

Building capacity for innovation and systems change

Achieving The Rockefeller Foundation's goals to build resilience and advance inclusive economies requires moving beyond traditional approaches to problem solving. New ways of thinking and working are needed in order to have impact at scale. The Rockefeller Foundation Global Fellowship Program on Social Innovation was designed to enable leaders to innovate in order to address the underlying causes of complex social and environmental challenges. With two successive cohorts of Fellowships now complete and a third underway, the timing is right to reflect on what the Foundation is learning about building individual and institutional capacity to innovate and drive systems change.

The 21st century has seen the rise of many complex social and environmental challenges. Traditional approaches are insufficient to solve these challenges; new and creative solutions are required to bring about sustained, transformative change.

To test its ability to build the capacity of social sector leaders to catalyze innovation in the global south, The Rockefeller Foundation launched its Global Fellowship Program on Social Innovation in 2013.¹ From its inception, the program sought to expose well-positioned social change agents to innovation and systems thinking, encouraging them to adopt new approaches to execute their visions for change—within their organizations and

beyond. In addition, by connecting leaders across sectors and geographies to work together to tackle challenges, the Foundation sought to advance its goals of building resilience and advancing inclusive economies.



¹ At the time of its launch in 2013, the program was referred to as "Rockefeller Foundation Global Fellowship on Social Innovation and Resilience."

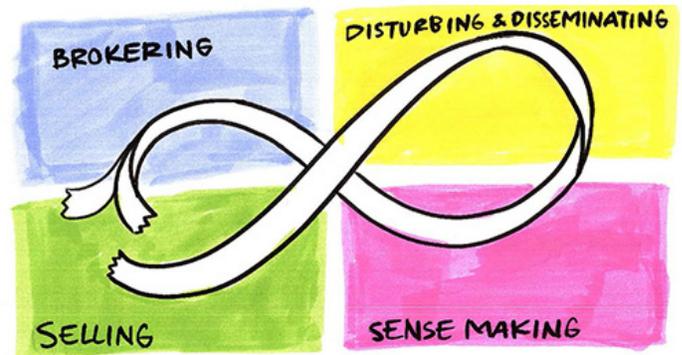
Sharing lessons for greater impact

Two cohorts of fellows have graduated from the Fellowship Program and a third is currently in progress. Independent assessments of the program have also been completed and a critical mass of information is now available about what is working and what is not for promoting innovation capacity. This information has and will continue to inform the Foundation's work. Given the program's focus on building capacity specifically in the areas of innovation and systems change, combined with its unique fellowship-based model, lessons learned may also be relevant to others with a similar stake in promoting innovation and systems thinking globally. This brief summarizes what the Foundation has learned through its Global Fellowship Program on Social Innovation to date. Much of the information contained in this brief was provided by independent evaluators from the Governance Network and University of Waterloo, who were engaged by the Foundation to generate evidence in support of program learning and course correction.

What have we learned?

The Fellowship Program is effectively targeting a diverse group of global leaders

Foundation grantees and partners from the private sector, social enterprises, development agencies, and non-governmental and philanthropic organizations working across a diverse range of issue areas, such as impact investing, economic growth, sustainability, and disaster relief – to name a few – are enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn more about complexity and to apply systems thinking to support their work. Each year, fellows are carefully selected by the Foundation based on their alignment with its programming and commitment to fundamentally altering the systems in which they work. The program has consistently been able to attract fellows with a high tolerance for risk and deep appreciation for collaboration. In total, 60 people – 55 percent of them females – have been enrolled as fellows since 2013. Fellows work in over twenty countries across five continents.



