BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INNOVATION IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR

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IMAGINE CANADA

AUTHORS

Dr Sandra Lapointe is a Professor of Philosophy at McMaster University. She is a Commonwealth alumna, a Fellow of the Humboldt Foundation and an award-winning scholar. She is a past President of the Canadian Philosophical Association and a past member of the Board of Directors of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Her current research agenda revolves around issues connected to knowledge mobilization, skills development and policy for techno-social innovation. Dr Lapointe is the Director of The/La Collaborative, co-founder of the Canadian Forum for Social Innovation and Inaugural Lead of the McMaster Social Innovation Ideas and Action Lab.

Vivien Underdown is a social sector professional who is passionate about mobilizing collaborative action toward creating prosperous and vibrant communities. She has a Bachelor of Arts from McGill University and has continued education focused on asset-based community development, user-centered design and empowerment. Over the past decade, Vivien has worked with grassroot, community-based and grant making organizations, leading initiatives that grow the knowledge, skills, resources and networks available in the social sector for driving social change.

With the contributions of Dr Milad Pira, Sarah May Lindsay PhD(c), Dr Catherine Klausen and Brent Odland PhD(c).

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Imagine Canada is pleased to partner with The/La Collaborative to make this research available to Canadian charities and non-profits. Any questions and comments on this report should be directed to the The/La Collaborative.

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KEY FINDINGS

Social inequities such as poverty and homelessness are intersectional and complex; they are persistent, wicked and their solutions are elusive. Because innovation and change in the social sector are driven by evidence-based practices and processes, universities as anchor institutions would seem to have a natural role to play in the social impact ecosystem. Campus-community knowledge collaborations and innovation partnerships can be a vector of impact and, if the conditions are right, academic engagement can increase capacity in the social impact ecosystem.

We wanted to better understand the needs of social sector organizations (SSO) in relation to their capacity, interests and experience with innovation and, along the way, assess how these needs had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our team collected input through a survey from 180 participants in social sector organizations across Canada and analyzed responses for trends, themes and sentiments. Here are the key findings:

- SSOs generally recognize that there is a role for campus-community partnerships in tackling enduring, "wicked" social problems, and many organizations entertain partnerships with higher education institutions. However, it is unclear that SSOs' needs around capacity for innovation, and specifically their ability to absorb and/or contribute to innovation at a systems level, are directly addressed through academic research partnerships.

- Generally speaking, the pandemic did not reduce the ability of SSOs to engage in activities associated with innovation processes. The perceived effectiveness of organizations for most innovation-related activities either remained the same or increased during the COVID-crisis. This is especially true of those activities crucial to innovation processes and cultures, such as brainstorming new ideas to address issues, developing prototypes for new ideas, collaborating with other SSOs, and implementing policies that foster equity, diversity, and inclusion.

- During the pandemic, the only activities for which organizations perceived their effectiveness as reduced were the activities for which they also perceived their effectiveness to be lower pre-pandemic: program assessment and research and development (R&D).

- Staff expertise is perceived to be a vector of innovation, and the skillset required for innovation is understood to be multifaceted and wide-ranging. Participants were generally keenly aware of the connection between human, socio-emotional foundational skills (those associated with e.g., critical thinking, communications, social and emotional intelligence) and capacity for innovation in their organization. They also recognize that increased capacity for innovation might require hiring or upskilling staff to have the competencies and toolkits to contribute to innovation processes.

- The current human resource crisis in the social sector and the related funding shortfall are perceived to affect capacity for innovation in the social sector.

GLOSSARY

Capacity: The ability of an organization to perform work, or level of an organization's capability to deliver services, programs, and products as part of fulfilling its mandate or mission.

EDI: An abbreviation for: 'equity, diversity and inclusion'.

Experiential learning (EL): The acquisition of knowledge and skills through practice and upon reflection on a period of engagement, observation, and/or immersion. This includes internships, co-op programs and service learning, among others.

Innovation Process: A series of actions or steps designed to create, improve, or implement ways of doing, framing, knowing, or thinking, intended to create new value.

Knowledge absorption capacity: The ability of an organization to develop routines and processes designed to assimilate information needed to support continuous amelioration.

Non-profit or not-for-profit: A model of activity, service or product delivery for the public benefit often associated with charitable entities. The term also describes a type of organization governed by a specific legal framework.

Reciprocity: A feature of collaborations and partnerships whose outcomes and impacts are balanced and mutually beneficial.

Research and Development (R&D): The planned creative work aimed at new knowledge or developing new and significantly improved goods, programs, and services. This includes both basic research and applied research and development; the latter is the use of research and practical experience to produce new or significantly improved goods, programs, services, or processes.

Resilience: The ability to effectively respond to and adapt to systemic change, seeking a balance of social, environmental, and economic needs.

Skill: An aptitude, competency, or ability, broadly construed.

- *Foundational skill*: A broad range of abilities and knowledge understood to be essential to employability and citizenship, and generally associated with social and emotional intelligence as well as cognitive literacy. They include critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, self-management, intercultural competence, and effective communication.
- *Technical skill*: A domain specific skill that is usually associated with applied training.

Social Sector Organization (SSO): A service, product provider, or facilitator that operates for and is organized around societal support and betterment, such as non-profits.

Social enterprise: A business model with the dual focus of social (and/or environmental) and economic gain.

Social finance: Any type of financial service that utilizes private funds to support social goals, address social problems, and/or facilitate social change. According to Economic and Social Development Canada, social finance is the practice of making investments intended to create social or environmental impact in addition to financial returns.

Social innovation ecosystem: The multilayered and multifaceted collection of interconnected institutions and organizations through which the resources, talent, and information that supports, interacts with, and affects social innovation flow.

Social impact: is predicated on specific activities or outputs (e.g., programs, services) and their outcomes. An organization's social impact is the measurable outcome of its products, programs, services, etc. that are created and delivered to address a specific social need.

Social innovation: The phrase "social innovation" is used in multiple contexts to refer to new ideas, services, processes, or frameworks intended to meet social needs or create impact for the public benefit as well as those involved in addressing wicked problems that are rooted in systemic issues. Here we make a distinction between **innovation for social impact** in the social sector that follows traditional logics and **innovation for social transformation** that targets systemic societal issues.

Social transformation: is a matter of collective, intentional, systems-level change. Social transformation is an intentional process through which transformational change is effected across social systems to address emerging social crises and global challenges. Social innovation happens as a result of coordinating the actions of multiple stakholders in a system toward a collective goal.

Social research and development (social R&D): Evidence-based methods and practices intended to acquire, absorb, and/or utilize knowledge, often to create or improve processes, products, and/or services in the social sector.

Social sector: An umbrella term denoting the activities of organizations that identify with and operate for the public benefit, including co-operatives, non-profits, registered charities, social enterprises/B corporations, or unincorporated grassroots or community groups. It is sometimes referred to as the "third sector", in contrast to what have traditionally been labelled the private and public sectors. Recently, the emergence of "social enterprise", i.e., a for-profit business model embracing social and/or environmental goals has made traditional boundaries between sectors in mixed economies more porous.

CONTEXT

WICKED ISSUES

The COVID-19 global pandemic provides a vivid illustration of the fact that health is indissociably woven into the social fabric. Because health is determined by a range of social and economic factors, the effects of the COVID-19 public health crisis have spread beyond the consequences of a physical illness that affected entire populations.[1] Public health issues are inextricable from systemic concerns that extend beyond the availability of medical treatment, the capacity for health research and innovation, or the ability of hospitals to absorb an increase in demand for urgent or intensive care.[2]

> Our team wanted to gather baseline data to understand the diverse needs of social sector organizations (SSOs) around capacity and innovation. The purpose was not only to shed light on the diverse needs of SSOs and identify where assets and strengths could contribute to reinforcing innovation mindsets for impact in the social sector and capacity to partake in social transformation, but to do so with the express intent of creating new approaches leveraging universities' community engagement mandates and mobilizing university-grown social and human knowledge and expertise within the process. The result of our research will be interesting to those trying to understand the current state of organizational capacity for innovation in the social sector, as well as those interested in the role of academic knowledge and social and human research. The assumption is that in order to have a

COVID-19 measures and their aftermath affected virtually every dimension of personal and social life, from the conditions in which we work and learn, to the cost of housing. For this reason, its effects are especially dire in the social sector, where organizations are on the frontlines, supporting community members vulnerable to social inequities.

Even though the likelihood of a global health crisis may have been expectable, and even though epidemiologists were not unprepared, the knowledge community had limited evidence around the effects of a global health emergency on people's lives. As a result, rapidly evolving public policies designed to contain the fitful spread of the disease made it difficult to predict or mitigate widespread impacts on social issues, and the resulting downstream consequences on SSOs.

We know that, at the most basic level, actions to resolve global crises and, at a local level, to address problems that these crises create or exacerbate in our communities, require innovation. We also know that when tackled piecemeal, social problems—violence, housing, and poverty, for instance—have the same recalcitrant nature as a seven-head hydra. Assuredly, swift and decisive actions are required to mitigate the immediate effects of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic on social issues. But more radical and comprehensive solutions are required to address wicked problems and, in the long term, to tackle their multiple causes which are rooted in the compound aspects of a complex, multilayered ecosystem.

> **"Wicked problems are persistent problems about which there is little agreement on solutions. Not all the stakeholders are known, end points are equivocal and when interventions are introduced the problems themselves might change. We can address wicked problems but we have a tough time eradicating them"**
> **(Phipps et al., 2012, p. 167)**

Piecemeal approaches to systemic issues are eminently inefficient.[3] When problems are wicked, the type of innovation needed to address them must be radical. In this context, we understand "innovation" broadly to include any new ideas, services, processes, or frameworks intended to meet social needs or improve the way we create positive impact to address social needs. However, to provide adequate solutions to complex issues pervading our social ecosystems, innovation must itself have roots that are "deep". We need innovation to profoundly transform social systems by changing basic routines (ways of doing), the flow of resources such as money, knowledge and people, as well as the way institutions work (laws, policies, rules) or the attitudes and perceptions people have.[4] In this perspective, successful innovation has a transformative social purpose: to reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience and, ideally, do so in a way that fosters sustainability and justice.

