

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Health

## Connecting Individual and Societal Change

Supporting the inner well-being of change makers can boost capacity for innovation and collaboration, and ultimately lead to more effective solutions to social and environmental challenges.

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(Illustration by Helena Pallarés)

“There is a lack of knowledge around the early warning signs of burnout in frontline work. The question has been how do we get [frontline workers], not how do we take care of them and develop them over time? If I’m a Rwandan nurse working on cancer [or] HIV care in a place with very modest resources, how much death can I see before

I can’t take care of my family, can’t go to work? Or if I’m a Haitian community health-care worker, how much starvation can I see without respite? We haven’t studied that well.”—*Gary Gottlieb, CEO Partners In Health*

Disaster relief workers, activists, social entrepreneurs, health-care providers, teachers, and others actively weaving the healthy, just, and caring fabric of our society live and work at the heart of great challenges. But even as these change makers find solutions and make progress, many are burning out and experiencing a host of personal challenges such as depression, divorce, and the early onset of chronic disease. Behind the scenes, many agents of change—at all organizational levels and in regions all over the world—are struggling. At the same time, we are far from meeting the social and environmental challenges of our day; we need to unlock more collaboration and more innovation. Finding ways to address the personal challenges change makers face is therefore important not only because it matters in and of itself, but also because it has the potential to drive more effective social change.

**Centered Self: The Connection Between Inner Well-Being and Social Change**



This series, presented in partnership with The Wellbeing Project, India Development Review, and The Skoll Foundation explores this important but often overlooked connection between inner well-being and effective social change.



For a long time, the well-being of change makers was largely taboo and under-examined in the mainstream of social change, due in part to a culture marked by self-sacrifice and martyrdom. There is an underlying expectation of people who work in social change to put others before themselves, whether it is directly saving others' lives or advocating for climate protection. But interest in the role well-being plays in driving social change is not new; it has roots in many movements and traditions over time. Indeed, an orientation toward nurturing our inner lives to feed our work in the world has underpinned some of the most powerful movements of previous generations, as well as the thinking of great leaders like Gandhi, Ela Bhatt, Rosa Parks, and Desmond Tutu. Adopting **principles like nonviolence**—taking positive action to resist oppression or foster social change while abstaining from violence—for example, requires profound self-awareness and self-engagement, and ongoing practice.

As another example, over the last few decades, some leaders and groups within the women's rights movement have emphasized the importance of inner well-being. In 1988, writer and activist Audre Lorde reflected an increasingly espoused theory of activism that prioritized self-care as vital to the movement's success, describing self-care as "self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." The recognition that many women involved in the movement had experienced trauma and, in their efforts to drive progress, were experiencing further trauma began to emerge at major women's rights convenings like the 2003 International Women and Health Conference. Organizations like **CREA**, **AWID**, and the **Urgent Action Fund** meanwhile began to acknowledge and support initiatives to support women's well-being. Later, the women's rights movement developed some of the earliest **self-care guides** and eventually **other materials for activists**, as well as retreats focused on the inner health of activists.

Due in part to efforts like these, the issue of well-being has become more visible in the field of social change over the past decade, prompting researchers to take a closer look. A **study by Unite** in 2018, representing employees of charities and nonprofits in the United Kingdom, found that 42 percent of social change sector employees felt their work posed challenges to their mental health. A **study conducted by Community Care** in 2016 found that 57 percent of respondents, social workers in England, used emotional eating while 35 percent used alcohol as a mechanism to cope with work stress.

Moreover, 63 percent of respondents had difficulties sleeping, 56 percent said that they were emotionally exhausted, and 75 percent said they were concerned about burnout. These outcomes were reported by individuals in the field and in leadership positions. In the humanitarian context, 19.4 percent of human rights advocates who completed a 2015 study related to mental health and well-being met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 18.8 percent met criteria for subthreshold PTSD, and 14.7 percent met criteria for depression. A similar picture emerges from other sub-sectors of social change globally, including important movements such as **Black Lives Matter**.

The reality is that social change work is difficult and often traumatizing. Health workers providing cancer or HIV care constantly witness the passage of life, while environmental activists working to slow species and ecosystem loss continue to track their devastation. Add to this the fact that significant numbers of people joining the social sector have previously experienced personal trauma and oftentimes choose to do work connected to their own difficult personal experiences. It is not uncommon, for example, for someone who personally experienced bullying to work for an organization that deals with that issue. Connections like these are also common in anti-corruption and environmental organizations.