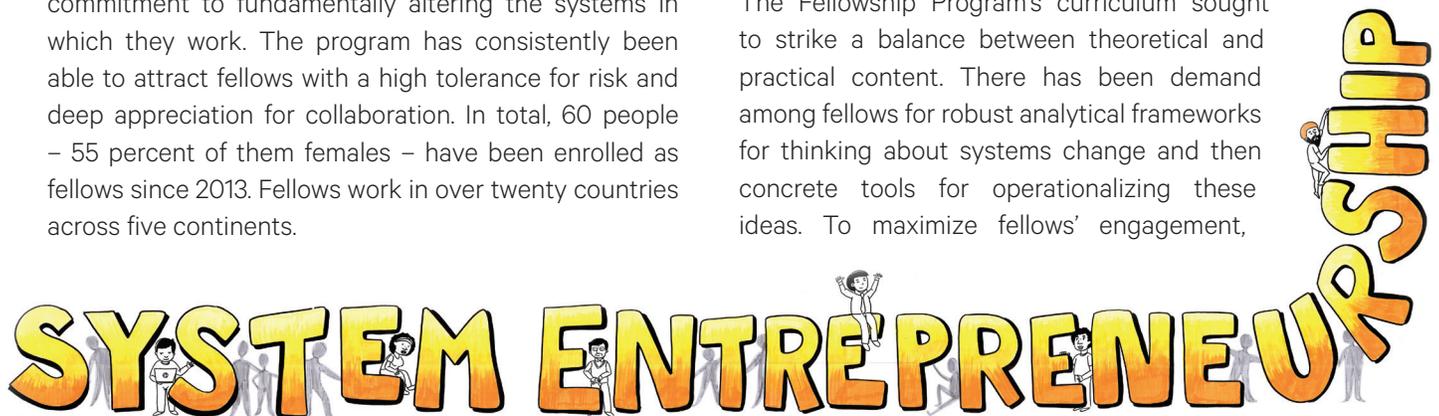
The Adaptive Cycle

Fellows are self-identifying as “system entrepreneurs”

After participating in the program, many fellows see themselves in a new light – as system entrepreneurs. System entrepreneurs are those who work not only to solve problems, but to address their underlying causes and the structures and relationships that sustain them. These are individuals who use their position of leadership within their system to shift resources, challenge power relationships, and navigate at multiple scales. A fellow from the inaugural year commented “I’m thinking systems... it’s not enough to run a successful organization; I need to influence the system I work in too,” while another noted that “I see my role in the larger system and my work as a system change maker.” Developing this new identity has helped fellows surface and interrogate their own assumptions and approaches to problem solving. Being a system entrepreneur means thinking about one’s own role in a completely different way.

Fellows need both theoretical and practical learning opportunities

The Fellowship Program’s curriculum sought to strike a balance between theoretical and practical content. There has been demand among fellows for robust analytical frameworks for thinking about systems change and then concrete tools for operationalizing these ideas. To maximize fellows’ engagement,



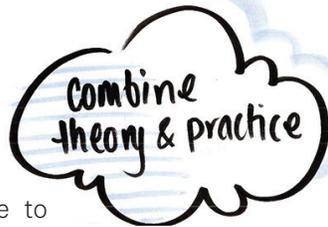
Fellow Spotlight: Bijal Brahmhatt, Director of Mahila Housing Trust



Bijal, a 2014-2015 fellow, leads Mahila Housing Trust, an organization that strives to empower women who live in slums to improve their communities and build local resilience. Before Bijal participated in the Fellowship Program, her organization focused its efforts on directly changing the lives of its beneficiaries. According to Bijal, after learning more about complexity and systems thinking, the organization “changed [its] strategy – and expanded [its focus] to systemic change and networking at scale.” Mahila Housing Trust has since brokered partnerships with new private sector companies and nurtured an internal organizational culture to support systems change.

It is expected that Mahila Housing Trust’s new innovative community-based programming approach will change the lives of more than 125,000 families in South Asia—giving them the tools and structures they need to design, develop, and implement their own solutions to climate problems in their communities.

the program curriculum mixed expert-led lecture-style sessions with more interactive and dynamic ones. Finally, establishing an environment conducive to candid conversation and honesty contributes to success. Facilitators deliberately create a “safe space” for learning and model behaviors for generating openness and motivating teams.