SYSTEMS

The social sector is a unique nexus of opportunities and challenges for igniting sustainable change. On the one hand, SSOs emerge to address the issues created from systems-level gaps and they

have tangible and often immediate benefits to community members. On the other hand, SSOs' capacity to participate in solutions to wicked issues upstream and at a systems-level is constrained by limited resources often dependent on the very systems they seek to change.

To address wicked problems, and to maintain adequate levels of operation in the conditions of constant flux the social system affords, SSOs need the capacity to absorb and/or contribute to innovation as well as the ability to feed into systems-level dynamics. Over the last decade, design and innovation processes have gained increasing attention in the social sector.[5] While the recipe is still tentative, when it comes to establishing the conditions in which communities can successfully tackle wicked problems in the social ecosystem, two ingredients seem to be desirable. On the one hand, what is needed is an understanding of innovation and change management processes to guide actions.[6] On the other hand, decision- and policy-making needs to be able to rely on the evidence sciences bring.

In this pursuit, there are assets on all sides. On the one hand, the social sector has riches of knowledge and experience to contribute to solutions. On the other hand, the sort of empirical and conceptual investigation (e.g., of the conditions in which wicked problems evolve) traditionally emerges from human and social research: economics, business, anthropology, sociology, history, and philosophy, to name only a few disciplines. Assuredly, university-based social and human researchers are keen to help tackle wicked problems in a number of ways, including, but not limited to, evidence support and training. But do current models of campus-community partnerships meet the needs of community partners and are there other, more efficient ways for universities to leverage their mission and mobilize their resources to support innovation and transformation in the social sector?

Key to making headway around innovation is to find ways to integrate the social sector's experience of social issues and their know-how in implementing innovation and change management strategies with the expertise of postsecondary researchers, especially in the social sciences, humanities and arts (SSHA). Collaborations of this type, however, are still an uncommon occurrence outside of some dedicated applied programs, like social work. While the number of partnered research projects led by SSHA researchers in the social sector is increasing, the participation of SSHA academics in processes specifically designed to support innovation in the social sector and cross-sectoral research collaborations, which may or may not feed into social innovation, is rare at best.[7]

This is a missed opportunity. The best approach to innovation in the social sector would channel social and human researchers' knowledge and expertise into community-led research and development, impact assessment and "design" processes that draw on the know-how of SSO practitioners and involve them throughout the process. When the conditions are right, innovation benefits from cross-sectoral partnered initiatives that bring researchers and community experts together.[8] The challenge is to create these "ideal conditions", i.e., conditions that build on a realistic appreciation of the motivations and constraints for both SSOs and academics.

Creating the ideal conditions for campus-community innovation partnerships requires an accurate understanding of the issues at play. It requires an adequate appreciation for both the assets and the needs of social sector organizations regarding their capacity.

This report is dedicated to identifying and assessing social sector perceptions of motivations, assets and needs around capacity for innovation. While our primary intent is to inform campus-community strategies that focus on knowledge and expertise in SSHA, the results can likewise be used by actors in the social impact ecosystem to inform their own strategies.

AN ILLUSTRATION: WORKING WITH/IN A "WICKED" PROBLEM

One wicked social problem is the variable, but consistently lacking, capacity of social sector organizations to secure the human resources they need to fulfil their mission, which in turn affects their capacity to address the needs of their communities.[9] Human Resource (HR) problems in the social sector are not new, but we know that they have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.[10] Lockdown measures forced social sector organizations to adapt at all levels.[11] Modified operation affected the conditions of employment: many social sector organizations—35%, according to Charity Village— reported having reduced staffing capacity, with smaller organizations reporting the largest proportion of the changes.[12] This corresponded with reports that capacity to deliver service diminished (Figure 1[13]). And, unfortunately, according to a recent report by the Ontario Nonprofit Network, many SSOs continued experiencing high levels of turnaround and staffing shortages even after they began resuming operations at pre-pandemic levels.[14] But many SSOs reported having experienced an increase in demand for their services during the pandemic, increased staffing levels[15] and higher capacity to meet demand for services/products over the pandemic.

The point here is that when it comes to HR and staffing capacity in SSOs, broader systems-level considerations are at play. The current human resource crisis in the social sector cannot be addressed without examining the role of broader concomitant factors in the complex social ecosystem, such as demographic shifts (e.g., baby-boomers reaching retirement age), a pre-existing skills shortage, and comparatively less attractive salary and work conditions than in many private sector industries, none of which the pandemic created, but only exacerbated. Whatever the cause—exhaustion, reluctance to return to in-person work due to fear of virus transmission, skills shortages, or chronic issues such as uncompetitive salaries and lack of funding[16]—a durable

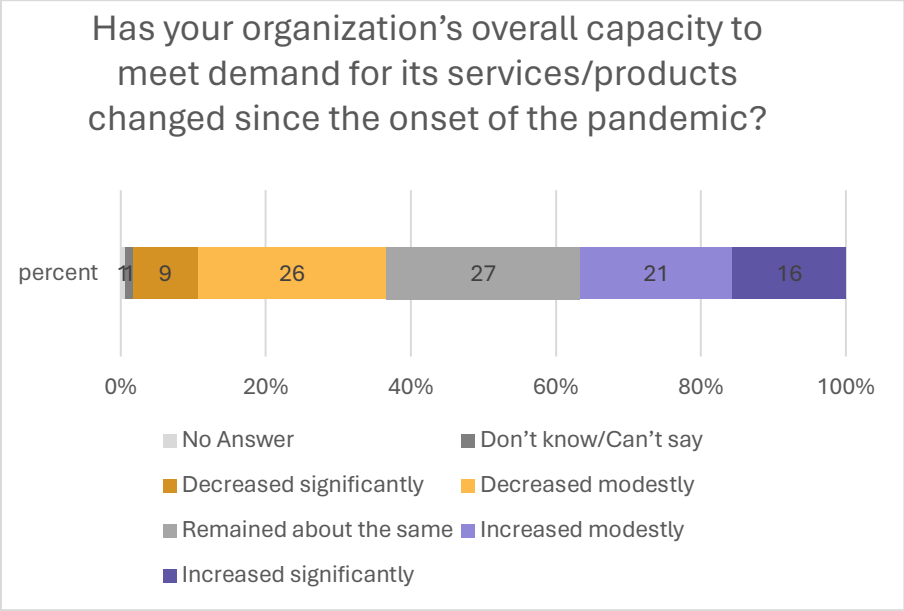

Figure 1. Changes in SSOs' overall capacity to meet service/product demands since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (percentage); frequency: n=180.

solution cannot be piecemeal nor exclude actions that would move much beyond the social sector.

More importantly, because a HR crisis in SSOs is likely to directly affect the capacity of social organizations to address the needs of their communities, it should also be understood as an important variable affecting their capacity to leverage innovation processes to effect change and transformation needed in communities. From our perspective, this makes the current human resources crisis a textbook target for campus-community initiatives designed to intentionally support the social sector.[17]

ASSUMPTIONS

Tackling wicked problems and societal challenges requires innovation. These problems will not go away on their own; they cannot be addressed in a piecemeal fashion, but rather require radical and systems-level change strategies.[18]

In what follows, we avoid using the buzzword 'social innovation' altogether for reasons that will become clear below. Innovation in the social sector is connected to specific approaches to impact and systems change. Approaches to innovation in the social sector may be embedded in the Research and Development (R&D) process, as is the case with design thinking and co-creation, or they may target the business and funding model specifically, as is the case of social enterprise and social financing.[19] What is common to all innovation in the social sector is the application of these processes for the explicit end-purpose of creating greater social and human wellbeing, and with the awareness of the fact that complex problems require solutions at a systems level.

The assumptions we make on the nature and structure of innovation in the social sector are as follows:[20]

- Innovation and transformation happen in an ecosystem.

- Innovation and transformation are best fostered locally but aim to be transformative at a systems-level.
- Innovation and transformation happen through processes that are non-linear and iterative.
- Inclusive innovation and transformation integrate all stakeholders and assets in meaningful ways.
- Innovation and transformation happen on a variety of different scales.
- Innovation and transformation require knowledge and change management capacity.

An exhaustive discussion of innovation in the social sector should include an appraisal of the organizational, sociological, and political conditions in which both it and the wicked problems it is meant to address emerge. However, our study is primarily focused on better understanding the organizational and systemic conditions in which capacity for social innovation emerges.

SCOPE

What are the needs of SSOs in relation to their capacity for, interest in, and experience with innovation processes? How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted innovation-focused activities? We gathered evidence to answer these two questions through an online survey we developed and distributed across Canada through the United Way Centraide network, as well as other partners. The questions were developed on the basis of a preliminary literature review on capacity for innovation in the non-profit sector, as well as through a series of co-design workshops with stakeholders.

We received 180 responses from SSO employees across Canada. Most responses came from people working in organizations offering services in a neighbourhood, city, town, or rural municipality, or a region or territory, as opposed to those operating at a provincial, national, or international level. More than half of the agencies we polled indicated that they offered their services to low-income households, people experiencing poverty, children and youth, and/or people experiencing mental illness or addiction. About half reported serving equity-deserving or vulnerable groups: women and/or girls, newcomers, people with disabilities, older adults, and/or people experiencing homelessness or employment barriers. More than a third reported providing support to BIPOC and/or LGBTQ2S+ communities.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

BEYOND BUZZ WORDS

Over the last decade, social sector policymakers and funders have increasingly relied on the notion that "social innovation" is an expedient of social impact. There have been welcomed calls to build capacity for innovation in the social sector, but the notion has also been criticized. While "social innovation" is widely used, it is rarely well defined. While the idea that innovation drives impact seems intuitive, there is little data on the effectiveness of specific innovation approaches and strategies in the social space or the difference between traditional approaches to design and implementation and more recent approaches based on design-thinking and co-creation or on the "innovation lab" model. This contributes to the concept's elusiveness, which has in turn contributed to a broadening narrative wrought with assumptions.

Importantly, social innovation is not a "holy grail" or a magic potion for solving social issues.[21] Creating the conditions in which innovation happens cannot be achieved merely by changing business models to embrace social enterprise. There is no immediate connection - whether conceptual, economic or otherwise - between 'innovation' and 'enterprise'. Building SSOs' capacity for innovation requires a reassessment of practices much beyond those that revolve around funding and impact assessment.

