



CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION EMERGENCE

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Interest in social innovation is growing. It needs to. Our societies are facing extraordinary challenges: increasing inequality, rising poverty rates, unstable economies, climate change and a raft of other issues. At the same time, technologies are transforming the world in which we live, markets are undergoing massive change, and philanthropists are changing their practices. The speed of change is faster than ever, and the social and environmental need is reaching a frightening crescendo.

These challenges are daunting, yes, but they also offer the right set of circumstances to look at old problems in new ways. These challenges offer precisely the right opportunity for social innovation to emerge.

With all of this in mind, thinkers and practitioners alike are trying to make sense of the field of social innovation. What exactly is social innovation? How can we better understand social innovation? What are the best ways to catalyze social innovation and how can we produce more of it?

The Centre for Social Innovation in Toronto is experimenting with new ideas about how to create the conditions for social innovation emergence, in an effort to provide tangible answers to some of these questions.

As part of our work, we have encountered a number of definitions of social innovation. We generally prefer the simple definition that social innovation is “an idea that works for

the public good". Recently, we have been warming up to the longer definition offered in *Creative Cities Series: Breakthrough Cities* by Kahn et al., which describes social innovation as:

new ideas, institutions, or ways of working that meet social needs more effectively. [Yet] Often social innovation involves not just new ideas, but the remaking and reuse of existing ideas: the reapplication of an old idea. Social innovations can take the form of a new service, initiative or organization, or, alternatively, a radically new approach to the organization and delivery of service.

Building on these definitions, there has been increased emphasis on intentional innovation^{2 3} - conscious efforts to develop a more systematic approach to innovation. Rather than wait idly by for social innovations to appear, practitioners and organizations around the world are working to understand and establish methodologies, frameworks, and processes that stimulate social innovation and aim to increase the chances of its success. This is an important development.

Yet, there is an intrinsic character to innovation that resists the linearity imposed by many traditional frameworks. And, while it is important to pursue these more structured methods, it is equally as important to pursue approaches that embrace the unique, magical quality of emergent innovation.

Much of the existing literature acknowledges the need to set the conditions for social innovation, but rarely does it discuss what those conditions should be. At the Centre for Social Innovation, our on-the-ground experience with a diverse range of civil society groups provides us with unique insight into how to create the conditions for social innovation emergence.

This paper will use the Centre for Social Innovation as a case study to demonstrate how the conditions that facilitate social innovation emergence can be deliberately created.

We are practitioners, not academics, as you will quickly discover! Still, we hope this contribution, based on our own experience, will provide insight into the field and offer transferable ideas that can be used to accelerate social innovation in other environments.

WHAT IS THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) was created in 2004 with the mission to catalyze, inspire and support social innovation. Based in Toronto, Canada, we operate a shared workspace with desks, offices, and meeting rooms to over 180 nonprofits, social enterprises, artists, activists and entrepreneurs. CSI is an incubator of emerging projects, a community centre for Toronto's social change sector, and a catalyst for social innovation around the world. The CSI staff team act as community animators, encouraging connections, producing community events and managing access to shared services. The combination of space and services creates an environment that enables members and the broader community to increase their efficiency and achieve greater social impact. (for more information on the evolution of CSI, see *Emergence: The Story of the Centre for Social Innovation* at www.socialinnovation.ca/ssi)

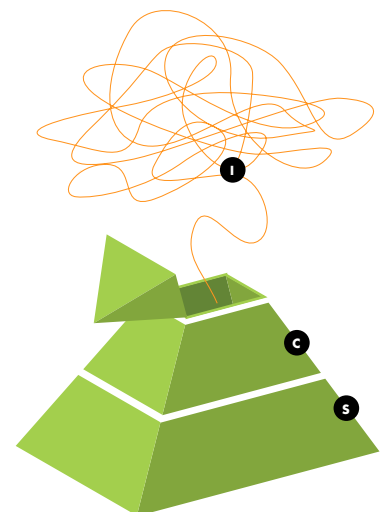
THE CSI THEORY OF CHANGE

Our theory of change sets out a hypothesis about how the Centre for Social Innovation creates the conditions for social innovation emergence. It took us awhile to find language to describe what is unique about our model, and how it can inform others. But, after four years of operation, we landed on something that we feel starts to reflect the essence of CSI.

