Destination Unknown

Reckoning with the uncertainty inherent in community development and innovation

About this series:
In the midst of the unprecedented COVID-19 health crisis, the Caring Community Challenge was launched, asking the question: how can we look after each other better in the places where we are? This 4-part Social R&D Learning Series will offer insights on key learning moments on the journey. The Caring Community Challenge was facilitated using the UpSocial lab methodology developed in Barcelona, Spain.

Process in brief

In March 2020, the Caring Community Challenge was launched, a collaboration between Balsam Foundation, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Unison Health and Community Services, UpSocial and UpSocial Canada: a MakeWay Foundation program.

The Challenge followed a 6-phase methodology that involves:

- convening stakeholders around an issue of interest
- developing a Key Research Question
- searching the world for innovations that have answered that question
- selecting the best placed innovations for testing in the local community
- piloting the chosen innovations
- looking to scale the outcomes if successful.

In June 2021, our Caring Community Cohort selected Post Bellum and Link Generations for testing in the community of Bathurst and Finch. Read more about our outcomes in the Challenge Report. Visit OurNeighboursStories.ca or email gcahill@upsocial.org
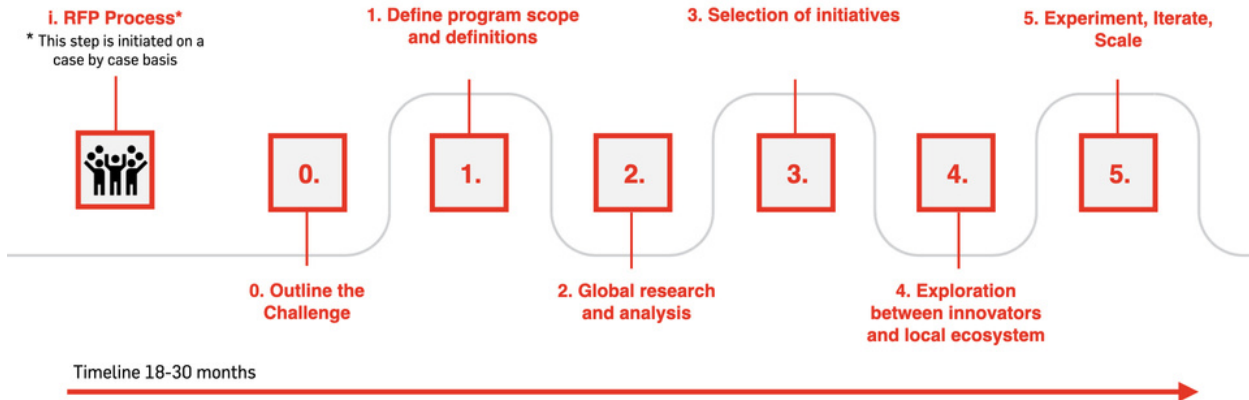
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Background

During the Caring Community Challenge, the partners managed a great deal of uncertainty, not just as a result of the pandemic and other obstacles (see article 2) but also due to the project's fundamental characteristics. The UpSocial phased approach to Challenge development means no one can know what will be tested in the pilot phase until late in the process (Phase 3 in diagram on next page). Hence, as a host team, we couldn't define specific outcomes, but instead aim for them and update partners along the way. While there are good reasons for this lack of definition, it is challenging to plan resources and partnerships around this uncertainty and it can also limit a convener's ability to estimate the project's timeline.

Facilitating a challenge in this way means you are making educated guesses about potential scaling partners, and inviting them to come to the collaboration table with the hope they start to see themselves in a pilot's long term growth. This doesn't always work out. It's the nature of these lab processes, and inherently uncertain. Managing this uncertainty and setting reasonable expectations for collaborators and partners is par for the course. This can be especially difficult for collaborators with less agile internal processes and more traditional leadership structures.

UpSocial methodology in brief

i. RFP Process*
* This step is initiated on a case by case basis

1. Define program scope and definitions

3. Selection of initiatives

5. Experiment, Iterate, Scale

0.   **1.**   **2.**   **3.**   **4.**   **5.**

0. Outline the Challenge

2. Global research and analysis

4. Exploration between innovators and local ecosystem

Timeline 18-30 months

Our response

Although we know nothing is a guarantee in life, planning and resourcing for an unknown outcome is difficult. When Unison was applying to be the community partner, one of the agency's directors asked the engagement lead, "So, what is the project?" The engagement lead responded: "I don't know. The decision is made during stage 3 of the process" She followed up her response with: "Probably a food security project," hoping to reassure the worried director about dedicating resources to a mystery outcome.

The engagement lead knew from her decade of experience with a resident leadership development program that working with the community makes it difficult to predict resources at first too, but with the residents' passion and determination, and that special kind of community "magic", one can almost always make up for the planning gap. Thankfully the director accepted her response.

Being mindful of the uncertainty, the host team invited many partners to the collaboration table, both local resident leaders, local agencies and external subject matter experts across a range of disciplines. As the chalenge direction became clearer, we kept ourselves open to adding more partners as well.