We wanted to neutralize buzzword and fuzzword effects around the use of the phrase "social innovation". This is partly why we speak of "innovation in the social sector" as opposed to "social innovation". Specifically, to avoid misunderstanding, we talk about capacity and processes for innovation in the social sector broadly, and we look at the organizational, human, and social conditions of activities that support or create change in the community.

To avoid making too many assumptions, and to bypass the perfunctory talk about "social innovation", we devised questions that would allow us to document participants' attitudes about specific practices and routines that have been identified by researchers and practitioners as being associated with the capacity to innovate. Nonetheless, since many people in the social sector do refer to "social research and development" and "social innovation", we also wanted to understand what they assume this involves. We predicted that asking participants about their attitudes toward "social research and development" and "social innovation" could not be taken at face value and we wanted to recognize the assumptions they make.

We started by asking participants about their level of interest (on a scale from "extremely interested" to "not at all interested") in engaging in research and development and/or social innovation within their organization, irrespective of current capacity and costs. We expected that the interest would be overwhelmingly positive, and the majority of participants reported being very interested (32%) or extremely interested (27%). However, a full third of participants (33%) indicated being only "somewhat interested" (Figure 2[22]). Whether this comes from measured

caution/indifference or reflects the fact that participants didn't feel they knew enough about what it involves or something else, this is interesting.

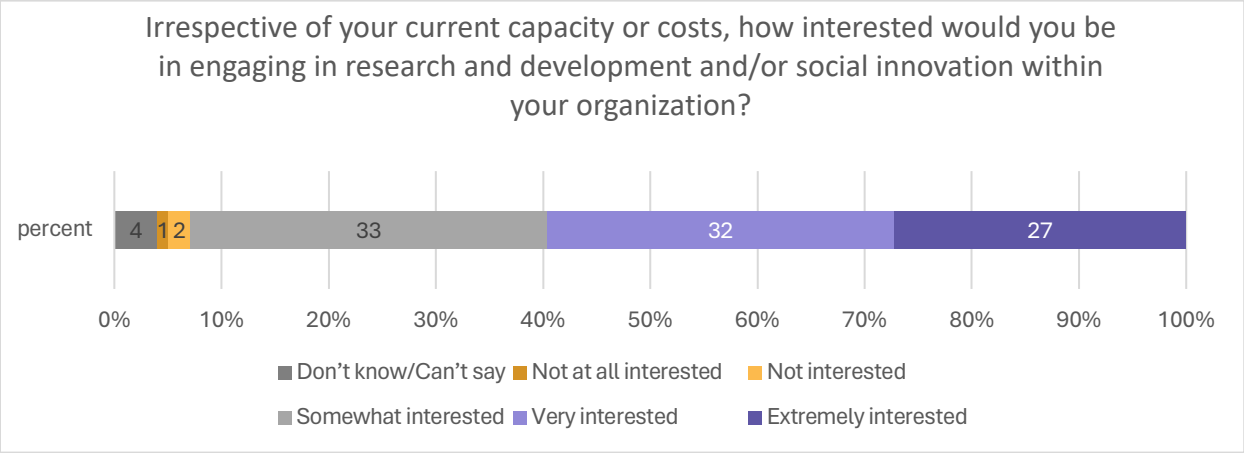

Figure 2. Participants' interest in engaging with social R&D or social innovation within their organizations, irrespective of cost and capacity (percentage); frequency: n=180.

We interpreted what participants meant when they indicated their level of interest in engaging in research and development and/or social innovation (Figure 2), in connection with what they said about their interest in specific types of routines and behaviours associated with innovation processes (Figure 4):

- Launching projects that would count as forms of social innovation.
- Being familiar with the techniques and approaches to social innovation.
- Benefitting from funding for a project labelled "social R&D" or "social innovation".
- Being involved in workshops and/or training labelled "social R&D" or "social innovation".
- Relying on research and/or development.
- Using research ("R&D") for the purpose of innovation.
- Using research ("R&D") for the purpose of program evaluation.

We also asked them directly if they were clear on the connection between research and development and innovation in the social sector. This approach allowed us to identify (an important) variability in the level of cohesiveness in participants' claims about their experience with innovation in the social sector, and the broad-based assumptions they make about capacity and needs.

An example of this tension can be found in the fact that while 93% of the people we polled reported that innovation had played either a central (70%) or small (23%) role in maintaining programs and/or pivoting during the pandemic—only 4% indicated it had played no role, or had failed (Figure 3)—less than half of participants indicated that they agreed (32%) or strongly agreed (14%) with the claim that there are people in their organization who are familiar with the techniques and approaches to social innovation and whose job it is to apply them (Figure 4).

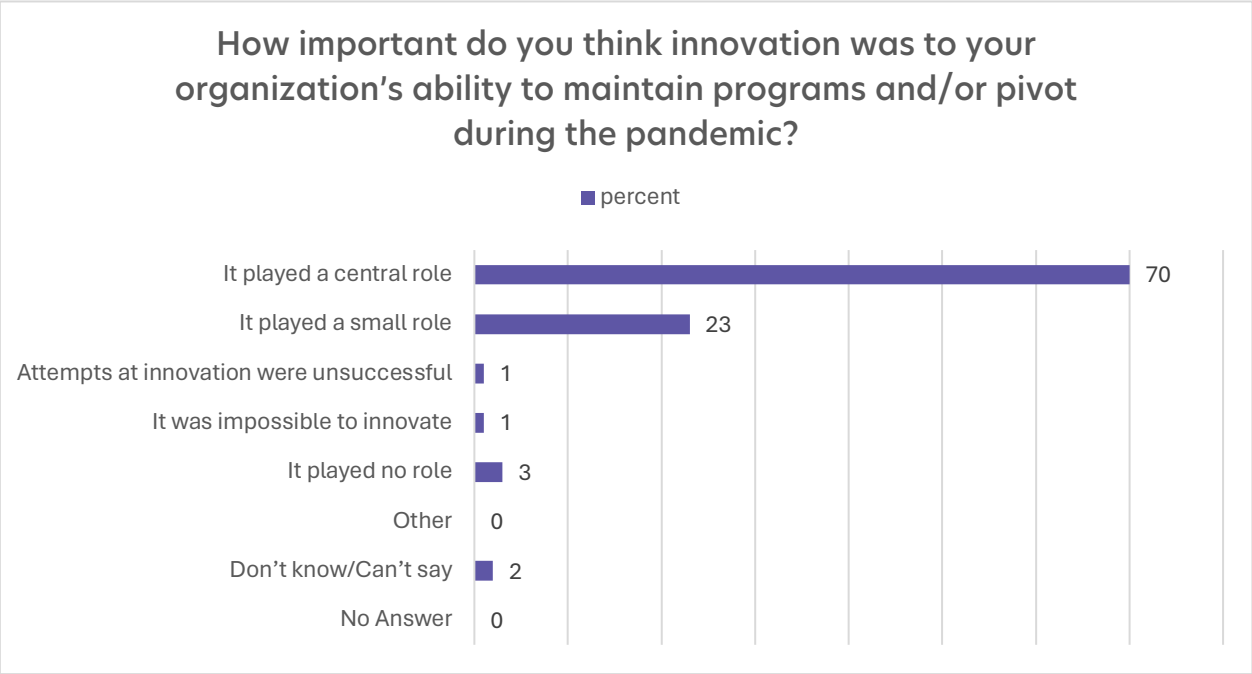

Figure 3. Importance of innovation for maintaining programs and/or pivoting during the pandemic (percentage; frequency, n =180).

Likewise, less than a third of participants agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (10%) that their organization has been involved in workshops and/or training labelled "social R&D" or "social innovation" (Figure 4).

There is, of course, no requirement that those working in SSOs receive specific training or mentoring to participate in innovation processes (e.g., brainstorming, prototyping, piloting, engaging end-users in co-design) or to adopt the types of organizational routines that increase capacity to contribute to social impact and transformation (e.g., knowledge sharing, networking, establishing strong EDI cultures). The disconnect between the perceived role of innovation in maintaining organizational capacity during the pandemic (Figure 3) and the level of participation in professional development opportunities targeting capacity for innovation (Figure 4[23]) signals that innovation happens in spite of access to professional development opportunities. However, it could also indicate that access to such development opportunities is difficult, that the offer is largely insufficient or that its value is misunderstood. None of these possibilities is inconsequential, and all require additional research.