CSI's theory of change is best understood as a pyramid based on three distinct but integrated levels:

- Space is the foundation and acts as the platform for everything that transpires
- Community develops as people occupy the space and form relationships
- Innovation emerges from the connections that are formed in the space and in the community

More succinctly: Space and community increase the likelihood for social innovation emergence!



SPACE

Not all spaces are created equal. And certainly, some spaces are more conducive to creativity and innovation than others. A space created to foster social innovation must be designed as a social space, and must possess features that encourage the generation of new ideas and connections.

The Centre for Social Innovation is a creative, welcoming space buzzing with activity. It is carefully designed to foster connections and to increase opportunities for collaboration and conversation. In addition to workspaces, there are comfy couches, café style coffee makers, open kitchens, phone booths, white board walls, a library and even a nap room. The building itself boasts large windows, high ceilings, exposed brick, and a green roof. The unique character of the space fosters creativity and energy. (for more on space design, check out Rigour: How-To Create World-Changing Spaces at www.socialinnovation.ca/sssi)

COMMUNITY

Communities are not automatically formed when people occupy the same space. The notion of community carries with it important connotations; a community shares social and emotional bonds, recognizes its connectivity, and identifies some commonality. A strong community possesses social capital that can be leveraged to serve the individual and shared interests of its members.

At the Centre for Social Innovation, what begins as a group of people looking for a place to work becomes a community through conscious and careful animation. CSI produces events, activities and experiences that foster conversation and connectivity. People talk about their respective work or their ideas. They also talk about weekend plans, art, politics, or recipes. It is the weaving of these professional and personal linkages that builds a sense of community among the Centre's members. And it's a welcoming, open and inspiring space that makes it all happen. (for more on community animation, check out Rigour: How-To Create World-Changing Spaces at www.socialinnovation.ca/sssi)

INNOVATION

The third layer – the pyramid's peak – is innovation. Innovation is what emerges when the space and community layers are functioning and interacting at their best. It's what can happen when a diverse but connected community occupies a facilitative space.

At the Centre for Social Innovation, social innovation is what happens when our members' interactions spark new ideas for social change; ideas that emerge at the intersection of our space and our community. It happens when accountants talk to artists, when

web developers talk to youth group coordinators, and when senior executives chat with junior admin staff. It happens because all of these people are part of a shared community and a shared space, whose impacts are far reaching and rarely predictable. It is what happens when we share a desire for action for a better world. (for more on how shared spaces lead to social innovation, check out Proof: How Shared Spaces are Changing the World at www.socialinnovation.ca/ssi)

All three levels of the pyramid have organic and intentional characteristics. In other words, some of the actions and outcomes within the Centre for Social Innovation emerge quite organically out of our shared day-to-day experiences. Other actions and outcomes are deliberately planned. Both are critical ingredients in setting the conditions for social innovation emergence.

THE ORGANIC AND THE INTENTIONAL

It's important to acknowledge the productive tension that emerges out of the balance between *the organic* and *the intentional*. Social innovation emergence has a blend of both organic and intentional elements.

By organic, we mean developments that transpire without deliberate manipulation. More specifically, at the Centre for Social Innovation this means standing back from the conditions we've created to just let things happen. For example, two people may naturally strike up a conversation in our kitchen that leads to a formal collaboration. In this case, a connection has emerged without our direct intervention. Who knows where this connection might lead?

For us, organic means simply being a platform and letting the connections and intersections naturally emerge within the spaces and communities we've created.

An intentional or *cultivated* approach builds on and relates to an organic approach. Rather than letting things just happen, sometimes we consciously intervene. For example, we may spot two people who don't know each other in our kitchen. Rather than simply sit back and see if they make a connection, we may step forward to make an introduction and identify areas of possible overlap in interest or experience.

Being intentional means bringing the experience and skills of the animators to bear on moving an opportunity forward. Sometimes it means being a provocative convener, an enlightened connector, a strategic programmer or a wise counsel. Sometimes it is strategically adding value and experience to targeted projects in order to help speed up the

process of experimentation and innovation. Sometimes it means offering our leadership, management and infrastructure to ensure that vital projects happen.

Social innovation can be the product of organic or intentional innovation. Most often, it is the product of both – and it is frequently an impossible task to determine which aspects of innovation have been intentional or organic. Navigating the balance between organic and intentional is an art and not a science; it is about experience, intuition and reflective practice.

