

Getting it wrong & going backwards

Notes for social innovators
from Sarah Schulman &
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We, like many of you, aspire to make
the world a better place.

We want saner, greener, healthier,
happier, fairer, more meaningful lives.

But it's not easy.

It's not easy to develop solutions that re-solve complex social problems; and when we do find promising solutions, people and systems are often unable to transition to new ways of living and doing.

Spreading new ways of living and doing may be the common mission of us social innovators, but as people focused on the future we're often disinclined to look back and ask ourselves, 'Did the last project positively change lives?'

We have our own healthy portfolio of failures, of social innovations without social impact. Having reflected on them, we'd like to share a few thoughts on how we think change happens.

We think change starts by grappling with the right sized problem.

When we've worked on social problems like **crime** and **educational disengagement** they've been parceled into projects so tightly framed we missed the bigger picture.

In trying to describe the problem, we too often assumed the solution; **educational disengagement** implicated schools when the solution actually existed outside of schools.

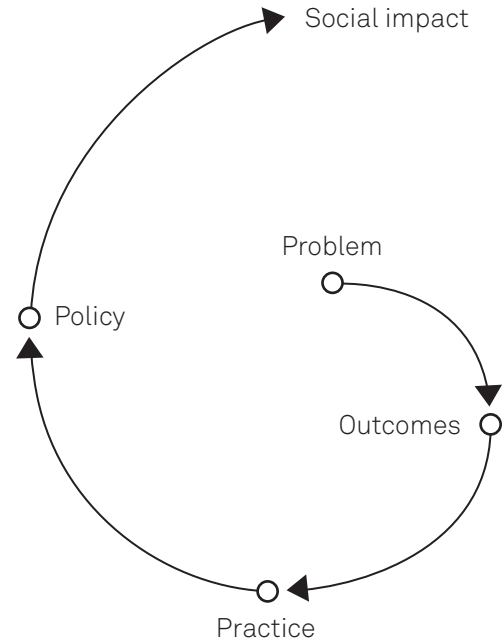
In trying to understand the problem, we too often mistook symptoms for causes and facts for values; that meant our solutions were often out of sequence and out of context.

We think we need a problem-solving approach that can measure up to the size and complexity of big social problems.

In the past, when we were faced with this complexity, we took shortcuts. We designed policy without engaging people or practitioners. We designed new practice without first challenging and then changing policy.

Taking shortcuts has led us to dead ends. These dead ends have led us to change course; to adopt an approach with some different starting points, some different end points, and some different middle bits too.

Now we work **with** people, **with** practitioners, and **with** policymakers. And we work **backwards**, building from problems to outcomes, from outcomes to practice, and from practice to policy.



We get to know people in their everyday contexts: the front room, the front desk, the back office, and the boardroom to learn about their realities, expectations, and ambitions.

We bring these insights together with evidence from the social sciences to work **backwards** from the problem to outcomes.

We work **backwards** from **what could be** to **how it could be**, bringing people together to co-design practice around the obvious and obscure factors that shape outcomes.

We use prototyping to workout what those solutions look and feel like; to develop the practice that best supports those outcomes, and then the policies that best support those practices.

We end with a redefined problem, reset outcomes, and a demonstration of new ways of living and doing for people, practitioners and policymakers.

Of course, this is really just the beginning of bringing those new ways of living and doing into being.

We work with governments, third-sector funders, private partners, and communities to generate vehicles and resource streams for taking solutions to sustained reality; vehicles like social enterprises, new public services, campaigns, and informal networks.

It's not easy.

Our experience tells us that working **with** requires project teams who are empathetic and curious, who can listen and hear, and who are able to move seamlessly between the front room and the boardroom.

Our experience also tells us that working **backwards** requires thinking analytically, philosophically, creatively, and practically to imagine **what could be** and then to build it, test it, and improve it.

Our way of working **with** and
backwards blends policy and design.

Design doing gives us the tools to
work with people in their everyday
lives, to visualize and enact how
things could be different.

Policy thinking helps us to ask tough questions and look at underlying assumptions; it provides us with the space to confront our values about what constitutes good living and good practice.

We've learnt that grappling with social problems is never value-free. And, it helps to be explicit about the values you have. Here are ours:

Everybody deserves to live the good life.

For us, problem free is never good enough.

Our version of the good life isn't just about freedom from the bad stuff, but freedom to experience the good stuff. We like to think of this as the freedom to do, to be, and to grow.

Freedom to do is about knowing how and having the opportunity to influence our life through our choices, skills, and strengths.

Freedom to be is about feeling good and feeling appreciated for who we are and what we can offer our families, communities, and society.

Freedom to grow is about feeling safe, secure, valued and connected enough to have hopes, take risks, and discover new possibilities.

Getting to the good life is about enabling independence through interdependence. We work to raise collective ambitions and build collective responsibility for new ways of living, doing and growing.

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