

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Nonprofits & NGOs

To Get to the Good, You Gotta Dance With the Wicked

There may not be one resolution to wicked problems and nonprofits can't—and shouldn't—do it all.

By [Cynthia Gibson](#), [Katya Smyth](#), [Gail Nayowith](#), & [Jonathan Zaff](#) | Sep. 19, 2013

In their recent article, [“When Good Is Not Good Enough”](#) (http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/when_good_is_not_good_enough) (*Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2013), Bill Shore, Darell Hammond, and Amy Celep conclude that the social sector needs to “shift its attention from modest goals that provide short-term relief to bold goals that, while harder to achieve, provide long-term solutions by tackling the root of social problems.” The authors base their conclusion on hard questions about whether what they, as leading social entrepreneurs, initially saw as solutions to difficult social problems were even making a dent.

It's rare that successful people talk publicly about their failures, and when they do, it's usually little more than a brief aside, so it was a nice surprise to see this honest article. As people who have served as community workers, advocates, nonprofit executives, researchers, philanthropic advisors, and government employees to address an array of social problems inextricably linked to poverty, we agree with the authors' conclusion. Like many of our colleagues, we've employed the tactics that Shore, Hammond, and Celep identify as essential: policy advocacy, cross-sector collaboration, and moving from one-shot programs or interventions to more systemic, multi-tiered strategies. We've also engaged other strategies that the article didn't cover, including legislation drafting, litigation, policy research, budget advocacy, and community organizing.

Nimbly juggling multiple tactics and strategies is hardly the *modus operandi* of “simplistic” organizations “built on flawed foundations focused on symptoms, rather than on deeper systemic

change.” Certainly, there are some organizations that fall into that category, but many more use thoughtful and nuanced approaches to fundamental change around problems that are anything but simple. In fact, our experience shows that *despite* incorporating the very tactics the authors suggest, organizations often end up in the same place as Shore, Hammond, and Celep now find themselves: perennially struggling to resolve problems that have complex and messy roots.

In short, what the authors describe in their article is necessary but not sufficient for transformational change.

Transformational change requires digging down into the trenches and facing the reality that problems like poverty are nuanced and multi-dimensional and may require an array of approaches to resolve (note that we use the word “resolve” versus “solve”). It requires understanding that definitions of problems are fluid and subjective. It means wrestling with the uncomfortable truth that we can’t address everything. At the same time, the more narrowly we define a problem, the more we throw the important intersections with other issues (the pernicious overlap between poverty and violence, for example) into the shadows. It means authentically engaging the community in every step of the process—including identifying issues, creating plans to address them, and rolling them out. It also means accepting that an unforeseen crisis sometimes wipes away gains, allies and advocates sometimes move on to other issues, energy wanes, and resources dry up.

So what does all that mean for those of us who share Shore, Hammond, and Celep’s commitment to achieving big goals and trying to resolve big problems? We’d like to add some recommendations to their list of “to dos”—recommendations that spring from our own hard-earned experiences.

1. We can’t resolve “wicked problems” with one “solution”—maybe not even ten. Continued efforts to build on single franchised interventions will not succeed in eradicating poverty, homelessness, or educational failure—and it’s hubris and naïve to think that they can.

That’s not defeatist; it’s accepting the finite impact that a nonprofit or group of nonprofits can have when dealing with what we see as “wicked” problems. Wicked problems, because they’re usually ill-defined and morph with context and time, typically rely on elusive “political judgment

for resolution.”¹ They also don’t usually occur in a vacuum; they’re reflective of the wildly unpredictable environments—physical, social, economic, and geographic—in which people live, as well as the social history of race, class, gender, and place baked into community, personal identity, behavior, and worldview.

Wicked problems require what Roger Martin, dean of University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, calls “integrative thinking,” defined as:

... the ability to constructively face the tensions of opposing models, and instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generating a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new model that contains elements of the individual models, but is superior to each. Integrative thinkers build models rather than choose between them. Their models include consideration of numerous variables—customers, employees, competitors, capabilities, cost structures, industry evolution, and regulatory environment—not just a subset ... and capture the complicated, multi-faceted and multidirectional causal relationships between the key variables in any problem.²

Subscribe | Sign In

Attempts to devise a strategy to “solve” wicked problems, therefore, are inherently flawed because the process of formulating the problem and conceiving solutions are identical. In short, every specification of the problem insinuates a direction for intervention, and every wicked problem can be a symptom of another problem. It’s like a game of whack-a-mole: Try to address one problem, and another one pops up somewhere else.