These two forces impose constant pressure on the pyramid framework, appearing at all three levels and creating a dynamic that is simply part of the magic of the innovation process.

EXPLORING THE PYRAMID

The pyramid offers a basic framework for understanding the relationship between space, community and social innovation within shared spaces. But on its own the pyramid doesn't explain how shared spaces lead to social innovation, and how we can actively create and foster the conditions for social innovation emergence.

To better understand how the pyramid leads to social innovation, it is important to articulate three critical ingredients of the Theory of change: curation, culture and connection. As we work to understand how social innovation emerges in our environment, these Three C's illuminate the pyramid approach and offer interesting conclusions about social innovation emergence in different environments.

CURATION

Just as the Centre for Social Innovation curates a physical environment through the design of its space, it *curates* a social environment through member selection. CSI, unlike many other shared workspaces, uses a fairly strict set of criteria to select its members. But before we select them, they select us.

CSI naturally attracts a certain type of individual through our space design, our community, our events, our brand and our marketing. Before applying for space at CSI, a potential member inevitably engages with us through one of these channels. As a result, they already have a sense of who we are before applying to be part of the community. Our magnetic attractor – the desire to change the world – defines the audience. This enables a process of self-selection that helps ensure we are attracting people who share a certain

set of values and interests. This process of self-selection should not be underestimated – by building a particular brand, experience and atmosphere, the Centre for Social Innovation attracts people for whom these characteristics resonate.

CSI further curates by selecting members based on a number of criteria and characteristics, including: mission, sector, legal structure, enthusiasm, reputation, friendliness, commitment to our shared vision, and potential to collaborate. Understanding potential members through how they see themselves as social innovators and occasionally light reconnaissance makes it possible to curate the right mix of members. Our goal is not to create an exclusive club; indeed, it is an explicit objective to ensure diversity of experience and perspectives. But we do need to ensure a minimum baseline of amenability to our environment so that new members are contributing to the community we are building together.

CULTURE

Active and conscious curating gives you the best possible shot at having the right *ingredients* in the room. But having the right ingredients is just the very first step. Once you have the *right* people in the *right* space, it is essential for us to create and maintain a culture of innovation, creativity, permission, fun and authenticity.

At the Centre for Social Innovation, our culture is first and foremost about celebrating and supporting the work of our members. CSI aims to be a happy and healthy place for people to work. To this end, our goal is to create a welcoming, human, and comfortable environment.

That said, we don't quite stop there! Since the Centre for Social Innovation is about fostering new ideas for social change, CSI works to establish a culture of innovation, creativity, experimentation, and encouragement. We celebrate action. We encourage trial and error. We avoid complaints in favour of solutions. And we are open to a variety of suggestions.

We are also focused on building a culture of responsibility and self-organization. For a shared space like CSI to really work, everyone needs to be a part of the team. From washing dishes to organizing events, we are building a culture of contribution and leadership.

Of course, identifying a desired culture and establishing and sustaining that culture are two very different things. As mentioned above, the first step is curating – bringing the right people into the right space to establish the best possible conditions for that cul-

ture. But it takes more than space design and member selection. Community animation is key to building an enabling culture. This means intentional intervention at all levels of the member experience, from initial contact to day-to-day work. All members of the CSI team are animators, who through gestures, conversations, introductions and casual encounters weave the desired culture into the day to day experience of the space.

And if done right, the culture becomes self-sustaining as your members embody, reinforce and add to the atmosphere you have worked so hard to establish.

CONNECTION

We are all increasingly aware of the power of social networks. The most reliable way to find a new service provider, collaborator, or colleague is often to ask for recommendations from people you already know, and the best way to expand and deepen your work is by engaging with others who have similar interests and have experiences and insights to share. For innovation to emerge, people and organizations must interact with new ideas, perspectives and energies – this provides the stimulation for innovation.

CSI embodies this reality through the connections it fosters. We are a home to projects in sectors ranging from arts to environment, from citizen engagement to international development. We are home to charities and businesses, independents and branch offices. On a daily basis we have people coming from across Toronto and throughout the world to connect and work with each other.

