Achieving Sustainable Social Change: the Importance of Systemic Change

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When pursuing a career in the social and solidarity economy, we are quick to come into contact with one of the new trends in the field: **Systemic Change.** Defined as "fundamental and sustained changes in policies, processes, relationships, and power structures, as well as deeply held values and norms" (Administration for Community Living), systems change helps social change agents recognize that they alone cannot attempt to fix a problem. According to the World Economic Forum (2017), even though social entrepreneurs have long been concerned with organizational growth and scaling to achieve their social mission, they are recently coming to term with the fact that their efforts must be concerted and aligned with other stakeholders to maximize impact and address root issues.

As the biggest challenges we are facing in the 21st century are interconnected and complex ones, we observe that knowledge, capacities, and decision-making are distributed among different types of actors: public institutions, businesses, social entrepreneurs, and citizens alike for instance. Thus in these challenges' image, the social and solidarity economy should pursue interconnected and holistic solutions to address societal issues most effectively. Whatsmore, a collaboration spanning large amounts of actors can lead to more concrete actions being implemented to instore change: financial investment, research, public policy changes, service delivery, community empowerment, and more.

In this statement paper, I will present coalitions for change as an emerging best practice from the social and solidarity economy in order to tackle inequalities. As a case study, I will present my own experience as a coalition facilitator at Makesense Philippines, working on the Health4All coalition during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

While I focus in this paper on the social added value of building coalitions, I wish to present one of the key challenges of creating a coalition in my accompanying video: thus, I will delve deeper into the funding of coalitions, and to a larger extent, of systems change as the two concepts are undoubtedly connected.

<u>Maximizing impact through ambitious partnerships: the example of coalitions</u>

Also referred to as Strategic Alliances, coalitions aim to bring together stakeholders around a common issue, such as homelessness, education, poverty, gender rights, or as it was the case for Makesense Philippines in 2020, access to health and health literacy (Makesense, 2021a). According to The Copenhagen Centre, a coalition is made up of "People and organizations from some combination of public, business, and civil constituencies who engage in voluntary, mutually beneficial, innovative relationships to address common societal aims through combining their resources and competencies"(Steckel and Boyson, 2003). As mentioned above, these communities of change-makers wish to capitalize on their individual strengths and align their actions in order to achieve their mission in the most impactful and sustainable way. Indeed, the notion of sustainability is key to coalitions as they create through concerted actions and values, a positive and durable ecosystem in order to resolve an issue.

However, if we refer to these coalitions as ambitious, it is not only to refer to the actions they wish to carry out or the scale of their impact but also regarding the complexity of implementing them. In fact, launching and facilitating a coalition requires large amounts of funding and time (Moon, 2016), as well as a new form of leadership. From a traditional leader, at the head of one organization who is the sole owner of a solution, coalitions require "bridging leaders" who have the ability to convene actors of change and harness collective intelligence in order to have emerge a solution that is co-owned by all stakeholders (Synergos). Indeed, according to Katherine Milligan (2019), Head of the Schwab Foundation, the myth of the "hero entrepreneur is dead", and it is no longer a question of whether or not they should collaborate with other actors such as public institutions, but how to do so.

<u>The Health4All Coalition in the Philippines: promoting access to health and health literacy at the community level</u>

When I joined Makesense Philippines in September of 2020, the world was still in the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Philippines at the time specifically was the country experiencing the longest lockdown, and mistrust towards health institutions and fake news were growing issues. But like everywhere else in the world, the pandemic was not affecting all communities the same. This is the observation that helped jumpstart the coalition: how could communities be better prepared to face health emergencies?

This idea of health preparedness did not only refer to physical health but also included a holistic approach, where Filipino's financial, mental, and physical health could all be shielded to a certain extent when faced with unprecedented health circumstances. In practice, we observe that many communities are disadvantaged in the face of Public Health: many do not enjoy access to medical experts for reasons such as "cost, time or distance" (Makesense, 2021a). In fact, there is an average of "3.9 doctors working in health institutions for every 10 000 Filipinos", and 8 out of 10 citizens "report never having had a medical check-up or physical examination in their life" (Makesense, 2021b). What's more, community health workers, being understaffed and overworked, are unable to address all the needs of their beneficiaries thus failing to build trust between locals and their health institutions (Makesense, 2021a). This lack of trust in health structures is exacerbated by the fact that some communities already suffer from poor health literacy, which prevents them from adopting certain preventive health care practices and adopting the right actions when they do fall sick. Poor health literacy also contributes to making people more vulnerable to the spread of fake news, which tends to directly undermine modern medicine and its efficiency during public health crises.