One of the reasons people living in poverty have trouble getting jobs, for example, is that they can’t afford childcare. If an intervention helps them obtain affordable childcare, they may then face another challenge of not having transportation to get to a job site. Or maybe their new job raises their income level to the point where they no longer qualify for housing support.

That doesn’t mean, of course, that we don’t keep trying to tackle big problems and set big goals. What it means is that we accept that no matter how many “solutions” we devise—systemic or otherwise—they may not be adequate to ever completely eradicate wicked problems like poverty. It also means that the current trend toward “innovate, prototype, refine, and scale” is a model

that's inherently flawed, because problems don't stand still. Our solutions—our models—can't either.

In 1995, as an Echoing Green fellow, one of the co-authors of this article (Katya F. Smyth) founded **On The Rise, Inc.** (<http://www.ontherise.org>), a community-based organization of women who are homeless and face myriad other challenges. She quickly discovered that most had long histories of domestic violence and childhood abuse, but when they tried to get help, they had to decide whether they were “homeless” or “a trauma survivor”—it had to be one or the other, because programs and systems weren't set up to provide more than one narrowly designed “service.” The options available weren't appropriate for the women who needed help.

Smyth also recognized the need for the organization to change over time. She suggested to her staff that if she came back in five years, they shouldn't be doing the same thing that they were doing when she left, even though it had been extremely effective. Why? Because what it meant to be a chronically homeless trauma survivor in 2011 would be very different from what it was in 2006. She realized that as laws, regulations, and social norms change, so too must the organization's practice.

Smyth also realized that upstream policy work was needed—not necessarily to address homelessness or domestic violence per se, but to change systems so they could better respond to the intersection of entrenched poverty, violence, and trauma that often collide as part of a person's experience. In 2007, Smyth launched the **Full Frame Initiative** (<http://www.fullframeinitiative.org>) (FFI), which brings the real-life lessons and experiences of organizations working in the trenches to bear in larger policy, program, and public initiatives. By doing so, FFI underscores the complex interplay of issues that fuel difficult problems such as poverty and violence.

FFI's model stipulates five domains of wellbeing: social connectedness, safety, stability, mastery (for example, control, choice, and the skills necessary to influence one's environment or situation), and meaningful access to relevant mainstream resources. The model suggests that the problem is not that we don't know how to make people safe (or stable or connected); it's that we often make them safe at the cost of eroding the other domains of wellbeing. Organizations that effectively minimize tradeoffs among these five domains help people make progress and achieve better outcomes. They also increase the likelihood that people can and will sustain that progress.

2. Wicked problems aren't an organizational responsibility; they're everyone's responsibility.

Shore, Hammond, and Celeb imply that resolving wicked problems is primarily the responsibility of organizations, rather than the larger ecosystem in which these problems are occurring. This is problematic for a number of reasons, mostly because it puts organizations and programs—instead of people—at the center of an issue.

We're not criticizing model-centric nonprofits or romanticizing “people power” as the sole factor in making change. But we've learned the hard way that the more an organization positions itself—or its model—at the center of a resolution, the less sustainable the progress it creates. Admittedly, some of what's driving this is a tendency for investors to focus on organizations, because they're easier to fund and evaluations of them usually attribute success to their efforts. But we often overlook the rest of the ecosystem, which arguably has an equal, if not more, pronounced role in results.

Subscribe | Sign In We believe that organizations doing the bold work that Shore, Hammond, and Celeb call for have a responsibility to name this discrepancy and move forward to serve as catalysts, rather than primary implementers, for change. Experience shows that the most effective approaches for embedding long-term change are those that put children, youth, and families at the center of strategies that work with organizations across sectors and are committed to focusing on the overall ecology in which wicked problems occur. Nevertheless, planning often centers around institutions and structures.³

Institutional foci also tend to fall into sector or domain silos. Shore, Hammond, and Celeb believe that needs to change, because cross-sector and multidisciplinary approaches are critical to tackling wicked problems. We suggest that, given the deep experience that both the authors and we have had in working with a wide variety of domains and sectors, this is a particularly fruitful area for more collaboration. We would stress, however, that collaboration across formal resources—nonprofits, government, and the private sector—is incomplete unless those who have to live the changes are brought in and authentically involved.

3. Wicked problems require attention to history. It's important sometimes to take a step back and acknowledge and learn from others who've been engaged in anti-poverty work for a long time, and to identify what's worked and what hasn't—and why.

