The McConnell Foundation Social Innovation Fund

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Information Guide & Application

McConnell

Overview

Improving the lives of Canadians —and contributing to a more resilient society — requires breakthrough ideas and approaches, game-changing strategies and collaborations, and continuous innovation.

To support this work and to commemorate its 75th anniversary, the McConnell Foundation launched the Social Innovation Fund in 2012.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) supports organizations looking to strengthen their capacities in order to scale for greater impact. SIF grants to high potential/high impact organizations are integrated with special convenings plus technical and peer support through Innoweave or the Social Innovation Learning Program (SILP). The Social Innovation Fund was originally launched with two streams —one for early stage innovations and a second for scaling up successful social innovations and for mature organizations diversifying program and business models.

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How does the Social Innovation Fund work?

The McConnell Social Innovation Fund will support work that is congruent with the Foundation's own mission and granting priorities, in the **following categories:**

1 Early stage consolidation

— Community sector organizations that have proven or promising early stage innovations and that need additional support to create the capacity and conditions to effectively sustain them.

2 Re-tooling for growth

— **Transitions to scale:** Established organizations that are operating successful social innovations which they are planning to scale up to meet growing demand; or

— **Innovations at scale:** Established organizations (over $1 million annual budget) that are introducing new innovations that significantly modify or complement their core business.

In addition to providing direct grants through the Fund, the Foundation may convene meetings with other social innovators, policy makers and funders; arrange access to **Innoweave** workshops; and commission studies or reports.

What do we mean by 'Social Innovation'?

Social innovations are **new ideas, products, services, institutions and relationships, offering fresh approaches** to overcoming pressing societal challenges.

Examples of social innovations of the past include the nursing profession, the emergence of cooperatives, and umbrella fundraising organizations. Today, we are witnessing a proliferation of social innovations, many enabled by breakthroughs in technology, disruptions in the status quo, and through engagement with vulnerable populations.

Social innovations often occur at the edges of systems, or where two or more 'siloed' disciplines meet. For example, the burgeoning field of social entrepreneurship integrates financial with social or environmental outcomes. Innovations also occur when a solution from one domain is transferred to another—the way Registered Retired Savings Plans were adapted to create Registered Disability Savings Plans. Disruptive social innovations like mobile health programs bring 'good enough' solutions to large numbers of people at low cost.

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation has supported leading social innovators in Canada for the past 15 years. Sustaining and disseminating social innovations is a core component of our work.

We are now seeing the emergence of social innovation systems, hubs and clusters designed to generate continuous social innovation. For example, the **Social Innovation Generation** (SiG)[1] partnership conducts research in social innovation; trains and mentors social innovators and social entrepreneurs; and supports collaboration and learning involving the community, government and private sectors.

Innoweave, a McConnell Foundation program, is making technology and social process tools available to community sector organizations, in cooperation with several partners.

As well as supporting individual social innovations, we seek to increase awareness and support for social innovation as a means of contributing to Canadians' resilience—our capacity to manage complex and unexpected challenges.

[1] —SiG's core members include the University of Waterloo (SiG@Waterloo); SiG West; SiG@MaRS; SiG@McConnell; and SiGNational. In turn, each node in this network has multiple partners, including private, public and community sector organizationsand networks.

Supporting the stages of Social Innovation

While recognizing that social innovation is not a linear process, it can be thought of as developing through the following five phases (adapted from **The Open Book of Social Innovation** by Robin Murray, Julie Caulier-Grice, and Geoff Mulgan. March 2010):

1. Prompts – Problem Identification

Once a problem is identified, it prompts the need forbringing fresh perspectives to generate new ideas.

2. Generation Ideas – Piloting

New ideas become prototypes or pilot projects for conceptand model testing.

3. Sustaining

Once the prototype or pilot is validated as an improvement on existing practice, the innovation can be turned into a sustainable program.

4. Scaling

In responding to increased demand, the innovation can then be 'brought toscale'—expanding reach and impact, and often generating insights into possible shifts at asocietal or systems level.

5. Changing Systems

With collaboration across sectors and interventions at different levels—from community practice to policies —social innovation can help us both tonavigate complex problems, and to shift the context and conditions — the systems—that perpetuate them.

Supporting transitions across stages

Transforming a successful pilot into a sustained approach to a social challenge, and then disseminating or scaling it, requires different organizational strengths and partnerships than those needed to create and test a new idea. Currently, there is unmet demand for supporting the ability of organizations to transition across these stages.

The McConnell Social Innovation Fund will focus on the following transitions:

1 **Early stage Consolidation**

→ Sustaining

Generation Ideas – Piloting

2 **Re-tooling for growth**

→ Scaling

Sustaining

In addition, we will support multi-stakeholder collaborations whose purpose is to effect change at a systems level.

1. Early-stage Consolidation

After an innovation has been tested and validated, it typically elicits requests to expand the program to other jurisdictions or to share the innovation with other organizations.