The very notion of a “fellowship” is integral

Unlike traditional training programs, which focus primarily on knowledge and skills development, the Global Fellowship Program on Social Innovation goes one step further to also emphasize network building and collaboration. Fellows report that they are “part of a community of practice with whom [they] can be accountable and bounce off ideas.” One fellow reported that “to develop a bond in a short period where [co-fellows] provide you support – and

at the same time provide you with constructive criticism without judging – is of tremendous value.”

Framing this program as a fellowship nurtures a sense of community and commonality among



participants. This has enabled them to relate to one another’s challenges and develop a commitment to work together toward ambitious goals.

Fellows bring what they have learned back to their organizations

Many fellows report changes to their behavior, including engaging colleagues in new ways of thinking, fostering improved dialogue, applying dynamic analysis and planning tools such as the adaptive cycle,² demonstrating commitment to learning, and forging new internal and external partnerships. Some fellows have challenged their organizations’ theories of change and surfaced implicit beliefs and norms, resulting in new insights and ideas for improved practice.

Others are working to apply multiple lenses to understand systems more fully and strategically. However, while fellows feel confident thinking strategically and seeing the bigger picture, they



² The adaptive cycle is a framework that describes the four phases that social and ecological systems need to go through to strengthen their capacity for resilience and growth. It provides the mechanism through which innovations can reach a stage of maturation, yet keep abreast of changing needs.

“I feel more motivated to deal with imminent change in our organization, cause disruption where necessary, and exercise more influence in strategic matters.” – 2014/2015 Fellow

sometimes face challenges putting ideas into practice within the context of their organizations and systems.

Maintaining momentum between modules is challenging

Since modules are months apart, deliberate effort needs to be made to sustain momentum between them. This is particularly challenging when dealing with such a diverse group of high-profile individuals, representing different countries, languages, and sectors. The Foundation is testing different approaches for stimulating continued learning throughout the year. Initial evaluation findings indicate, however, that informal communication is happening on an ongoing basis with fellows – including those from different cohorts. Fellows are routinely sharing updates and news with one another and have established e-groups to facilitate discussion about their work.

Unlikely partnerships present opportunity

Ordinarily, partnerships are formed between like-minded individuals and organizations. However, fellows have noted that the program has helped them realize that they need to establish relationships with new and unlikely partners in order to move the needle on systems change. Fellows Francisco José Noguera, a consultant formerly with Social Innovations Lab in Colombia, and Amy Chester from the U.S.-based Rebuild By Design have been collaborating on design-based resilience competitions as a result of participating in the Fellowship Program together. Similarly, fellows Lina Useche from Brazilian Aliança Empreendedora and Ahmet Dawalak

from Mercy Corps in Niger have worked together to install an early warning system in Niger. These are just two examples of the many collaborations that have been catalyzed through the program.

Measuring institutional and systems change is a long-term endeavor

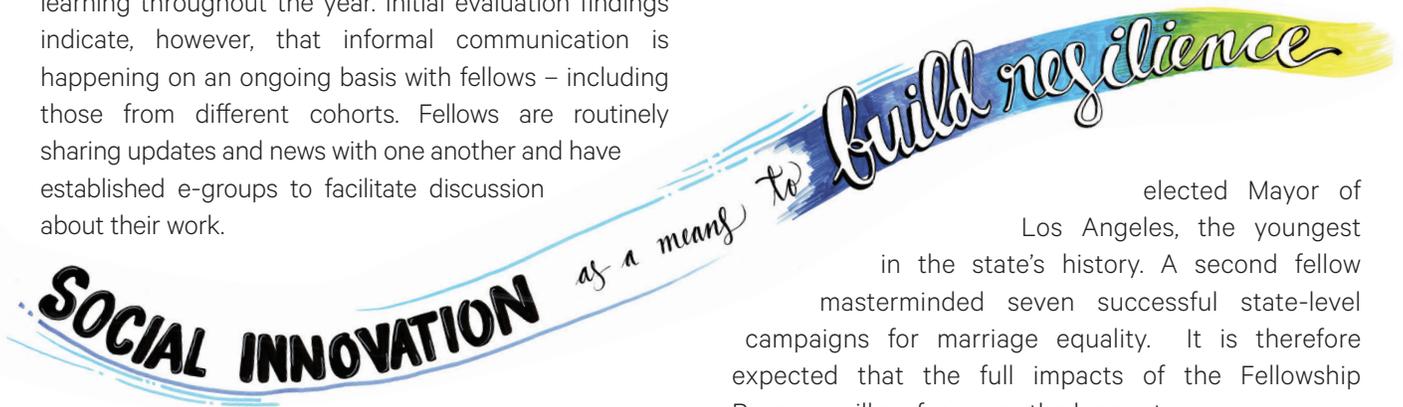
Measuring short-term outcomes of the Fellowship Program, including fellows’ abilities to ask strategic questions, formulate long-term strategies for innovation, and develop plans for scaling programs, is relatively straightforward. However, as the Foundation has learned through its history of investing in individuals who have the potential to create lasting impact - from American Playwrights to “Rocky Docs”- the further down the results chain one goes, the longer it takes to observe and measure changes. As but one example, The Rockefeller Foundation’s Next Generation Leadership Program trained five cohorts of diverse US fellows in the late 1990s. Fifteen years later, one of the inaugural fellows was