“Setting big goals that address the root causes of big problems,” for example, has been a clarion call among nonprofits working on these issues for decades. Use of the phrase “root causes,” in fact, was once *de rigueur* in any discussion about poverty, but it fell out of fashion in recent years, to the point where those who used it were considered naïve or using it as a crutch to avoid focusing on more “concrete” outcomes. Not surprisingly, that perspective coincided with the rise of social entrepreneurialism, social enterprise, and more “business-like” approaches to social problems. The latter were led by a set of new players with a commitment to results, energy, and fearless optimism, which some investors saw as a welcome change from a seemingly tired and ineffective root-causes approach.

The irony is that many of these new initiatives steered away from the activities—such as policy advocacy—that Shore, Hammond, and Celeb now say are essential to resolving big (that is, wicked) problems. Meanwhile, organizations engaging in advocacy and these other recommended strategies saw their funding dry up. Now it seems we’ve come full circle, with those who drifted away from root-cause strategies once again calling for them.

Subscribe | Sign In

It’s time to put an end to these debates about which approach is “better” or “more effective” and who is “in” or “out.” We need to acknowledge that there aren’t many clear distinctions among symptoms, root causes, and problems; we need to leverage the skills, assets, and resources of all approaches and groups to achieve big goals.

4. Wicked problems require dynamic policy strategies, but they’re not always a quick win—or even winnable. We appreciate the authors’ admonition to “pick policy battles big enough to matter but small enough to win,” but we think this is tactical rather than strategic and may not lead to the results they want to achieve.

First, policy battles aren’t usually that simple or linear. They’re also not usually divorced from what’s going on in the larger environment; what may look like a winnable policy battle today may not be winnable tomorrow due to an array of unforeseen factors. As the authors note, the issues that demand policy advocacy are usually systems issues—those that involve government and policymakers, along with the larger community, and that presuppose changes in access or distribution. New York City’s **Earned Income Tax Credit**

(http://www.nyc.gov/html/ofc/html/policy_and_programs/eitc.shtml) (EITC), for example, was made possible

primarily because it was pegged to the sitting mayor's proposed property tax rebate—a strategy developed by a group of advocates, legislative aides, and elected officials who wanted to ease the tax burden on low-income working families that rented but didn't own their homes.

Second, most policy experts and advocates—including one of the co-authors of this article (Gail Nayowith) who has decades of policy advocacy experience—know that what seems like the most winnable policy battle isn't necessarily so. For example, despite an iron-clad body of research demonstrating that there is a triple-bottom-line return on investment from supporting early childhood education and childcare—findings that the Federal Reserve, Nobel Prize-winning economists, and the country's top philanthropies have touted—these issues have been relatively immune to advocacy on ensuring universal access.

Third, even if an organization does play a role in making policy changes, it doesn't necessarily mean that those changes will be sustainable or widely adopted. The “Seatbelts Save Lives” slogan, for example, set the stage for ensuring car safety, but it was an insufficient condition for preventing auto-related fatalities. To bolster these public health messages, states also had to enact laws and enforce them through tickets and fines.

Behavioral change is also one outcome. John Gaventa of St. Francis Xavier University views change as a function of how much power people have over their lives. His theoretical and methodological framework goes beyond seeing power as who wins and who loses. Instead, power is multi-dimensional; those in power can wield it behind the scenes by preventing decisions or participation. In fact, the highest level of power is one that is rarely acknowledged because it is hard to see. It's the ability to frame an issue; determine who gets to comment on that issue and its solutions; and, ultimately, embed the results into a cultural practice, belief, or ethos. The latter, Gaventa argues, may be the deepest form of “impact” a social change initiative can have.⁴

Fourth, as mentioned above, because policy work often applies simple tactics or a single piece of legislation to address wicked problems, the unintended consequences of a policy change can create new, more pernicious problems. Originally intended to provide a safety net for people living in poverty, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, for example, unintentionally became a social welfare system that created disincentives by reducing benefits if people got jobs, married, or supported children. Another example is school reform accountability; testing and benchmarking

has led to some school districts to cheating and pushing out students who might bring the school's scores down.

Finally, the inherent assumption that policy change is a “battle” suggests that policy makers are the problem and nonprofits are the solution or that naming a problem and suggesting that more money will fix it is a “solution.” In our experience, the best advocacy brings together nonprofits, affected constituents, and forward-thinking policymakers and their staff to drive change within and across departments, divisions, and agencies. This strategy leverages the knowledge, influence, and relationships within policymaking organizations toward change, rather than pitting them as the enemy.