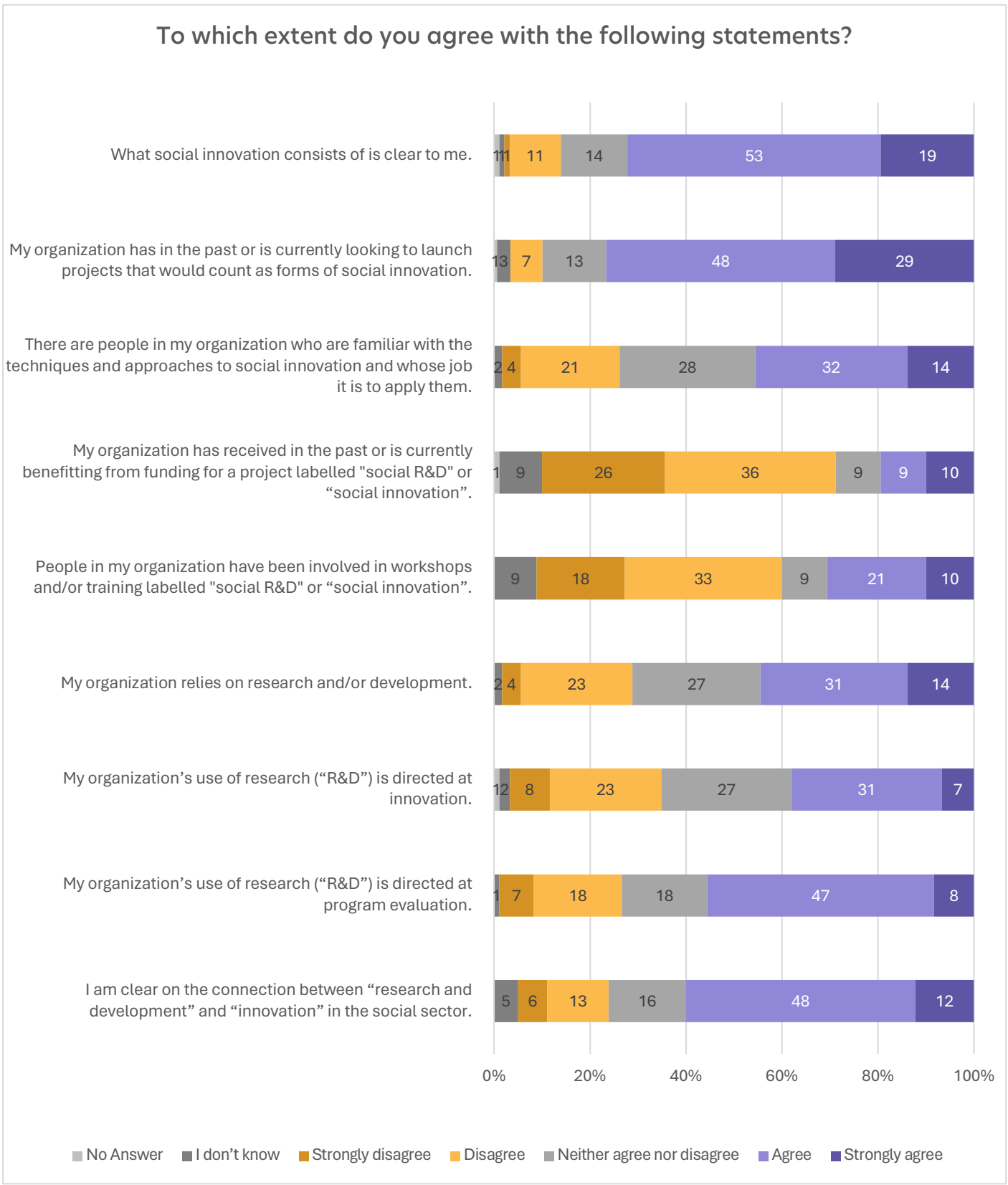

Figure 4. SSO's attitudes toward social innovation and social R&D (percentage); frequency: n=180.

Consider, for instance, that while 93% percent of participants reported that innovation had been involved in their ability to maintain programs and/or pivot during the pandemic (Figure 3), only 45% of participants reported that research and development had been involved in supporting innovation (Figure 5).[24]

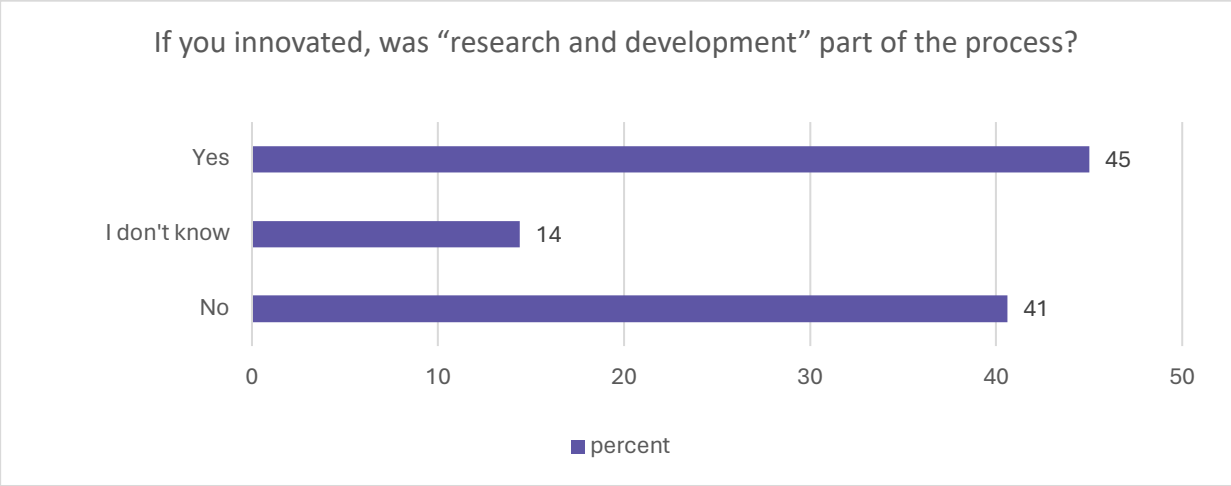

Figure 5. Polled SSOs' use of R&D in innovation (percentage); frequency: n=180.

How are we to understand the result, namely, that organizations innovate without engaging in research and development? Is the choice intentional or is it a reflection of the fact that most SSOs are too small to have a dedicated R&D lead or unit, or is there another reason?

When asked about the specific behaviours they adopt to foster innovation, participants showed great variability. For instance, only 38% agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (7%) that their organization directs R&D at innovation (Figure 4). By contrast, 55% of participants agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (8%) that the main use of R&D is program evaluation (Figure 4). Lack of conceptual clarity might also be the reason why 72% of participants were willing to agree (53%) or strongly agree (19%) with the statement, “What social innovation consists of is clear to me”, while only 60% agreed (48%) or strongly agreed (12%) that they understood the connection between R&D and innovation in the social sector (Figure 4).

It could be that, just like the concept of “social innovation”, the concepts of “R&D”, “research” and “evaluation” remain somewhat vague to participants, and that they had difficulty connecting them together and/or to specific practices, activities, or routines. But if that is the case, academic stakeholders should pay attention and find ways to articulate the value of research for community partners. At the very least, such incongruities point to the fact that those who want to make a connection between social R&D, program evaluation and social innovation need be clear on what is involved, as well as how all those activities are connected to one another, both in individual organizations and across the social ecosystem.[25]

INTEREST IN BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INNOVATION

The capacity of SSOs to adopt and deploy innovation processes and routines is affected by a range of internal and external factors. We set up the survey so as to acquire information on participants' needs as they relate to capacity building specifically for innovation activities or innovation processes, e.g., allocating resources to evaluation, research and development or conducting primary and secondary research.

Figure 6 shows that while participants perceived SSOs' ability to engage in some activities associated with innovation processes as reduced during the pandemic, their perception of the effectiveness of their organization for most other innovation-focused activities they were asked about either remained the same or actually increased.

Most importantly, many of the people we polled reported that, during the pandemic, their organization had become more effective at activities such as, e.g., brainstorming new ideas to address issues, developing prototypes for new ideas, collaborating with other SSOs, and implementing policies that foster equity, diversity, and inclusion activities (Figure 6[26]). This is noteworthy. All of these activities are crucial to innovation processes and cultures, and increased capacity for them in times of crisis might indicate something crucial about the conditions in which innovation happens.

In a series of sense-making sessions we organized with social sector practitioners to review preliminary results, some participants suggested that increased capacity for innovation during the pandemic could be explained by the fact that the stress pandemic measures exerted on institutional routines created new space for organizational transformation by weakening longstanding barriers to change rooted in habits, and expedited the adoption of innovation-focused strategies that were needed for organizations to continue delivering services. If this is correct, we have additional ground to think that innovation is involved in addressing emerging social needs, even in the absence of financial support, training or specific staffing responsible for innovation portfolios. This does not mean that intentional skills-building and training around innovation processes and tools is superfluous. On the contrary: plausibly, greater familiarity with innovation methodologies would have increased the outcomes substantially. This question, as well as the question of the role of "natural disruptors" in creating the conditions for change is beyond the scope of this project.[27]

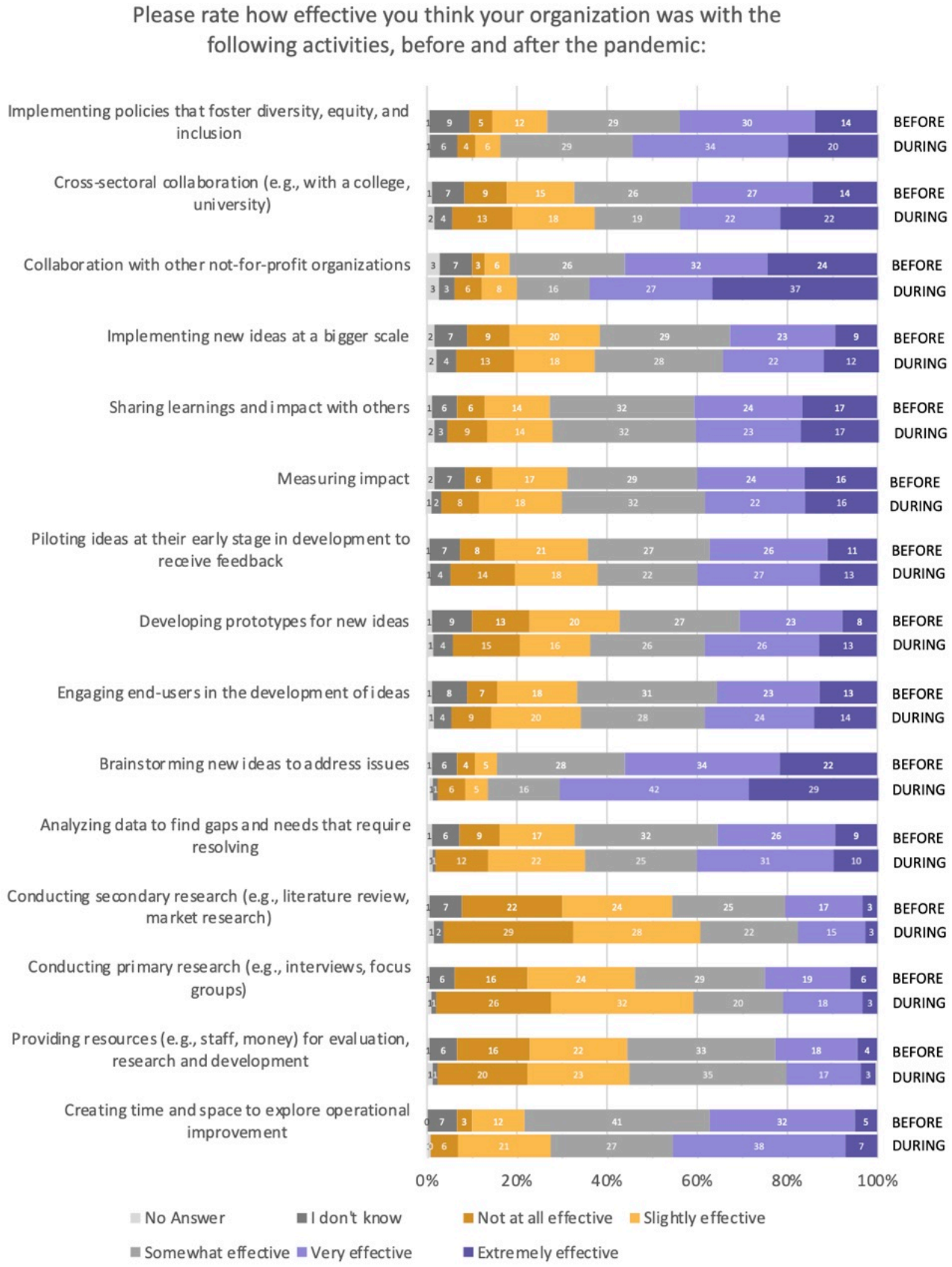

Figure 6. SSOs' assessment of their capacity for innovation-related activities before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (percentage); frequency: n=180.