The pioneering work of activists like those we mentioned above, as well as new research has helped lay the groundwork for the cultural shift we are seeing today. In the broader cultural context, discussion and practices related to issues like mindfulness and mental health have become commonplace, particularly in the West. And in the realm of social change, more and more people are recognizing that well-being is an underlying issue that the field needs to address openly and understand better.

## Putting a Human Face to the Numbers

**The Wellbeing Project** is a co-creation of **Ashoka**, **Esalen**, the **Impact Hub**, **Porticus**, the **Skoll Foundation**, and **Synergos**. It was formed in 2014 to catalyze a culture of inner well-being for all change makers. The project emerged from honest and vulnerable interviews with people engaged with social change around the world, who shared their personal struggles and need for support. These interviews gave us a deep sense of how people were doing, the challenges they faced, and what kind of support made a difference. We learned that when people had support, such as an ongoing meditation practice or therapy, they experienced tremendously positive shifts in their lives. Individuals who adopted a meditation practice, for example, found that they were better able to listen to others constructively, leading to healthier relationships at home and work.

Inspired by these initial interviews, we began looking at the issue globally, exploring support for the inner well-being of individual change makers, and researching the connection between inner well-being and social change. As we did this, we convened global organizations on the issue of well-being to help bring the topic into the open, and to find ways to improve support for the well-being of their team members and constituencies.

While previous studies focused on particular countries, subsectors, or types of roles, we wanted to understand whether the issue looked the same universally. To this end, in 2017 we conducted a comprehensive, multi-round, web-based Delphi study over six months. We surveyed 250-plus change makers, recruited from the Ford Foundation and Impact Hub communities, across 55 countries. The majority of respondents expressed a common need for inner well-being support, and perceived inner well-being as an essential ingredient for healthy and sustainable social change work. A significant segment reported feeling stressed, worried, anxious, burned out, and isolated. And while 75 percent of respondents felt that caring for their well-being was “very important” to addressing these issues, only 25 percent reported that they were caring for their well-being “to a great extent.” Their primary reasons for not tending to well-being included a lack of resources; a range of health-related issues, including self-medication; and feeling like their work was never done or that self-care was self-indulgent.

We learned it was universally difficult for respondents to distance themselves from their work, because they closely identified with their roles and because they felt that working too much was still considered a badge of honor within the sector. It also became clear that organizations and the sector more generally played a significant part in enabling a culture that was either supportive, or dismissive, of their inner well-being.

## Fostering Inner Well-Being

The initial set of interviews showed us that “inner work” made a significant difference in the lives of change makers. Also referred to as personal work, self-care, or self-inquiry, inner work can include personal practices like meditation or journaling, spiritual practices, therapy, and exploration in ongoing group meetings and retreats. It encompasses increasing self-awareness, healing from past trauma, and moving toward healthier patterns of living.

To examine the development of inner well-being through inner work, as well as its effects, we launched an 18-month **Inner Development Program** (IDP). The first cohort started in 2015 and included three groups of 20 social change leaders from 45 different countries. While our Delphi study demonstrated that all change makers share similar challenges, we chose to work with those in leadership roles for our

research study, as it made tracking shifts across the individual, organizational, sectoral, and societal levels easier. Participants applied from four different networks—Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation, the Skoll Foundation, and Synergos—and included social entrepreneurs, social activists, and nonprofit leaders. Similar to Delphi respondents, IDP participants indicated that working for social change had taken a significant toll on their physical, emotional, spiritual, and/or mental health, as well as their relationships with themselves and their family, friends, and/or colleagues.

The program offered comprehensive support to each participant, including retreats featuring a variety of modalities of inner work, customized work with experienced well-being practitioners, engagement with other participants, and four- to eight-week learning modules on topics like mindfulness and relationships. It also included check-ins with and guidance from the program dean. As their experiences unfolded, a team of seven researchers conducted longitudinal, qualitative research—including surveys, observation, and interviews with participants' colleagues—over three years to learn what happened when change makers actively pursued well-being, and how those efforts affected their own and their organizations' engagement with social change.

At the beginning, IDP participants expressed guilt about taking care of themselves, but they came to see inner work as essential to their own and others' long-term health and work. They learned to understand and accept aspects of themselves, their personal or professional relationships, and their work and lives they had ignored or denied. They described experiencing greater awareness, presence, and relief from harsh self-judgement, which resulted in different ways of being and engaging in both personal and work environments. This included increased awareness of the difference between their true self and their identity in the world; shedding a projected image of strength, and becoming more open and vulnerable with others; recognizing harsh self-criticism, and being kinder to themselves and others; and greater clarity about what they wanted and needed versus what they thought colleagues, peers, and funders expected of them.