And it works: In Massachusetts, government agencies that regulate and oversee the state's response to sexual violence, domestic violence, and homelessness have been advocating an ambitious agenda to improve the state's response to the intersection of these issues. Nonprofits, community groups, and survivors' experiences all informed the need for this work and have helped to keep it going, but the solutions have not been imposed on government; these groups have arrived at solutions in partnership with government.

Subscribe | Sign In

We would, therefore, encourage Shore, Hammond, and Celeb to think carefully about how they define policy battles. Advocacy and other mobilization strategies should align as much as possible if they are to lead to lasting and meaningful results, rather than a set of outputs. Yes, postcards and petitions are important, and they're easier to evaluate than an organization's role in, say, protecting the food security benefits in the recent farm bill reauthorization. But the latter may be the strategy that builds the longer-term and more pronounced change the authors seek. In the meantime, continuing to enroll children in a program that an organization is gutting may lead to even more problems down the road. And while initiatives to de-stigmatize food insecurity through in-classroom meals or universal eligibility for free lunches are important, if the federal budget that subsidizes these programs is axed, it could spell the end.

We'd also encourage more investors to support advocacy, community engagement, and public education work, which they're still somewhat reluctant to do, despite years of organizational efforts to show that without these kinds of strategies, most attempts to achieve big goals simply won't happen.

5. Wicked problems need clear and detailed theories of change. We're not anti-metric; on the contrary, we strongly support and try to employ rigorous evaluation in all of our work (and would like to see more quality evaluations supported by funders and provided by third-party evaluators). Good strategy and evaluation depend on a theory of change that goes beyond broad-stroke goals or particular interventions. It includes clearly articulated ideas about the cause of a problem, hypotheses for how to address it, goals and strategies, and specific actions and indicators—both outputs and outcomes, and impact—for all. Without each of these elements, it's likely that efforts to tackle big goals will remain transactional rather than transformational.

Organizations must be more explicit in providing detailed theories of change behind the problems they are addressing. That said, this level of detail may not always be possible, and even the most elegant theory of change doesn't necessarily end with clarity. Wicked problems put up a vicious fight against the best theories of change, because long-term, transformational changes will never lend themselves to logic models with neat little boxes. Wicked issues are shape-shifting, and our theories of change must be clear enough to guide us yet flexible enough to keep up with the problem.

It's also important to acknowledge that context matters, and even when successes do occur, no one can say with 100 percent certainty that it was because of a particular intervention or one organization's efforts. In some cases, it may simply boil down to good timing. There are countless examples of organizations spending millions of dollars and hundreds of person hours on a particular issue that went nowhere until some precipitating event occurred and moved it up to the front burner.

But sometimes we get it right. In a systematic review of research conducted on community collaborations, one of the co-authors of this article (Jonathan F. Zaff) found that the primary difference between collaborations that have substantive impacts on community-level outcomes and those that don't is that successful collaborations have a clear theory of change that's aligned with the community's determined goals.⁵ When these pieces are not aligned (for example, when we see teacher quality as the sole strategy for resolving the nation's graduation crisis), large-scale impact will not follow.

6. Different stakeholders understand wicked problems differently. There's little question that without the intentional involvement of and partnership with the community (however that's defined—constituents, residents, beneficiaries, organizations), proposed solutions will likely fail to achieve longer-term impact.

Building community involvement means going beyond asking people for input that outside “experts” use to make decisions or inviting them to plug into existing, pre-determined programs, initiatives, or campaigns that experts have developed.⁶ It means recognizing community members as actors in all facets of planning, implementing, assessing, and developing efforts to strengthen their community—and their own lives.⁷

Auspiciously, there's been growing awareness among public officials, school administrators, and other traditional decision makers of the importance of involving community members as partners in identifying problems, developing strategies to address them, and then working together to implement co-created action plans. One particularly promising approach is participatory budgeting—meetings that bring together legislators with citizens to figure out, weigh in, and vote on funding priorities. In recent years, this model has become increasingly attractive to policymakers, because it spreads the responsibility for making sometimes-painful decisions across the entire community. The community, in turn, can apply its distributed wisdom to increasingly complex problems that have become too challenging for just one constituency to address. Ultimately, these kinds of collective processes can lead to more robust ways of solving tough systemic problems.⁸

A critical part of those processes is giving the people who are most affected by wicked problems the opportunity to identify what *they* think the issue and its “roots” are. Not doing so risks wasting a lot of time, energy, and resources on solutions that fail because they weren't designed to address the real problem.