While this demand is gratifying, and indeed, a required condition of successful dissemination, the organization needs a solid foundation to be able to carry this out. This may involve strengthening the current organization, merging with a larger one, or identifying partners with whom to undertake the dissemination. In any case, new staff, new skills, more robust systems, a new business model, and new partners may be required.

Eligible activities

Activities under this stream could include:

- Strategy formulation, through participation in peer learning and/or consulting arrangements.
- Structuring, restructuring costs.
- Improvements to operational, financial and human resource systems, and other infrastructure needs.
- Impact measurement and knowledge transfer capacity – i.e. a relevant means of assessing impact and communicating the results to create broader change.
- Development of new or diversified business models to ensure long-term, stable funding.

Funding amount
Up to $150,000 over 2 years

An example

"A newer organization developed a number of internationally recognized programs that were in great demand. It approached the Foundation for core organizational support to ensure that the rapid growth in programming activity was matched by appropriate administrative and management capacity and to test a new revenue generating model."

(This represents an example of many. It is not intended as a benchmark or model for all applications. Please refer to the different types of activities the Fund supports for guidance.)

1. Early-stage Consolidation

Organizational eligibility

To apply for support, the organization should meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Have a tested social innovation that significantly improves current practice.
- Have a committed, diverse board, and core staff leadership team.
- Have funding for current program activities plus a demonstrated demand for program expansion.
- Preference will be given to organizations that are working in one of the **Foundation's Emerging or current program areas.**

In addition, we look forward to working with organizations which:

- Have a theory of change – i.e. a thorough understanding of the problem they are addressing and a working hypothesis about the difference their work will make.
- Understand that scaling up is not a linear process – that operating at a new level may involve changes to program design or organizational structure.
- Demonstrate openness to changing work culture, structures and activities.
- Are open to collaboration and learning with others.
- Can provide a frank assessment of current leadership and organizational strengths and weaknesses.

Funding exclusions

Funding will NOT be provided for:

- University-led academic research
- Pilot projects
- Strategic and structural changes due to a loss of funding (crisis management)
- Direct program costs related to expansion

Click here to apply for Early-stage Consolidation support

2. Re-tooling for Growth

Option 2A: Transitions to scale

As mentioned, scaling up a social innovation rarely follows a linear path; it is much more than just doing more of the same in more locations.

Methods and activities that enable a local social innovation to move to the next level might include influencing public policy, generating public awareness, developing a new business model and market; and so on. Our hunch is that an effective way to scale up is not to think sequentially so much as to operate to some extent at various scales simultaneously. To make a successful transition, social innovators often need new strategies, and additional organizational capabilities. Expanding networks and opportunities for learning from a range of sources can accelerate this process.

Funding amount
Up to $300,000 over 2 years

Eligible applicants

To apply for a grant in this category, applicants should address the following eligibility criteria:

- Are currently operating a successful social innovation which has been externally endorsed or supported, and for which there is growing demand.
- Have stable management and organizational structure.
- Their board and staff are committed to a sustained effort to expand the work to new locations, and modify the operating model as necessary.
- Have committed (or realistic expectations of) funding from other sources.

An example

"An organization which had carried out dozens of innovative community-based sport projects realized that, in order to integrate the lessons into the Canadian Sport System, it was necessary to influence government policy and municipal practice. It approached the Foundation for support to develop new skills, more diverse partnerships, and a new business model."

(As with the Early-stage Consolidation, this represents an example of many. It is not intended as a benchmark or model for all applications.)

Funding exclusions

Funding will NOT be provided for:

- University-led academic research
- Pilot projects
- Strategic and structural changes due to a loss of funding (crisis management)
- Direct program costs related to expansion

2. Re-tooling for Growth

Option 2B: Innovations at scale

Sometimes larger organizations are already achieving impact, but must "retool" to implement an innovative new program, or to significantly expand an existing one.

Funding amount
Up to $300,000 over 2 years

An example

"An organization, which already operated successful national school ground greening and municipal brownfields restoration programs, approached the Foundation for core organizational support so it could lead a unique, large scale urban renewal project."

(As with the Early-stage Consolidation, this represents an example of many. It is not intended as a benchmark or model for all applications.)

Eligible applicants

To apply for a grant in this category, applicants should meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Have a substantial track record managing large programs.
- Are introducing a social innovation that complements existing program and organizational strengths, that would constitute a unique and significant innovation in the field.
- Present evidence of demand at a national level.
- Preference will be given to organizations that are working in one of the **Foundation's Emerging or current program areas.**

In addition, we look forward to working with organizations which:

- Approach us to be part of a consortium of funders, and which plan to contribute substantial organizational resources (in-kind and financial) to the project.
- Plan to collaborate across sectors – i.e. with government and/or private sector partners.
- Have a commitment to broadly disseminate the work.

Funding exclusions

Funding will NOT be provided for:

- University-led academic research
- Pilot projects
- Strategic and structural changes due to a loss of funding (crisis management)
- Direct program costs related to expansion

Click here **to apply for Retooling for Growth Support**

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