While we were clear that this was our starting observations, we were open from the start to our pain points and objectives shifting as we would be joined by more organizations. Indeed, we understood that the value of a coalition was to provide a different point of view over a specific issue, in order to understand fully what health entailed for each community. By putting together our knowledge on the topic, we could make emerge new definitions, obstacles, and opportunities. Constituted of health experts from the field, the government, international private corporations, and the social and solidarity economy, the coalitions also required the help of community organizers working with different groups such as women and the youth to make sure to address cross-cutting issues and understand the way health was experienced by different groups within the Filipino population. This was key to the Coalition's approach which was centered around 3 steps: **embracing diversity, tapping into the collective, and collaborating for the long term** (Makesense, 2020).

Thus, the coalition's events were designed as follow: a "World Cafe" event where participants were invited to share their own understanding of access to health in the Philippines and their experience as an organization with the pandemic. They were also invited to talk about their mission regarding achieving a healthier Philippines and what they were currently implementing. This first meeting was also a great occasion for them to state what they expected from the Coalition, in terms of collaboration and results.

The second event was an "Ecosystem Mapping", a three-hour event where organizations' representatives listed what was being done already in the country regarding health and mapped out all stakeholders in this field. This helped us identify new potential members to the coalition, especially since the mapping exercise showed the level of involvement of each actor, and their interest to fix this issue and showed the type of relationships between agents (conflictual, collaborative, non-existent…).

Finally, the "Collaborathon", our final event, was spread out across two days and hoped to make emerge a solution to implement in communities. Through the use of design thinking, the organizations present on those days were able to flesh out a holistic and empowering solution for communities: out of the Health4All coalition was finally born the Imagining Healthy Futures initiatives.

By putting together their knowledge and technical capacities, the coalition was able to create an "open knowledge platform accessible to anyone, at any level" to "equip them to act in whatever they can" (Makesense, 2020). Mostly destined for young Filipinos who wanted to have an impact in their communities, the program offered a 2-month course, where they would receive training, mentorship, and resources on how to mobilize and strengthen communities, and on how to design, monitor, and evaluate a social program that took into account the realities of health for several groups, including but not limited to women or disabled Filipinos. Since the start of the program, diverse community initiatives have been launched all over the country thanks to the training young advocates have received. For instance, Ren, a young participant in the program helped equip his community with medical equipment and helped local medical experts disseminate key information regarding health. Chloe, another participant, launched an online platform with her team offering information regarding Covid-19 vaccines and where to get them in their city, to make vaccines availability a reality (Makesense, 2021b).

<u>Conclusion</u>

In order to achieve its objectives as a coalition, Makesense had to make sure that the principles of diversity and empowerment were always respected throughout the coalition's facilitation, rules, events, and outcomes. This is what helped assure the success of the coalition.

A diverse set of agents were invited to join the initiative, but were also made co-owners of the solution and of the functioning of the coalition: after the first event, the World Cafe, expectations listed regarding the coalition led to the creation of a Manifesto that was signed by each participant. This document listed the rules and principles of the alliance that helped align interests and expectations while making sure that all actors would be seen as equals and as legitimate members of the initiative. What's more, the Manifesto helped establish values of open-mindedness, collaboration, and respect, as members committed to contributing their technical knowledge and expertise to the endeavor. This Manifesto was a key step to the creation of an inclusive community, that could bring about a sustainable and holistic solution. Through the Health4All coalition, we can also see a particularly interesting mobilization of resources. The point of partnerships is to mutualize capacities, knowledge, and resources for mutually beneficial purposes, but the coalition went a step further and even managed to mobilize resources that were made evident to them from the start. Indeed, by working together, they realized that outside of the coalitions members, young members of communities could also be potential partners in the programs to help improve the health of their countrymen. And by capitalizing on the community management experiences of NGO members of the coalition and their training capabilities as health actors, they were able to onboard more agents of change along this adventure. Thus showing us how innovative and ambitious coalitions can be in order to achieve their mission, in a way that can only be achievable through large-scale partnerships.

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