There is synergy at CSI that you feel the moment you step off the elevator. This speaks to a curated community of dynamic change-makers and a culture of innovation. But it also speaks to the vibrancy of connections that are formed within the space. And the connections are lurking everywhere, both within the membership and across our broader networks. The possibilities and opportunities that come from these connections are innumerable and utterly transformative.

SOCIAL INNOVATION EMERGENCE IN ACTION

Describing a Theory of change and experiencing it in action are two different things. Here, we'll share a pair of illustrative stories that show the Theory of change –and social innovation emergence – in action. These are just two examples within a vibrant collection of stories both big and small. Within each story, we'll attempt to deconstruct how the features of the Theory of change play out.

1. JANE'S WALK

In the spring of 2006, Jane Jacobs – an urban planning icon – passed away. Her death affected many members of the CSI community; she had been an incredibly influential voice and thinker, especially in Toronto. Shortly after Jane Jacob's death, a CSI member named Chris Winter, of the Conservation Council of Ontario, attended a networking meeting on active transportation at CSI hosted by the Ontario Smart Growth Network (another CSI member). The purpose of the meeting was to explore how to promote more walking in neighbourhoods. Chris proposed the idea of having neighbourhood walks to celebrate Jane Jacobs. Each walk would be locally led and would encourage an exploration of the urban environment and the relationship citizens have with the spaces they inhabit.

Chris shared his idea with CSI co-founders Mary Rowe and Margie Zeidler. Using their collective social networks and the support of the Jane Jacobs' Award at the Maytree Foundation, the idea went viral. On Jane Jacob's birthday, six weeks after the idea was first hatched, 25 neighbourhood walks were held in Toronto to explore and celebrate peoples' relationship with urban spaces.

Jane's Walk is a social innovation for its unique approach of getting citizens engaged with their local urban environments. In a brilliant yet simple way, Jane's Walk starts a conversation and rekindles the powerful relationship between city design and citizens. From a model replication perspective, Jane's Walk is predicated on an open, decentralized and self-organizing model whereby anyone can offer to lead a walk by proposing a tour idea. Using a light-touch, a single staff person coaches people leading walks to improve their content and creates buzz that raises awareness of all the walks across the city. It is the aggregated impact of dozens of citizens leading tours that demonstrates the transformative impact of the model. The staff person isn't trying to *control* the tour list, nor send a manager on every tour, but rather their focus is on enabling and trusting that citizens will organize and bring to the conversation what is needed. Jane's Walk embodies the trust in people that Jane Jacobs would have been proud of. It also embodies the much more modern spirit of the internet and social networks – creating a collective narrative of the city by weaving together dozens of self organizing conversations. The difference, of course, is that these conversations happen in real time and space, with feet on the concrete and neighbours looking into each others eyes. It's the story of the city by city.

Three years later, Jane's Walk is operating neighbourhood walks in over 50 cities around the World. In 2009, 315 Jane's Walks were enjoyed by over 10,000 people. All this with a single full time staff person (Jane Farrow) and a skeletal part-time leading up to event day in May each year.

This simple story offers an opportunity to explore the Theory of change. As the pyramid indicates, this social innovation emerged out of a community inhabiting a shared physical space. In this case, the idea emerged through the tension between organic and intentional forces. The initial meeting – Ontario Smart Growth Network – was intentionally held. But the idea for a new project emerged organically through the process.

But the process did get a helping hand from the Three C's. With respect to curating, Chris Winter was specifically selected as a member. Further, Ontario Smart Growth Network was held at the Centre for Social Innovation because of its consonance with CSI values and vibe. A culture of innovation and encouragement set the conditions for the new idea to emerge. Finally, a web of connections that include Chris, Mary, Margie and the Maytree Foundation, helped bring the project to life. This is a shining example of the power of organic emergence in action when the conditions are right.

2. ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

In 2006, CSI staff participated in a consultation to explore the creation of a new body that would unite the nonprofit sector in Ontario. The meeting was held at CSI. It was clear that, although the leadership in the room all agreed that it would be *nice* to have such a body, it was not a *need* to have. This held true until, in early 2007, the Ontario Government announced that it was intending to make changes to the nonprofit legal framework. There were rumours that several freedoms that the sector then enjoyed were under threat. This was the galvanizing issue to ignite the sector and to pursue the idea of creating a voice for the nonprofit sector.