Research vs Innovation

Based on our data, SSOs are overwhelmingly keen to build capacity to apply social innovation techniques (Figure 7), and their interest is generally higher than their perceived effectiveness both before and during the pandemic (Figure 6).

There is one notable exception to this claim. Both before and during the pandemic, SSOs perceived their *effectiveness* at conducting primary research (e.g., focus groups, interviews) and secondary research (e.g., literature reviews, market studies) to be the lowest amongst all the innovation-driving activities they were presented with (Figure 6). However, their current *interest* in building research capacity is also the lowest (Figure 7[28]).

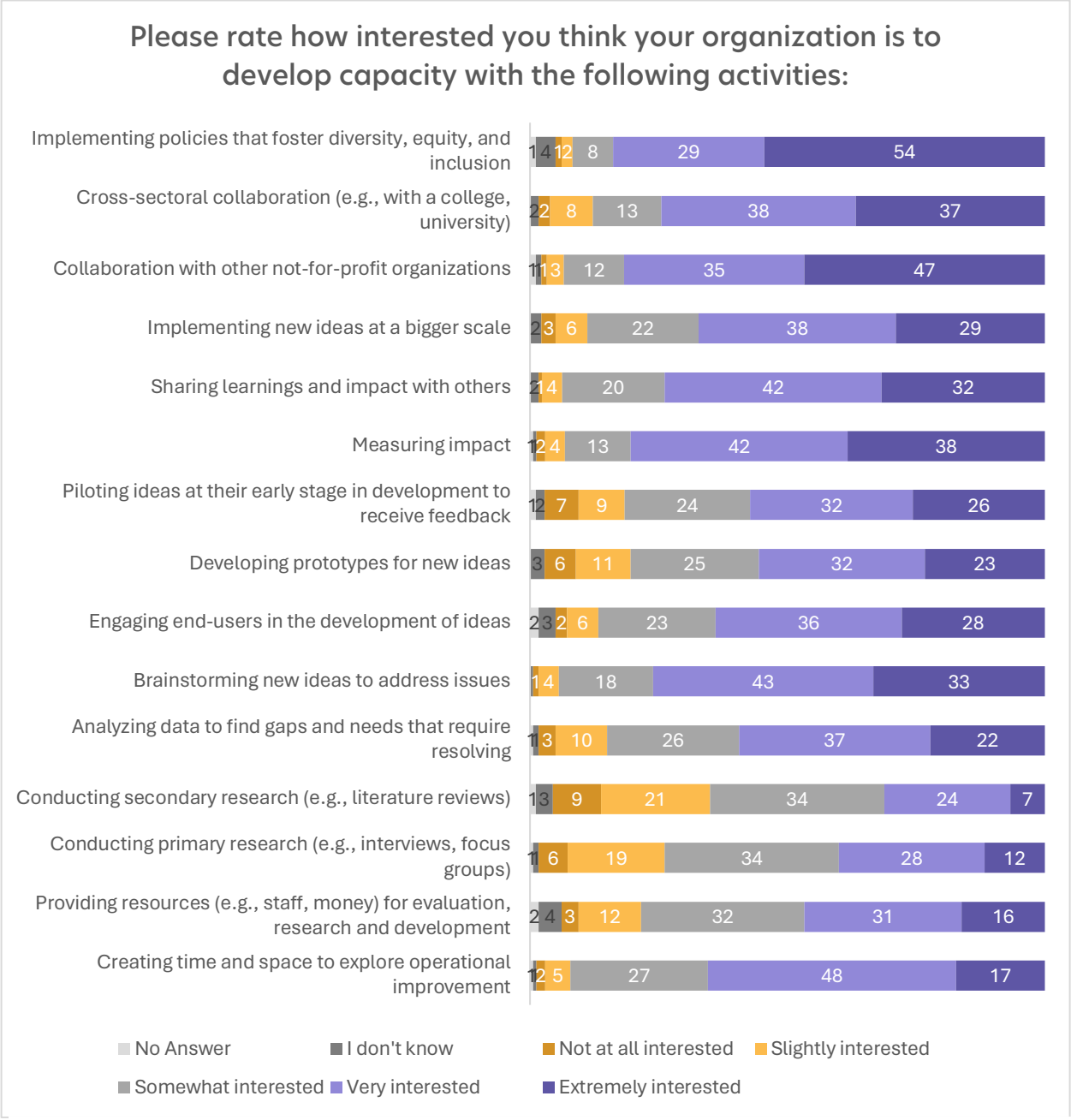

Figure 7. SSOs' interest in developing capacity for socially innovative practices (percentage); frequency: n=180.

This is all the more significant given that participants rated their interest in allocating resources like staffing and funding to "evaluation, research and development" as higher than their interest in support for primary and secondary research (Figure 7), which would suggest that they assume that the role of primary and secondary research in R&D is optional. Indeed, what participants are willing to say about their effectiveness and/or interest for primary and secondary research (Figure 7) seems to be disconnected from what they are willing to say about their interest for 'R&D', which is overall much higher (Figure 2). This raises some interesting question about perceptions participants have about research generally, and about the capacity of academic researchers to contribute to R&D in SSOs.

One other possibility is that participants lacked clarity on the nature and role of primary and secondary research in innovation processes. Any assumption that SSOs would benefit from "augmented research capacity" would require clarification on what social sector stakeholders call 'research', and how they see academic research partnerships contributing to the process of innovation.

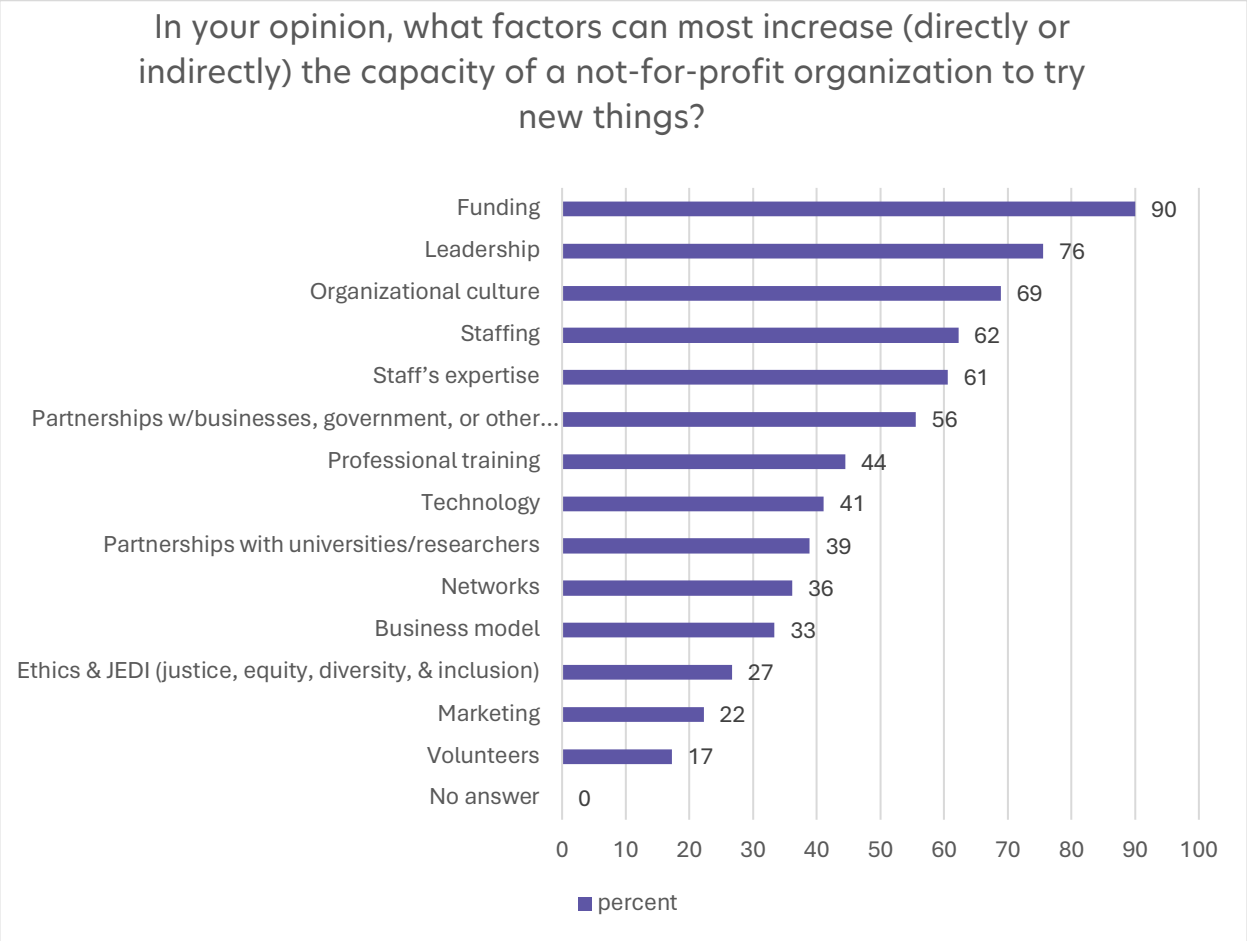

Figure 8. Participants' opinion of factors affecting a SSO's capacity to try new things (percentage); frequency: n=180.

