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# THE MOST WICKED PROBLEM OF ALL: IMPLEMENTATION

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**Where can design have the greatest impact in the next five years? As an educator and researcher active in the emergent field of design for social innovation, this is a question that I often ask myself.**

I'd like to put a stake in the ground and offer the concept of implementation as an answer worth considering. Implementation is one of the most crucial stages of social innovation: the phase that often determines whether a new object of design—be it an artifact, service, environment or system—might take hold, becoming widely diffused and adopted to address the previously unmet needs of a community in a sustainable manner.

We know how effective designers can be at the research and conceptualization phase of a brief that calls for a social innovation. They can prove masterful at embodying an idea and shaping it into form and function. This generative stage of design is simply wondrous to witness: one in which a promising direction for change can unexpectedly develop from a few sketches and posted notes, or a latent aspiration of a stakeholder can suddenly emerge with brilliant clarity from a messy and iterative co-creation process. In those

situations, design's increasing capacity to act as a mediating discipline comes to the forefront, along with designers' capability to become adept cultural explorers, ones deeply in tune with the problems and treatments of human experience (Buchanan, 1995).

At their best, designers excel in making ideas concrete, but they also delight in wonder and surprise, and are perfectly at ease at embracing the essential conditions of ambiguity and improvisation that characterize social innovation processes (Michlewski, 2008). In fact, when we consider the growth in complexity and uncertainty that characterizes our 21st century society, significant implications for design as a "reflective" community of practice (Schön, 1983), and as a pluralistic field for inquiry adept at tackling such wicked problems (Rittel & Weber, 1973), emerge. This is a time when we recognize a sense of urgency for change to happen—perhaps at a broader scope than ever before—and with it,

a call for paths creating forms of collaboration and generative modes of intervention that can lead to social innovations. In this context, to be a designer is more than a choice of discipline, but the recognition that creative vision and technical skill have the power to transform lives.

perspectives, knowledge sharing and precious human interactions that happened during designing cease to be. They end precisely at the complex juncture of implementation of a social innovation. When those conversations and insights might have mattered the most, design is no longer part of the equation.

Here's to a change, over the next five years, in how designers devise and embrace implementation as they continue demonstrating the catalytic role of design in society. I'm certain it will be quite powerful to watch the impact that ensues from those longer-term engagements.



Side by side images of student work from the Illustration Department, and its implementation in 2007 in partnership with the Community Health Africa Trust (CHAT), Kenya. This Designmatters project engaged designers to co-create with CHAT counselors a set of education and communication materials to deliver visually based, culturally appropriate health education messages that encourage family planning and prevent HIV-AIDS with nomadic tribes.

And so we return to the wicked problem of implementation. Somehow, and too often, the powerful contribution of design goes absent, or becomes stifled or arrested by the time a social innovation reaches this critical stage. There are a multitude of explanations for this drop; many can be traced back to ingrained organizational and financial factors that dictate the curve of a design engagement, and/or the expectations for a hand-off by a design team once a project reaches a certain level of “design completion.” What happens when the designers cease to be engaged? The rich

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