In the subsequent months, CSI helped convene a steering committee for the newly named Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), and adopted the initiative as an incubated project. CSI provided ONN with back-end financial services and front-end strategic and management support, and helped build a constellation governance model for the project allowing for provincial reach and nimble decision-making. In less than two years, ONN has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from multiple sources, hosted several province-wide network events, built a network of over 1,500 organizations, and convened and supported a dozen constellations (action-teams) focused on issues such as charity law, fundraising guidelines, human resource policy and general accounting principles.

ONN is learning from previous failed attempts at *uniting* the nonprofit sector in Ontario. Past attempts have focused on creating a representative structure that provides a single voice for the sector, predictably resulting in struggles over money, ego and power. Instead, ONN is adopting a network of networks approach with the aim of building a

movement rather than a new, centralized organization. This approach creates space for many organizations and voices to pursue their own projects and ideas under a shared umbrella. It also helps build trust with key players in government and business as the network comes across less like a monolithic interest group and more as a loose collection of organizations ready to work with others to solve the social problems facing Ontario.

At the core of this experiment is an innovative governance model that applies a *constellation* approach to the work of galvanizing over 46,000 potential members. This model pushes power to the edges of the network, with most decision making authority on small, self organizing work teams focused on a single issue or idea. There is no real *centre* or *top* within the structure. This approach allows ONN to weave together a mosaic of voices demonstrating the diversity, power and impact of the sector – a much better approach than trying to create a single monolithic voice. With a focus on collaborative leadership and transparent communications, ONN is on the leading edge of mass organizing strategies balancing the tension between advocacy and engagement. Once again, the social innovation is in the *how* of the work.

This story provides a different take on the application of the theory of change, demonstrating an intentionally cultivated response to the organic emergence of an external threat and opportunity. The Centre for Social Innovation was actively engaged with the community in working to create the Ontario Nonprofit Network. The work itself has been intentionally designed, and the participants actively curated. An organic instigator – the Provincial Government’s proposed policy changes – catalyzed the efforts to create a new network. A culture of potential and a dense web of connections among sector leaders within the space allowed the new project to quickly take shape. And it all started with a meeting held within the space.

BEYOND THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The sections above set out a description of the theory of change, point to the productive tension between organic and intentional forces, and identify the critical role of the Three C’s of curation, culture and connection. Two stories illustrate social innovation in action and use the Centre’s model to uncover how these innovations emerged.

Our goal, however, is not to parade our own sense of self-awareness, but to contribute an analysis and approach that can inform other efforts to foster social innovation. As noted above, existing literature increasingly recognizes the power of intentional innovation and increasingly highlights the importance of setting the right conditions. But little work has been done to examine what these conditions are or should be. The Centre for Social

Innovation presents a case study through which we can explore how to create conditions for social innovation emergence. As a result, our own experience can be informative to the broader field of social innovation.

Intentional innovation may be undertaken in a variety of circumstances – in organizations, in governments, in entire industries and in geographic communities. Employing the lens of the theory of change encourages us to consider how we can best set the conditions for social innovation emergence. Specifically, as stewards of social innovation, leaders must pay attention to the space and community through which innovation emerges. This means carefully designing the spaces where actors gather, work and connect. It also means building a sense of community among these individuals, groups or organizations.

Fostering social innovation also requires dual attention to the organic and intentional factors that are part of the innovation process. Setting the conditions for social innovation means intentionally creating activities and opportunities to spark and support the emergence of new ideas. When it comes to the organic dimension of the emergence process, proper attention means more than sitting back and letting it happen. Those hoping to foster social innovation must intentionally establish an environment in which organic innovation will likely emerge; hence, the great paradox of the intentional-organic relationship: We must be intentional about setting the conditions for organic social innovation emergence.

Navigating the balance between organic and intentional in practice requires discrimination, experience, intuition and strategy. We call this role community animation – the art of navigating a complex system that is more like parenting than rocket-science. It is about listening, adapting and about a reflective practice.

Finally, setting the conditions for social innovation emergence means paying attention to the Three C's. Curating is not merely the act of selecting members; it is the act of recruiting, welcoming and employing the complement of actors with this greatest likelihood of working effectively together to produce new innovations. This is a serious responsibility. Just as any organization *curates* its employees to achieve its goals, those seeking to foster social innovation must engage the individuals who will actively participate in the innovation process.