FACTORS AFFECTING CAPACITY FOR INNOVATION

Funding

Unsurprisingly, funding emerged as the factor most participants (90%) perceived as likely to directly or indirectly allow them to try new things (Figure 8). This overwhelming agreement reflects both the fact that social issues are always eminently urgent and that the unpredictability, short timeframe, and/or inflexibility of funding constrains organizations' ability to try new things. In addition, the lack of funding arguably has compounding effects on each of the remaining factors: organizational resources, structures and cultures, business model, knowledge collaborations and partnerships.

While almost all participants identified funding as an important factor for trying new things, lack of funding did not always constitute an unsurmountable roadblock. When asked how likely it would be for their organization to try a new idea should they not receive funding or financing for it, more people reported it would still be more likely (34%) or even very likely (12%) that they would, rather than unlikely (24%) or very unlikely (9%) (Figure 9). While the absence of funding may not prevent an organization from trying a new idea, it is logical that the success (e.g., effectiveness, scale, sustainability) of these attempts could be impacted.

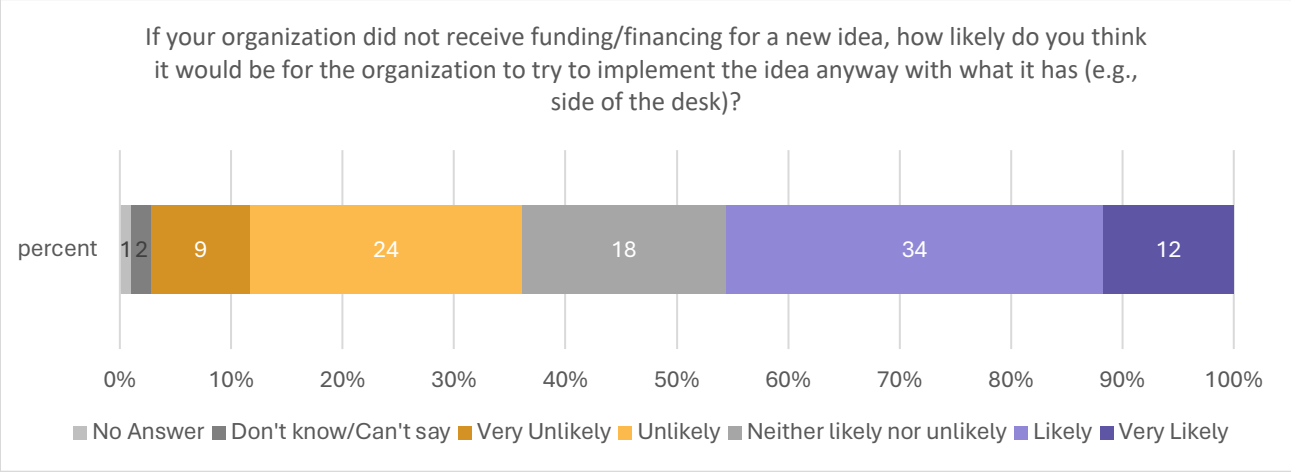

Figure 9. SSOs' likelihood to implement a new idea, without funding/financing (percentage); frequency: n=180.

Organizational resources, structures and cultures

If we set funding aside, a broad range of organizational factors are perceived to contribute to capacity for innovation that are, unsurprisingly, connected to organizational management. Leadership and organizational cultures came second and third to funding, with 76% and 69% of participants including them on their list, respectively. Closely behind were adequate staffing levels (62%) and staffing expertise (61%) (Figure 8).

These results are consistent with the increasing importance ascribed to organizational leadership when it comes to fostering organizational cultures that can implement and manage change and

contribute to innovation.[29] They also confirm the perception of an ongoing human resource crisis.[30] Noteworthy is the fact that "volunteers" were one of the least cited factors. This is surprising since volunteers are commonly perceived to provide a "solution" to internal human resource challenges in the social sector.[31]

There are two data points that are particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, while there was no limit to the number of factors they could select, only 39% of participants included "partnership with universities/researchers" among the factors they perceived as likely to help their organization try new things. On the other hand, only 27% of participants saw ethics, justice, and EDI as a factor of innovation (Figure 8). Both results signal opportunities for action, especially for those in academia interested in building capacity through cross-sectoral collaborations, and to do so by leveraging what is known about the connection between innovation, on the one hand, and equity, diversity, and inclusion on the other.[32]

Business model

Out of 180 participants, 60 (33%) indicated that they thought a different business model might increase capacity for innovation. If participants' perceptions are representative of the sector at large, it raises important questions, all the more so that participants were just as likely to express an interest in resorting to social enterprise (14% very likely and 21% likely) as they were to adopting a fee-for-service model (14% very likely and 22% likely) (Figure 10[33]).

They also reported low interest in pursuing innovation with the support of social finance (3% very likely and 6% likely). This is interesting and raises important questions about the availability and/or the perceived benefits of each funding/business model in the social sector. It would be interesting to determine whether participants had principled reasons for their choices and whether the lack of a preference for funding models could be explained by other reasons. One possibility is that the lack of preference reflects participants' lack of familiarity with some or all these financing options.

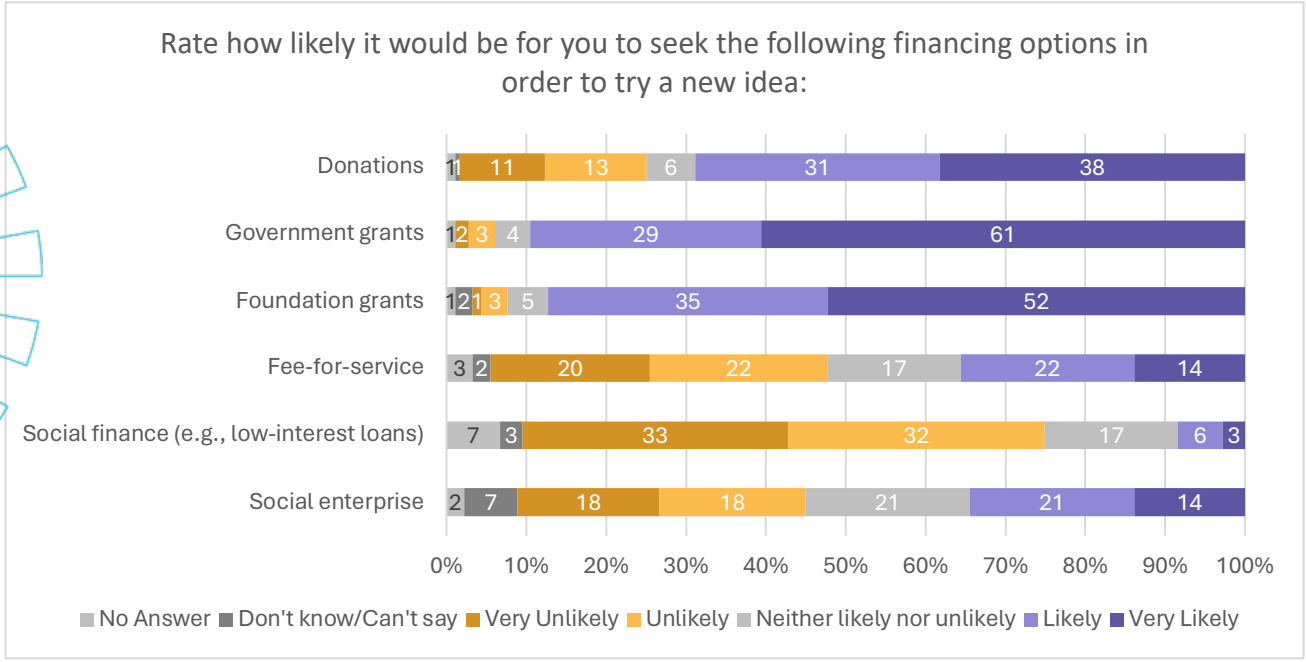

Figure 10. SSOs' likelihood to seek different funding options for a new idea (percentage); frequency: n=180.

More traditional SSO revenue streams like donations (38% very likely and 31% likely), foundation grants (52% very likely and 35% likely), and government grants (61% very likely and 29% likely) seem to remain at the core of SSOs' strategy to fund innovation (Figure 10).

Collaborations and partnerships with Universities

Because knowledge, i.e., research, collaborations are the bread and butter of campus-community engagement in the social impact ecosystem, we wanted to learn who participants perceived to be the most likely partners they would seek out to increase their knowledge or expertise of a given topic.

While free online resources and/or workshops seem to be preferred when it comes to increasing knowledge and expertise specifically, calling on university-based research partners was either likely (49%) or very likely (22%) for SSOs (Figure 11). Partnerships with colleges were seen as slightly less likely (Figure 11). What this means is that the relevance of campus-community partnerships is already established. But it is not clear that communities see their local campuses as a one-stop shop for their knowledge and expertise needs, and this points to a rather tragic failure to leverage opportunities given the community engagement mission of higher education institutions.

