social Innovation Practitioners

This Framework was produced through the Social Innovation Impact initiative, a partnership between Maison de l'innovation sociale, the Winnipeg Boldness Project and Social Innovation Canada. Supported by funding from the Government of Canada's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Program, this initiative is helping social innovators track and demonstrate their impact in alignment with the SDGs and build capacity for impact measurement across the ecosystem.

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