Once the right complement of actors is in place, a culture of innovation must be created and sustained. Culture emerges naturally out of groups and is informed by the structures in which they exist. But it can also be consciously infused into a given setting. This is key

– and a key responsibility of innovation stewards. We must also recognize that there is no single *culture of innovation* that is appropriate in all contexts. In some cases, innovation is best served by a competitive culture, and in others a collaborative one. In all cases, the culture must reflect the unique goals and circumstances of the given situation.

Connection is the final ingredient. Stewards of social innovation must work to weave connections among internal and external actors as a strategy to catalyze the emergence of social innovation. It is through the relationships built among actors that new ideas emerge, take shape, and take hold. Again, the nature of these connections depends on context; in some cases the goal may be to foster diverse connections, and in others homogenous one. But fostering connections is an intentional activity, and an essential part of the process of setting conditions for social innovation emergence.

The Centre’s approach to setting the conditions for social innovation emergence is not entirely unique. We can witness aspects of CSI’s model in other circumstances. Google, for example, is known for its creative space design. It curates its employees, selecting those with certain characteristics (individuals already attracted to the Google brand), and builds a culture of collaboration and innovation. Google connects people and departments, and balances intentional and organic aspects of innovation emergence, going so far as to insist on unstructured time for employees to experiment and explore.

MindLab in Denmark is another example. MindLab is uniquely designed to create certain experiences. The projects are carefully curated based on the priorities of the government, and the *raison d’être* of the initiative is to foster connections between departments, thereby building a new public sector culture and increasing the opportunity for innovation emergence.

What might happen if we applied this approach to other spaces in which we hoped for innovation to emerge – for example, classrooms, neighbourhoods or cities? How would our university campuses transform if we emphasized connection? How would our neighbourhoods change if we were designing them to foster certain cultural traits or behaviours? How would our cities perform if we took a more active role in curating them with innovation in mind? How would our bureaucracies transform if there were professional community animators building cultures of innovation in and out of government?

As thinkers and practitioners in the field of social innovation, it is our responsibility to better understand how we can create the conditions for social innovation emergence. The CSI theory of change offers one lens through which to pursue this goal.

CONCLUSION

CSI's mission is to catalyze, inspire and support social innovation. Rather than overseeing a formal process of social innovation, where a practitioner methodically moves from stage to stage, CSI creates the conditions for social innovation emergence. The theory of change reveals the features of this process.

This has been a missing feature of the literature on social innovation. If our shared goal is to foster the emergence on social innovation, then we must improve the practice of social innovation. Setting the right conditions is a first step in this process.

The next steps for CSI will be to play with the balance of organic and intentional. How might we be able to convene more strategically? How can we provide more supportive environments for burgeoning entrepreneurs? What might happen if we start convening around the problems that the world is facing? What would happen if we cluster and curate even more intentionally?

This is just the beginning of our work, and these are just the initial threads of a theory to help us to better understand how to create environments that foster social innovation. We hope this paper makes a contribution to both the study and practice of social innovation, and helps us further along the path of understanding this emerging field.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TONYA SURMAN IS A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR, COMMUNITY ANIMATOR AND NETWORK CHOREOGRAPHER. With a passion for bringing life to world-changing projects, Tonya is the founding executive director of the Centre for Social Innovation – a dynamic convergence space in Toronto whose mission is to catalyze, connect and support new ideas that are changing the world. CSI provides shared space to 200 social mission groups, acts as a community centre for social innovators and is an incubator for world-changing projects.

In 2009, CSI was awarded the *City Innovation* award from the Canadian Urban Institute and Tonya was recognized as a *Leader in Social Change* from the Canadian New Media Awards. In 2010, Tonya became a Global Ashoka Fellow for her innovative work building models of collaboration. 2010 also saw CSI innovate a citizen-based Community Bond for the purchase of an old building to create another vibrant social change community in Toronto.

Previous to CSI, Tonya was the founding Partnership Director for the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment, whose work, in part, led to a new legislative framework to manage chemicals and the banning of Bisphenol A in baby bottles. Tonya has been creating and leading social ventures since 1987 and has built her body of knowledge around multi-sectoral collaboration and entrepreneurship for social change.

A list of publications and resources is available from www.socialinnovation.ca

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