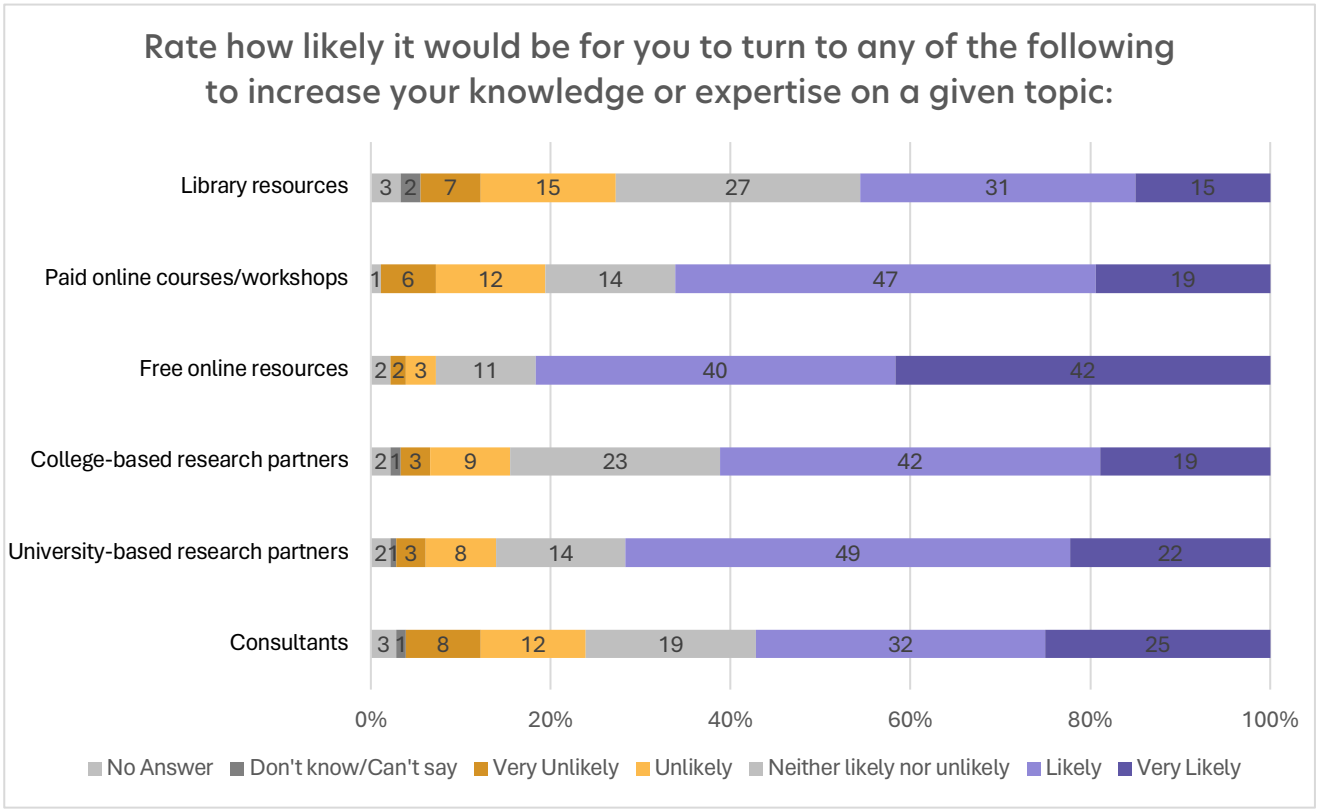

Figure 11. Polled SSOs' likelihood of engaging with knowledge/expertise building resources (percentage); frequency: n=180.

Even though some participants indicated that they were either unlikely (12%) or very unlikely (8%) to engage the services of a consultant, more people indicated that they were likely (32%) or very likely (25%) to do so (Figure 11). Participants reported that they were likely (47%) or very likely (19%) to pay for online resources, and it would be interesting to understand what the nature and appeal of such resources are in comparison to other paid options, e.g., consultants (Figure 11). Regardless, the fact that most participants indicated they would be likely to use paid services suggests they place a relatively high value on learning, especially given the sector's limited resources.

When asked in an open question about what other approaches to increasing knowledge and expertise beyond those mentioned in Figure 11 they might adopt, 54 of the 75 participants who volunteered an answer indicated that they rely on colleagues, mentors, peers in other SSOs or community members, groups, and partners. This result highlights the fact that connectivity through network and collaboration is an asset in the social sector. Extant expertise should be leveraged to inform strategies for developing collaborations that drive capacity for innovation.

SKILLS FOR INNOVATION IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR

Figure 11 provides good evidence of SSOs' keen awareness of the fact that increasing capacity for innovation might require hiring or upskilling staff who have the competencies to contribute to innovation processes. Not only did the majority of participants consider staff expertise to be a factor in innovation, those who responded to our survey also understood the skillset needed to contribute to innovation in an SSO to be multifaceted and comprehensive.[34]

In order to acquire a systematic understanding of perceptions around skills, we provided the participants with a taxonomy of 12 foundational skills associated with high organizational-level adaptability, innovation and social and emotional intelligence.[35] We asked them to select all the skills or competencies they think individuals would need to have, acquire, or develop to be able to try new things in their organization. Each of the skills was selected by at least 60% of participants, but skills associated with social and emotional intelligence (people skills, integrity, self-management, and judgement) were generally selected less often than those associated with innovation and adaptability (creativity, critical thinking, capacity for continuous learning, and problem solving) (Figure 12).

Participants were also invited to suggest other skills they would see as foundational beside those we had listed. However, when the answers to the open-ended question were analyzed qualitatively, the skills mentioned all fell under one of the 12 definitions of foundational skills we had provided, with only two exceptions — time (which is a resource, not a skill) and project management (which is not a foundational skill, but a technical skill).

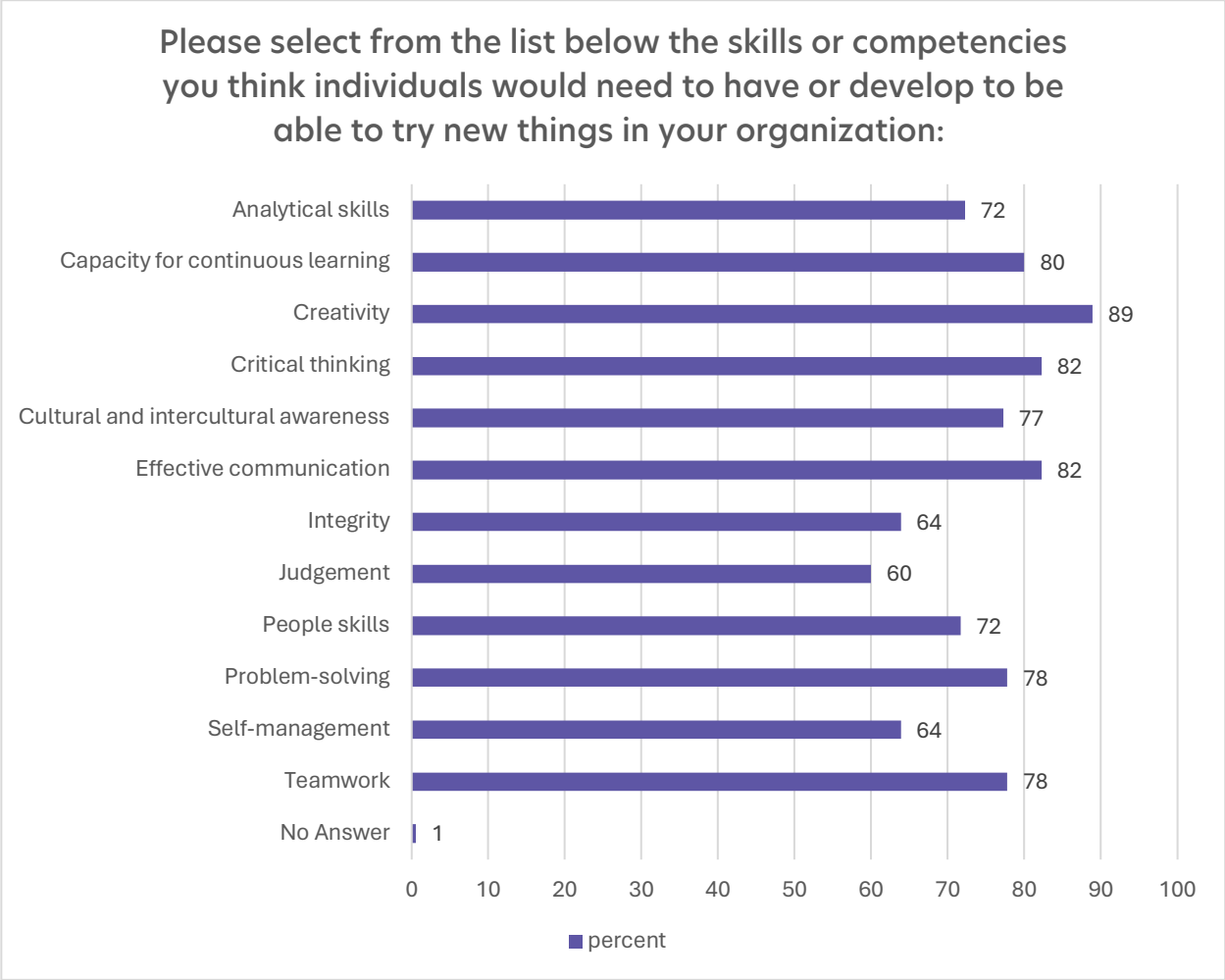

Figure 12. Participants' opinion of the skills/competencies needed to try new things in their organization (percentage); frequency: n=180.

Other skills besides foundational skills associated with innovation, adaptability and social and emotional intelligence support innovation processes. In a different open-ended question, we asked participants to indicate what other types of competencies their organization would likely see as a learning priority to foster innovation and agility. Because the distinction between foundational and technical skill is not always well understood, we expected some redundancy.

Indeed, more than half of the new answers we received (48 of 82) still best fit the list of foundational skills we had already provided: participants most often used different names to pick out one or more of the skills included in the previous list of foundational skills. This seems to confirm the perceived importance of foundational (i.e., soft, transferable) skills in organizational innovation strategies and approaches.[36]

On the other hand, if we exclude 7 out of 82 people who reported that they thought the list was exhaustive or that they could not think of other skills, all other answers (34 of 82) involved hard, technical competencies including, in order of frequency:

- Business strategy and management
- Digital and technological literacy (including data management)
- Research and impact assessment
- Grant writing and fundraising.

Figure 13. Summary of participants' perception of who in their organization would most benefit from skill development related to innovation (percentage); frequency: n=180.

Techniques and approaches associated with R&D and innovation processes such as "design thinking" and "system change" received a few mentions, as did skills associated with policy and advocacy. Finally, while skills related to community-building, partnerships, and collaboration were not entirely overlooked, they received the least mentions. This cannot be taken at face value given that participants' answers to other survey questions suggests a high degree of importance placed on areas like R&D and collaboration.