## Social Change From the Inside Out

As we have described, at the heart of our research—which is the first large-scale exploration of this topic, and which we hope will encourage further research—was the question of how change makers' inner well-being influences how social change happens. **Our results were exciting:** While keeping in mind that the process of inner well-being is ongoing, complex, and evolving, participants generally demonstrated that individual shifts toward well-being positively influenced the well-being of their organizations and their engagement with the field. We have also begun to observe shifts at the societal

level. In other words, our research shows a clear connection between the inner well-being of change makers and the way social change happens.

Below, we take a closer look at the effect of well-being at four different levels, from the individual to the societal, and some of the ways they interconnect.

We observed shifts in outcomes starting at the individual level when participants engaged with inner well-being support. These outcomes informed subsequent shifts, in turn, at the organizational, sector, and societal levels. (Image courtesy of The Wellbeing Project)

## 1. Individual Outcomes: Self, Identity, Role

Participants experienced remarkable shifts in perspective as a result of their inner work, including:

- **Discovering an identity that was more whole:** Work tended to consume participants' lives. Even when they were physically present with family and friends, they were often preoccupied with things like to-do lists and work-related ideas, and thus mentally and emotionally unavailable. By focusing on well-being and by engaging with underlying issues that created this dynamic, they were able to "switch off," feel less defined by their work, and reclaim a more whole identity in a way that enriched their work and their lives.
- **Releasing fear of failure:** We all occasionally hear a self-critical voice within us. Participants shared that examining this self-critic, through journaling or other means, and looking at its sources helped them reframe their fear of failure. Understanding the harsh standards they held themselves to actually decreased their need to preserve a hero-like identity. This process did not eliminate the discomfort or pain of failure, but it lessened it. Participants felt relief as they moved away from perceiving failure as something for which they had to punish themselves, and expressed finding more courage and momentum despite the possibility of failure.
- **Having more resilience and maintaining equilibrium:** Inner work tends to foster awareness and emotional intelligence. As a result, participants found that they were able to respond to difficult situations from a more level-headed and positive perspective.

Other individual benefits included listening to and connecting with colleagues and peers more deeply, feeling more joyful, and recognizing and encouraging others' capacities for solving problems rather than assuming they were the only ones who could do certain tasks.

## 2. Organization Outcomes: Trust, Integration, Connection

As the program went on, participants began to change how they engaged with colleagues and peers; they wanted to be fully present, actively listen, and co-create. Our research revealed that supporting the inner work of change makers cultivated important organizational qualities and capacities besides traditionally important ones like idea generation, fundraising, and scaling. Capacities such as empathy, compassion, and gratitude fostered more interconnection and nurtured relationships in valuable ways.

- **Shifting to trust, vulnerability, and a human-first orientation:** Participants shifted their leadership perspective toward building trust in colleagues, recognizing the value each person brings to work, and empowering people to do things from their own place of wisdom and expertise. Their work became more about collaboration and support, rather than control and check. Participants became more comfortable expressing when they did not have an answer, needed something, or were not feeling strong. This had ripple effects throughout the team and encouraged others to do the same, creating deeper connections all around. Even in challenging moments, participants shifted from an “only I can fix it” mindset to one that considered relationship-building the first step toward solving a problem.
- **Integrating well-being throughout the organization:** Participants described weaving well-being into their organizations by showing care and making personal connections beyond strictly work-level interaction. They started prioritizing human connection, even in fast-paced environments, through simple actions like asking, “How are you?” This allowed employees to be more open and honest about their needs, because they felt valued beyond their work capacity. As a result, instead of teams feeling pressured to overwork and drain energy down to zero, there was a more positive, supportive, and efficient approach to work, which supported both individuals and mission.

The process of integrating well-being into their organizations took many forms, including:

- Seeking alignment between how the organization works internally and the work it does in the world
- Weighing the impact of new work on the well-being of self and staff
- Building awareness and other well-being practices into meetings, workshops, and presentations
- Placing a different kind of emphasis on scaling or more intentionality around scaling
- Actively seeking well-being opportunities for staff, colleagues, and peers

Other ways participants worked to normalize or prioritize well-being in their organization included addressing the importance of creating a culture of well-being at the board level; finding opportunities to

share well-being awareness and practices; creating new projects or organizations with well-being values and practices at their core; and equating effectiveness with maintaining a sense of well-being, despite the demands of the work.

