Strategies for tackling complex problems: the social innovation matrix.

In an increasingly interdependent, globalized society addressing complex problems often requires coordinated action[1]. A set of diverse actors need to develop a common understanding of the problem, a shared vision for change, a coordinated action plan and a set of key progress indicators.

The Social Innovation Matrix (SIM)[2] is a tool that converges thinking across these elements. The SIM uses the five levels of perspective from the iceberg model of systems thinking to describe the current situation, the vision we have of some future reality and the actions required to bridge the gap between them. A sample SIM template is reproduced below.

Level	Desired future	Current reality	Action plan			Progress indicators
			Actions	Stakeholders	Timeline	
Vision						
Mental models						
Systemic structures						
Patterns						
Events						

On the vertical axis the **five levels of reasoning** or **perspective** are listed.

1. A **vision** is an image we hold of how things currently work or should work in the future. To envision the future, you need to imagine a compelling picture of the future that you deeply care about.

2. **Mental models** are our deeply held theories of how the world works. We need to surface, suspend, and question the beliefs that underlie current systems.

3. **Systemic structures** are the cause-and-effect relationships between variables that are responsible for patterns of behavior. We need to redesign those aspects of the system that are causing undesirable patterns.

4. **Patterns of behavior** are the trends or changes in things over time that are produced by the structure. We need to notice them and adapt actions to anticipate and respond to them.

5. **Events** are tangible occurrences that reflect the vision we hold for a system. Respond immediately to address the problematic event(s) in line with our vision.

Each of these levels represents a different way of looking at the situation and an increasing level of complexity: the more complexity that can be brought into the conversation, the more potential for change.

The **action plan** involves identifying **concrete actions** at each of the five levels, associating the **appropriate stakeholder** that will execute, sponsor or receive the action and **fixing a timeframe**. Data should be collected to measure progress towards addressing the problem along key progress **indicators**.

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[1] See for example Kania and Kramer (2011; 2013)

[2] The social innovation matrix is based on the Vision Deployment Matrix developed by Kim (1995).

The role of the social innovation matrix

Developing a vision for a complex situation should be a collective process: stakeholders agree on a common vision and agenda and the key indicators of progress. The goal is to bridge the gap between a current reality and an envisioned and desired future. Sometimes the gap is a large chasm.

Many change efforts fail to achieve expected results because they do not strategically address ways to bridge the "chasm."
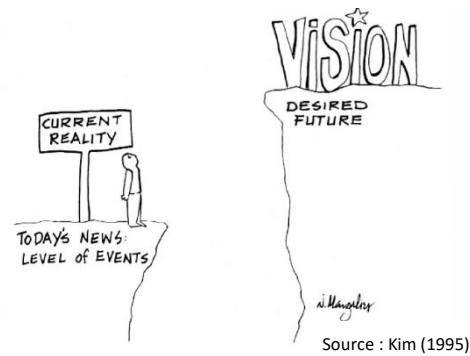
Source : Kim (1995)

Successfully managing large-scale social innovation requires a comprehensive, broad-based approach on multiple levels with multiple stakeholders. The social innovation matrix facilitates this process.

5 steps to using the matrix

To use the matrix, start with a blank template and ask questions to help clarify the desired future reality, the current reality, and the gaps between these two states. Action steps are then formulated to help close those gaps that are monitored by progress indicators. The steps and questions are outlined below:

1. Clarify **your desired future reality**. Ask questions for each level of perspective, from vision to events.
    - Vision: "What is the vision of the future we say we want to create?"
    - Mental Models: "What are the beliefs and assumptions that will be congruent with the vision?"
    - Systemic Structures: "How can we create structures that will be consistent with those beliefs?"
    - Patterns of Behavior: "What patterns of behavior do we want the structures to produce?"
    - Events: "Can we describe tangible events that would indicate that the vision had been achieved?"

2. Describe the **current reality**. Start at events and move up.
    - Events: "What events characterize the current reality?"
    - Patterns of behavior: "What behavior patterns of key indicators characterize the current system?"
    - Systemic structures: "What systemic structures are producing the behavior pattern behind our current results?"
    - Mental models: "What current assumptions, beliefs, and values sustain the existing systemic structures?"
    - Vision: "What is the current actual vision?"

Level	Desired future	Current reality
Vision	What is the espoused vision of the future?	What kind of vision are we operating out of that explains the mental models we hold? What is the current vision-in-use?
Mental models	What assumptions, beliefs, and values are needed to realize the vision?	What mental models do we hold that led us to put such structures in place? What are the prevailing assumptions, beliefs, and values that sustain those structures?
Systemic structures	What kinds of systemic structures (either invented or redesigned) are required to operationalize the new mental models and achieve the vision?	Are there systemic structures in place that are responsible for the pattern? Which specific structures are producing the most dominant pattern of behavior behind the current results?
Patterns	What would be the behavior over time of key indicators if the desired vision became a reality?	Are those specific events indicative of a pattern over time? Do other stories corroborate this repeated pattern?
Events	What specific events would illustrate how the vision is operating on a day-to-day basis?	What are some specific events that characterize the current reality?

A checklist to move from vision to events and from events to vision

Adapted from Kim (1996)

3. **Identify gaps** (or challenges) between the vision of a desired future and current reality

   - Vision: "How clearly articulated is our vision of our desired future reality?"

   - Mental models: "Where are the biggest and most critical gaps?" "How do we know whether we are ready for change or capable of shifting our mental models?"

   - Systemic structures: "Can systems archetypes shed light on the structural gaps?" "What changes in measurement systems might be needed?"

   - Patterns of behavior: "What is the relevant time history of the patterns?" "How deeply entrenched are the patterns?"

   - Events: "What daily incidents can make it hard to do things differently?" "What short-term negative events might occur as we make progress in the longer term?"

4. Formulate **action steps** that would help to close the gaps, the **timeline** and the **stakeholders** who we need to work with on these actions.

5. Establish **progress indicators** by asking the question: "How do we know when we have arrived?"

An illustration of the SIM for the housing quality poverty trap is provided below.

References

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Level	Desired future	Current reality	Action plan			KPI
			Actions	Stakeholders	Timeline	
Vision	Housing helps households move out of poverty	The poor get poorer through their housing.	Develop a joint communication plan with relevant stakeholders around the role of housing.	Landlords Housing department Public housing bodies	Long-term	Public perception (score) of the role of housing in society
Mental models	The poor and needy deserve the best housing	You get the housing and care you can afford. Poor tenants are a higher risk for landlords.	Inform landlords of the social role of housing. Train public bodies in the social role of housing.	Landlords Housing department Public housing bodies	Short-term	
Systemic structures	Housing quality depends on household needs and not income.	Disposable income determines quality of housing, health cover and heating comfort.	Revise rules for awarding social housing. Encourage landlords to actively help needy households. Incite landlords to renovate and rent to low income tenants. Train social workers in identifying at risk tenants	Public housing bodies Landlords Social workers	Short-term	Quality of housing compared to household income ratio
Patterns	Fall in indecent housing, energy and health poverty	Increase in heating poverty, households living in indecent housing and socially isolated.	Enforce strict quality controls to limit indecent housing Build more public housing Subsidize costs for low-income earners.	Housing department Social security	Immediate	Number of households in indecent housing, health and energy poverty
Events	No more households living in poverty	Worsening of housing problem.	Rehouse poorly lodged households.	Landlords. Households	Immediate	Number of households in indecent housing

Illustration: The poverty trap social innovation matrix