These results indicate that those working in SSOs are keenly aware of the connection between foundational skills and the capacity for innovation. When asked who in their organization would benefit most from training and professional development to foster an innovation setting, without restricting the number of selections, most participants agreed that it would be people managers (Figure 13). However, a cross-tabulation analysis reveals that participants in executive manager roles (e.g., Executive Directors; Vice-Presidents) were more likely to see this need as equally distributed, while people managers were more likely to see themselves as requiring these skills.

DISCUSSION

HOW UNIVERSITIES CONTRIBUTE TO INNOVATION IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR

Universities should pay close attention to the needs of social sector organizations around capacity for innovation. SSOs have interests in building capacity around some specific skills and processes, and they are already willing to resort to partnerships with universities to acquire new knowledge and expertise. There is an opportunity to build on this natural affinity, and to leverage both experiential learning and research partnerships that achieve their purpose while also meeting these needs and interests of SSOs.

While this might require some out-of-the-box thinking and openness on the part of universities, it might also result in fostering the sort of trust and reciprocity that nourish rich relationships in the social impact ecosystem.

Over the last decade, increased resources have been deployed by the Canadian government to mobilize the knowledge of social and human researchers into the community in order to create social impact.[37] For instance, the proportion of funding allocated to partnered, community-focused, and community-engaged research in the social sciences and humanities has grown steadily over the course of the 10 years that preceded the first series of COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020. In 2016–17, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) created a new trimestral competition within their "Partnership" suite of grants, for projects meant to support small scale, community-based initiatives that would connect research teams with a community partner. The "Partnership Engage Grant"[38] program is meant to bolster research impact and knowledge mobilization, broadly construed, by allowing a greater number of researchers to collaborate and create impact locally through direct engagement in their community.[39]

In most universities, partnered research—whether it is funded through SSHRC grants or otherwise[40]—is a dominant outlet for campus impact strategies.[41] Preliminary findings from a scan of Canadian universities' websites indicate that community-focused knowledge mobilization tends to revolve around individual research projects, led by individual researchers who may or may not benefit from the support of community-engagement offices and/or knowledge mobilization units in the process.[42]

What our survey indicates, however, is that SSOs' needs around capacity for innovation, and specifically their ability to absorb and/or contribute to innovation at a systems level, is not sufficiently, nor indeed directly, addressed through research-focused partnerships.

Research-focused campus-community partnerships are, of course, often needed to generate new social and human knowledge.[43] But university-led research projects do not typically serve to enhance the research that already happens—on its own—in the social sector, and which would

meet the needs of SSOs. In this respect, the assumption that SSHA researchers offer a service that is lacking in the community, and that academic institutions are uniquely positioned to mobilize knowledge to impart on community, is misguided if it is not accompanied by an acknowledgement of the fact that, while laudable, this position is still vastly aspirational.

Universities tend to approach campus-community relationship on a deficit approach. The deficit approach has been the subject of scrutiny and criticism. One proposed alternative is to develop collaborative approaches to research and innovation that build on "assets" found on both sides of the partnership, and to mobilize individuals, resources and organizations to come together to further develop their strengths as part of a co-creation process.[44] This multidirectional knowledge mobilization draws on diverse expertise and assets and builds collective capacity across all partners involved.

Assuredly, there is a role for campus-community research partnerships in tackling enduring, wicked social problems. While research expertise and knowledge can, in some contexts, contribute to increasing capacity in an organization, whether it does so depends on a number of factors. At the very least, it depends on the extent to which community partners benefit from the research, which in turn is contingent on the degree to which the process is co-creative, especially given that academic research practices are sometimes perceived as extractive.[45] This is not to say that we need less community-focused, university-led research partnerships. However, there is no reason why campus-community relationships need to revolve solely around research, especially if the main needs of partners around innovation are not, as our research indicates (e.g., Figure 7), about the sort of primary and/or secondary research to which academics typically cater.

The community engagement mandate of universities can be deployed around collaborations that disrupt the deficit-based, traditional understanding of community-focused knowledge mobilization. Campus-community relationships may exist and flourish outside of the research/teaching/service trichotomy that serves to classify much of academics' endeavours more or less adequately. And campus-community partnership do not need to be structured to accommodate usual conceptions of role-based asymmetries: researcher/user of research, or teacher/learner.

HOW CAN UNIVERSITIES HELP INCREASE CAPACITY FOR INNOVATION IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR?

What do campus-community partnerships designed to leverage social and human knowledge, talent and assets to support innovation in the social sector look like? At the very least, such partnerships need to be structured intentionally, so as to feed into the social innovation ecosystem. If our working hypothesis is valid (see above), this would imply that:

- Innovation partnerships must be designed with an ecosystem mindset.
- Innovation partnerships are best fostered locally but with an aim to be transformative at a systems-level.

- Innovation partnerships need to leverage processes that are non-linear and iterative.
- Innovation partnerships need to happen on a variety of different scales.
- Innovation partnerships need to happen on a spectrum.
- Innovation partnerships need to be designed to support knowledge absorption.

The requirement that universities reframe their social impact strategies to suit the conditions in which innovation happens in the social ecosystem is here intended to be general and vague: campus-community partnerships exist on a spectrum and may involve a multiplicity of dynamics in which participants can contribute a variety of assets. The only constant is that such partnerships should reap the benefits of leveraging needs that are mutual and/or reciprocal. The aim here is not to limit but to broaden the range of conceivable initiatives in which expertise, knowledge and assets are leveraged to strengthen connections between campus and community.

What universities can contribute to the innovation ecosystem in which SSOs evolve is not just more social and human research. To increase their ability to contribute to innovation in the social ecosystem, universities need to deploy resources to support collaborative initiatives designed to leverage assets that fill actual needs of community partners. What is needed is an approach to community-focused knowledge mobilization and impact designed to maximize researchers and emerging researchers' (e.g., MA, PhD Students) ability to contribute their knowledge, expertise, and talent to community-based innovation processes, while addressing partners actual needs, whatever this turns out to be.

Our research shows that SSOs' interest in building capacity offers a fertile ground for knowledge-based partnerships. Developing approaches to partnered innovation in the social sector requires more than an understanding of the needs around capacity in the social sector; it requires greater attention to the existing assets in the social sector. Designing such opportunities is a matter of matching specific assets/needs on both sides, and the range of combinatorial possibilities is as wide as are the needs and assets on each side. Likewise, it requires a re-assessment of the assets and needs around knowledge mobilization in universities that questions widespread assumptions; this, however, goes beyond the scope of the present report.

NOTES

[1] (Raphael, 2009).
[2] (Raphael, 2009).
[3] (Nicholls *et al.*, 2015).
[4] (Westley 2013).
[5] (Mosley, 2021; Seelos & Mair, 2012).
[6] (Lapointe & Boss, forthcoming); a critical synthesis of the literature on capacity for innovation in SSOs.
[7] (Lapointe & Boss, 2023).
[8] (Cosner Berzin & Dearing, 2019).
[9] (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022).
[10] (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022).
[11] (Lasby, 2020). While staffing changes might seem like an expected consequence of pandemic lockdowns for a number of reasons, our survey documents the difficulty to establish any straightforward correlation, and points to the multifaced character of the issue. 70% of the social sector organizations we polled in the Fall of 2021 were operating with modifications, whether that meant remote work, online delivery, or something else.
[12] (Charity Village & The Portage Group, 2021).
[13] Automatically generated rounding calculations account for up to 1% discrepancies.
[14] (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022).
[15] (Charity Village & The Portage Group, 2021).
[16] (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022).
[17] (Lapointe & Underdown, 2022).
[18] (Brodhead, 2010; Phipps *et al.*, 2012).
[19] (Cahill & Spitz, 2017).
[20] (Seelos and Mair, 2012) make similar assumptions.
[21] (Seelos & Mair, 2012).
[22] Automatically generated rounding calculations account for up to 1% discrepancies.
[23] Automatically generated rounding calculations account for up to 1% discrepancies.
[24] This is consistent with the result, in a separate question, that 45% of participants agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (14%) with the claim that their organization relies on R&D (Figure 4).
[25] (Pearman, 2019).
[26] Automatically generated rounding calculations account for up to 1% discrepancies.
[27] For more on disruption and social innovation, see, e.g., (Arrillaga-Andreessen, 2015; Moon *et al.*, 2016; Tortia *et al.*, 2020; Westley *et al.*, 2016).
[28] Automatically generated rounding calculations account for up to 1% discrepancies.
[29] (Shier & Handy, 2016).
[30] (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022).
[31] (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2021).
[32] See, for instance, (Phillips, 2014; Sherbin *et al.*, 2013).
[33] Automatically generated rounding calculations account for up to 1% discrepancies.
[34] Definitions of each were based on an analytical framework designed to assess skills-talk in the grey-literature (Lapointe, 2021; Lapointe & Klausen, 2021).
[35] (Lapointe, 2021).
[36] (Lapointe & Klausen 2021: Analytical Glossary).
[37] See, e.g., (Government of Canada, 2022).
[38] (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2022b).
[39] Between 2016–17 and 2020–21, SSHRC awarded 779 Partnership Engage Grants on a vast range of research topics: education, Indigenous wellbeing, government and policy, violence, rural and urban planning, arts and culture, strategic management, social health and wealth being, newcomers, families and youth, justice, environment, housing, finances, as well as the ethical implications of AI, data, and

technological innovation. In the first year of the pandemic, SSHRC more than doubled the funds allocated to the Partnership Engage Grant program to create a "COVID-19 Special initiative". That year, SSHRC awarded PEG funding to a total of 520 researchers: 227 going to the researchers for the already established PEG and 293 PEG COVID-19 grants, more than doubling the amount (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2022a).

[40] Mitacs, for instance, is another source of funding for researchers interested in partnered projects with community-based organizations (Mitacs, 2022).

[41] For examples of community engagement in Canadian universities, see (Carleton University, 2022; Dalhousie University, 2021; McMaster University, 2022; Universities Canada, 2021; University of Guelph, 2022).

[42] See (Lapointe *et al*., 2023).

[43] Some human and social research agendas do not require stakeholder input, e.g., in history of theoretical linguistics. In many cases, however, social and human research requires sampling or observation that are best conducted in collaborations with partners in the community (as was the case with our study) because they also serve the interested of the community-partners.

[44] See, e.g., (Haine, 2009).

[45] (Wilmsen, 2008).

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