### 3. Sector Outcomes: Openness, Collaboration, Creativity

Reconceptualizing what it means to be a leader oriented and informed participants' personal engagement and the workings of their own organizations. It also informed how they and their organizations engaged across the social change sector and with other sectors. Two common shifts were:

- **Cultivating openness:** Contrary to rigid, static thinking about enacting change through a particular course of action, participants emerged from the experience more open to appreciating or even adopting approaches others might take. They also described realizing how important it was to not only learn and discover new ideas for themselves, but also share those learnings with other individuals—at an organizational level, or across and beyond the sector of social change. They found themselves cultivating a joy of learning, and trusting in a process of co-learning, co-working, and co-sharing.
- **Working more collaboratively:** The impulse toward collaboration benefits from awareness and intentionality. Participants expressed that inner work helped them recognize their own ego and, through that awareness, develop greater capacity for cooperation and collaboration. They gained a better understanding and appreciation for the opinions and thoughts of others, viewing partners as people with complex and valuable insights to consider. Despite feeling a great sense of ownership and centrality to the mission of their work, these participants discovered how collaboration can support and magnify their own efforts, and carry their work further than they could do alone, all while allowing them to maintain a “more whole” identity and pursue a full life independent of their work.

These insights created an opportunity for leaders to envision working differently in the field of social change. For many, collaboration—like well-being—is something they have given lip service to in the past, but neglected to value or engage with in a meaningful way. For some, the epiphany was around collaboration within organizations. For others, it was among peers or across organizations, or with donors. And for many, it was a combination.

### 4. Societal Outcomes: Deep Scale, New Bridges, Collective Impact



Over the next three years, The Wellbeing Project aims to acquire a more robust picture of the impact of well-being on society. So far, we have seen participants engage more deeply with communities and community members, work more collaboratively across silos, and restore or build bridges that lead to more effective, holistic outcomes. We hope to build this picture through furthering this study and broadening the scope of research.

## Collectively Building a Well-Being Culture

As we initiated our research, leaders from 85 well-known, global and regional organizations reached out to us to express their interest in better understanding and addressing well-being. In response, in 2016 we created two learning communities to explore ways these institutions could put inner well-being supports in place. These communities have met several times in person and many times virtually, and have taken significant steps to support both their staff and their broader constituencies. For example:

- Major foundations such as the Skoll Foundation, the **Ford Foundation's Build program**, and members of the **Big Bang Philanthropy** collaborative have begun to support the well-being of their staff and grantees. For example, the Peery Foundation has created **mental health protocols** for its staff, as well as a granting pool for existing grantees to invest specifically in the well-being of their staff.
- Major global and regional intermediary organizations such as **Ashoka**, **Echoing Green**, and **The Schwab Foundation** have started to incorporate inner well-being practices. For instance, The Schwab Foundation has dedicated the first day of its two-day social entrepreneurship fellow convenings to an exploration of inner well-being. Ashoka designated well-being one of its 10 global priorities, and one of its initiatives is providing well-being programming in countries such as India, Mexico, and Canada.
- Among other regional and local networks, **Impact Hub Vienna** has integrated well-being into its major acceleration program. The program provides the organizations it incubates with things like access to coaches for personal or organizational well-being, well-being awareness workshops, and metrics for tracking institutional efforts to create a culture of well-being.

The organizations in these learning communities have offered well-being programming to tens of thousands of change makers and organizations around the world, and the feedback they are receiving reinforces the programs' value. The Schwab Foundation, for example, heard back from its fellows that its well-being sessions were the most profound and meaningful of any in the organization's 20 years of existence. It also noted that the focus on personal well-being created a sense of vulnerability and open-

mindedness that enabled real collaboration to emerge. Taken together, the efforts of these organizations represent the beginning of an exciting sea change.

The pioneers of well-being in the social change sector are often met with great skepticism. Yet they persevered to create spaces for experimentation and learning, and paved the way for us to shift well-being from a taboo topic only whispered about in conference hallways, to an openly discussed and seriously considered aspect of social change. Today, we see more and more funders paying attention, a culture that increasingly recognizes the wide-ranging value of well-being, and a social change sector that is becoming more human. This cultural shift is happening even as we face some of the greatest challenges our world has ever seen, and it fills us with great hope—hope that we can meet those challenges by nurturing the extraordinary within each of us, and using those qualities to strengthen, deepen, and inspire the practice of creating change.

This article marks the launch of a year-long series produced in partnership with [The Wellbeing Project](#), [India Development Review](#), and [The Skoll Foundation](#). The series will explore individual, organizational, sectoral, and societal well-being, and draw together perspectives and learning from across the field and across the world. It aims to broaden the conversation and invigorate a very exciting cultural shift.



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