We acknowledge that real partnership isn't easy. As one of the co-authors of this article (Cynthia M. Gibson), who has worked with numerous organizations and foundations on civic engagement issues, has written, it's messy and needs tending and nurturing. It requires navigating the gray area where solutions are neither the sole purview of nonprofits or government, nor to some idyllic

conception of community. And partnerships need a foundation of trust and strong relationships that, because they are process-oriented, takes time and patience to develop. The result, though, is worth it: Communities can come together to address *any* issue they confront over the long-term because they have the social capital and sense of agency to do so. What better measure of long-term impact is there?

We'd therefore encourage Shore, Hammond, and Celeb and the rest of the social sector to champion this approach, walk the talk by incorporating it into their efforts going forward, and persuade others to do the same. We'd also like them to join us in educating investors about why it's important to consider supporting these kinds of collaborations and dynamic solutions, rather than focusing only on outcomes. Without resources to optimize collaborations, why would we expect collaborations to optimize outcomes?⁹

With gratitude for the solid foundation laid by Shore, Hammond, and Celep, we have suggested a few additional factors we believe are worthy of serious consideration in any framework that is focused on moving from transactional to transformational social change. These concepts are nuanced and complex, and embracing that complexity is essential if we want to move beyond short-term outcomes that may or may not change the game. That's not easy: Most people understandably would rather hear "we have the solution," than "we don't have the magic bullet, but here are some of the most important pieces of the puzzle." It's time to hunker down and get real. We hope we can do it together.

Subscribe | Sign In

NOTES

¹ Horst Rittel & Melvin Weber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* (4), 155-169, 1973.

² Definition of integrative thinking, Rotman School of Management Website, University of Toronto. Retrieved on September 1, 2013 at:

<http://www-2.rotman.utoronto.ca/integrativethinking/definition.htm>

(<http://www-2.rotman.utoronto.ca/integrativethinking/definition.htm>) .

³ J.F. Zaff, “A Cease and Desist Order for School Reform: It is Time for Educational Transformation,” *Applied Developmental Science*, 15, 1-5 2011. J.F. Zaff & B. Smerdon, “Putting Children Front and Center: Building Coordinated Social Policy for America’s Children,” *Applied Developmental Science*, 13, 105-118, 2009.

⁴ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, University of Illinois Press, 1980. P. Speer, & J. Hughey, “Community Organizing: An Ecological Route to Empowerment and Power,” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), pp. 729-748, 1995. N.W. Polsby, “The Sociology of Community Power: A Reassessment,” *Social Forces*, 37, pp. 232-236, 1959. P. Bachrach & M.S. Baratz “Two Faces of Power,” *American Political Science Review*, 56 pp. 947-952, 1962.

⁵ J.F. Zaff & E.S. Lin, *Community Collaboration for Community Change*, Center for Promise, 2010.

⁶ Richard Harwood, *Hope Unraveled: The People’s Retreat and Our Way Back*, Kettering Foundation Press, 2005.

⁷ John Kretzmann & John McKnight, *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*, ACTA Publications, 1993.

⁸ Kristi Kimball & Malka Kopell, “Letting Go,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2011. Matt Leighninger, *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule is Giving Way to Shared Governance—And Why Politics Will Never be the Same*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.

⁹ Cynthia Gibson, *Citizens at the Center: A New Approach to Civic Engagement*, Case Foundation, 2007; *Citizens at the Center: Lessons in Leveraging Public Participation from the Make it Your Own Awards* (with P. Levine & P. Deitz), Case Foundation, 2012; “Citizens at the Center: A Refocused Approach to Civic Engagement,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Winter 2006.



Cynthia M. Gibson is an independent consultant with foundations and nonprofits, a widely published writer on nonprofit and philanthropic issues, and a former program officer at Carnegie Corporation of New York.



Katya F. Smyth is founder and CEO of the Full Frame Initiative, founder and former CEO of On The Rise, Inc., and a research affiliate of MIT's CoLab.



Gail B. Nayowith is executive director of SCO Family of Services, founding executive director of the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, and former executive director of Citizens' Committee for Children of New York City.



Jonathan F. Zaff is senior vice president, research and policy development, at America's Promise Alliance and director of the Center for Promise at Tufts University.

Subscribe | Sign In

If you like this article enough to print it, be sure to subscribe to SSIR!

Copyright © 2016 Stanford University.
Designed by Arsenal, developed by Hop Studios