We communicated the flexibility of the project to the cohort participants to keep them engaged, and although not all of them became actively involved in the final pilots, the pool of partners provided an excellent opportunity for getting to know each other and for relationship building, a valuable network resource for future collaboration.

Throughout the many months of the facilitation process, we had to trust that the cohort's depth and breadth would bear fruit. And, although working with a new experimental process, the community partner agency also had lots of experience starting new community projects while resourcing on the fly. This flexibility helped our team to stay calm and maintain trust as well.

Trust the process

During challenging times, we sometimes wonder if outcomes will be realized. However, we have learned that with patience and determination, they can come alive in very magical ways. The UpSocial process was new to most in the cohort, but given its track record in other parts of the world, a great deal of trust was given to the team. The combination of experience and engagement cited above, helped foster the confidence needed to pursue outcomes together.

Close relationships between the project team, seniors and other partners in the project were established – not sure how they did this so well but there was a feeling of mutual care
- Balsam Foundation

Tap the wisdom of the community

Our cohort and its many partners were our best assets. The local residents and agencies brought us in-depth knowledge of the community, its passion, and never failing determination to make things happen. Our subject matter experts brought their expertise and new perspectives to the neighbourhood. Despite the process uncertainty, this cohort maintained attention to the project and our shared objectives.

Detach from results Embrace the learning

Uncertainty is the gateway to innovation. If we always walk the beaten path, we can never discover anything new. Accepting this reality gave us comfort and helped us focus on the journey. We were confident the results would follow.

Balancing assets and desires

Although it's useful and often critical to leverage community assets, sometimes community desire can outstrip asset availability. Be prepared to bring new resources to the community when needed. For our Post Bellum Our Neighbours' Stories pilot, we tried establishing partnerships with local youth agencies, but found they were overstretched and unable to commit. As a result, we found willing youth agency partners outside the pilot region, who ensured testing could still take place without compromising the outcomes.

Don't panic. It's an experiment.

An UpSocial Challenge follows an established methodology - one that demands much in terms of trust and commitment over time, and a healthy dose of experimentation as well. In this article we focus on the uncertainty of the process in the beginning, but the proof one needs for certainty is drawn out in the pilot phase.

We started the Challenge asking if we could find programs or initiatives to test, that would help us look after each other better in the places where we live, work and play. We narrowed that big question to a focus on fostering belonging across generations. And then we found 2 programs to test that had demonstrated their capacity to do that in different parts of the world. Would they work in the community of Bathurst and Finch? We tested them to find certainty.

We tested, we failed, we adjusted, we tested again, we found success. For example, we tested the program, Link Generations from Maryland, USA. During the first pilot we asked its founder, Dr. Lori Marks to run the program with very young children instead of the teenagers she usually worked with; this was a mistake. The second test ran as she had designed it, and it worked beautifully. Don't get discouraged in the process of testing. It's a journey and worth the failed tests to get to a surer outcome.

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Timeline resource crunch

We learned that 18 months is not enough time to complete a Challenge of this nature. Regardless of COVID-19 hurdles, for most community development projects, three to five years is the minimum time required. Resourcing the project with a more realistic time horizon is crucial. However, given all the uncertainty cited above, securing funding for that time horizon is difficult. We hope by sharing the learning and the outcomes of this work, we can help foster funder confidence in these types of challenges.

What surprised us?

Simple can produce amazing

With the selection of Link Generations in Phase 3, we set about designing its pilot. There was no denying the efficacy of the program, even at a distance. The results since its founding in 2016 have demonstrated meaningful connections are made between seniors and youth. What was unclear to the host team was how something apparently so simple could generate such powerful outcomes. And yet it does.

Step 1: Bring together a group of willing seniors and youth (over Zoom during COVID) for a couple of hours each week for 5 weeks.
Step 2: Co-create the conversation themes and activities.
Step 3: Go.

Sometimes, we get bogged down trying to be too clever. Link Generations proves that simple is surprising and impactful!

A sample of the feedback from the seniors included:
"I found it encouraging to interact with young people and learn that they can be wise and serious about their lives."
"It was inspirational to hear many words of wisdom from the younger generations."
And from the youth:
"[making connections] is the most important thing in Link Generations."
"This program made me feel amazing inside and out. I was looking forward to sessions every Monday...I am so excited I was a part of their lives."

Mission Critical

Meticulous and ongoing selection of partners: careful attention to a diversity of subject matter experts and local knowledge and network actors. Managing and guiding the cohort helps the host team ride the uncertainty. Their commitment is critical to success.
Keeping one foot on the ground and one eye on the ecosystem: remember the community is the centre. Don't seek to grow too quickly. Keep one eye on the system around your community. Local adaptation sometimes needs external support.

What we let go

Our assumptions about scaling:

In an uncertain process, you set expectations as best as you can, then keep listening, keep learning, keep communicating. As time unfolds, growth and new connections come. Bringing all partners along the journey together; ensuring people feel shared ownership over the outcomes, strengthens the possibility that pilots are ready to scale with support at the end.

As a facilitator you can also never predict the selection of the pilot programs, as much as you believe you know the context and desires of the project team at the start. Honour the methodology, and enjoy the ride towards clarity.

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About the authors

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