elected Mayor of Los Angeles, the youngest in the state’s history. A second fellow masterminded seven successful state-level campaigns for marriage equality. It is therefore expected that the full impacts of the Fellowship Program will surface over the longer term.

Moving Forward: Lessons for the Social Innovation Community

Emphasize soft skills. Empathy, negotiation, and listening skills are necessary for building networks and facilitating complex conversations among diverse stakeholders. By building these skills, individuals can be better prepared to broker new partnerships and work productively with others.

Connect content to fellows’ context. Translating new mindsets and knowledge into contextually-appropriate innovative practice is challenging. By



increasing the diversity in the faculty, leveraging alumni fellows, and sharing more case studies from the global south, it may be possible to make the content even more relatable and applicable. In countries or cultures where language about social innovation does not exist, creativity is required to communicate these concepts effectively.



Manage expectations. It should be made clear what fellows can expect to get out of the program, and what is expected of them in return. Similarly, stakeholders should be mindful that the full impacts of interventions will not be seen for many years, and that impacts are highly dependent on factors that are outside the control of the program.

Prioritize quality and diversity. Fellows have expressed appreciation for the diversity of people represented in the program. Gender balance and representation from various sectors and countries across five continents has enriched fellows' learning experience. Fellows have also shared that "[b]ecause the Foundation hand-selects the fellows, there's a high quality of influential people who can help make change. So the connections are very powerful."

Adapt as necessary. The program made significant changes between its first, second, and third cohorts and continues to change its agenda to meet the needs of the fellows. The success of this program depends on its ability to evolve in response to ever-changing contexts, while at the same time remaining anchored in a set of proven concepts, frameworks, and experiences.

Conclusion

The Rockefeller Foundation believes that innovation is the key to unlocking breakthrough solutions to complex problems. The Global Fellowship Program on Social Innovation represents an effort by the Foundation to build innovation capacity to help individuals and, in turn, organizations to find the skills, tools, and mindsets to catalyze innovation and systems change. By sharing the learning emerging from the program, the Foundation aims to equip those with a stake in leveraging innovation for social good to adapt and improve their capacity building efforts for greater impact.

For more information, please contact The Rockefeller Foundation's Monitoring and Evaluation Office at: rfevaluation@rockfound.org

About The Rockefeller Foundation

For more than 100 years, The Rockefeller Foundation's mission has been to promote the well-being of humanity throughout the world. Today, The Rockefeller Foundation pursues this mission through dual goals: advancing inclusive economies that expand opportunities for more broadly shared prosperity, and building resilience by helping people, communities, and institutions prepare for, withstand, and emerge stronger from acute shocks and chronic stresses.

Monitoring and Evaluation at The Rockefeller Foundation

Committed to supporting learning, accountability, and performance improvements, the Foundation's Monitoring and Evaluation team works with staff, grantees, and partners to monitor and evaluate the Foundation's pathways to impact in the short- and long-term, and to capture lessons about what works and what doesn't across the Foundation's diverse portfolio.

