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Social innovation for bridging societal divides: Process or leader? A qualitative comparative analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study builds on literature about inclusive growth, social innovation, and collaborative leadership, and uses case studies of alumni of the Asian Institute of Management's (AIM) Bridging Leadership program to build frameworks for understanding the role of social innovation (SI) in bridging societal divides (BSD), and the role of the bridging leader (BL) in implementing BSD initiatives. The study examines two process variables: Stakeholder engagement (SE) and formalization, and three leadership variables: Formal authority, formal influence, and personal experience, and their effect on BSD activities. This study combines a deep qualitative review of case studies with the use of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to develop configurations that result in positive impact of BSD activities. The study concludes that process variables appear the most in configurations that achieve positive outcomes. This result means that training and education on process tools can lead to successful BSD initiatives. Formal authority and formal influence both play roles in success configurations. The article also provides brief descriptions of case studies illustrating each of the three success configurations. These results have significance for policy makers, managers, educators, and researchers.

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1. Introduction

Technology and globalization help many countries achieve economic growth. However, even in countries that achieve growth, inequity and inequality persist in degrees that leave large segments of the population marginalized and vulnerable. Reducing inequity is the challenge of inclusive growth (IG). IG literature refutes long-held assumptions that growth automatically trickles down to benefit entire populations (Pernia, 2003; Ranieri & Ramos, 2013).

Inequity and social exclusion are a natural equilibrium arising from a complex interplay of underlying factors. Achieving lasting change in IG requires elevating natural equilibriums by addressing root causes affecting access to critical resources such as education and capital (Herrera, 2015b). This study focuses specifically on societal divides, significant differences in access, situation, or opportunity that marginalize key segments of the population, resulting in growth that is not inclusive. Bridging societal divides (BSD) involves addressing root causes, and is key to achieving IG. Achieving IG necessitates large-scale, systemic societal change that can only result from significant social innovation. Literature on social innovation increases, including catalytic innovation and collaborative leadership, but literature on purposive models for BSD, and particularly on the process that individuals who drive such catalytic change pursue, is sparse and should include descriptions of how such bridging leaders (BLs) stimulate innovation, co-creation and social change aimed at achieving IG through BSD.

The study addresses the following research questions: What process variables contribute to successful BSD initiatives? What leader characteristics contribute to successful BSD initiatives?

This research contributes to filling the literature gap by examining variables that affect the success of BSD initiatives. The study uses information from case studies of BSD initiatives of fellows of the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) Bridging Leadership Program (BLP). These case studies present a unique opportunity to compare individuals who undergo the same training program and hence, have shared understandings of process tools for pursuing social innovation.

This research uses literature review and a detailed review of case studies to develop conceptual and theoretical models, and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to develop a constellation of configurations of successful approaches, acknowledging the reality of multiple paths for achieving positive impact in BSD initiatives. This approach provides insights on multiple methods for successful BSD initiatives and provides useful lessons for policy makers, leaders of social change, educators, and researchers. The research indicates that process variables are key to successful BSD initiatives, which suggests that education of BLs on BSD processes is critical to successful social innovation for BSD. Both formal authority and formal influence play a role in successful BSD. BLs can use the successful combinations of process and leader variables to guide their process choices. Policymakers can also use this combination to develop an environment conducive to social innovation for bridging societal divides to achieve IG.

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This research provides brief descriptions of cases that illustrate each of the three success configurations resulting from fuzzy set QCA (fsQCA). BLS, educators, and researchers can use these descriptions to better understand how leader and process variables combine to create lasting positive impact.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Bridging societal divides

This research adopts a definition of societal divides drawing from the definition of social divide (Trauth, Howcroft, Butler, Fitzgerald, & DeGross, 2006): The divergence among social groups of the ability to fully participate socially and economically in society resulting from a significant differentiation of access, situation, or opportunities. Social exclusion increases risks of widening social divide and interrupting social mobility.

Societal divides are a barrier to IG because IG aims for economic growth and equitable outcomes by providing access to resources and promoting equality of opportunity (Herrera, 2015b). Significant inequities in the current societal equilibrium result from an interplay of underlying factors; thus, lasting change requires a systemic approach (Herrera, 2015b) that takes into account underlying factors and interactions. Herrera (2015b) identifies four interdependent building blocks for achieving IG: Legal and regulatory environment that provides a legal basis for rights, responsibilities, and entitlements; guaranteed basic services; institutionalized safety nets; and access to capacity building.

Bridging activities are challenging to launch, maintain, expand, and institutionalize (Brown, 2015). However, mobilizing diverse stakeholders expands understanding and provides opportunities to create consensus and co-create transformation such as in cases of catalytic innovation (Christensen, Baumann, Ruggles, & Sadtler, 2006). Successful bridge building requires compelling locally generated goals, systems enabling innovation, institutionalization of change, and cross-boundary leadership (Brown, 2015). The framework that this study proposes

(see Fig. 1), which draws roughly on the AIM bridging leadership framework, similarly uses a systemic, co-creative approach.

Achieving lasting impact requires bridging of societal divides by using a systemic approach, one that involves understanding and changing relevant, underlying conditions. Social innovations for BSD begin with an assessment or diagnosis of underlying causes, and proposing solutions involves designing changes in these conditions.

Current levels of equity or inequity are the result of actions of key social actors. Achieving IG requires collaborative action and transformative leadership from multiple actors (UNDP, 2013). The approach that the AIM BLP introduces focuses on actively engaging crucial actors in three key co-creative stages: Developing a shared vision for the future, developing a shared understanding of the current situation, and developing a common description of the proposed architecture and the implementation plan for creating the desired future. This approach creates a strong foundation for BSD implementation that draws on a systemic analysis of the current social equilibrium.

The AIM BLP uses a systemic co-creative approach to BSD. All BLS that this study covers use this method, which looks at three interdependent layers of factors:

- (a) Stakeholder roles, traits, competencies, and behaviors are the most observable component of societal situations. This layer represents the mechanical layer of societal divides: The behaviors of key actors and stakeholders.
- (b) Supporting institutions and processes directly influences the behavior of key actors. Organizations and processes institutionalize certain attitudes and processes, enabling or deterring different key actor behaviors. This layer addresses the structural or social layer of societal divides: The systems, processes, and institutions that embody the mechanisms that govern relationships between individuals, organizations, and state. Societal processes, systems, and institutions develop and evolve in response to the deep layer of mental models and shared constructs that fundamental root causes shape.

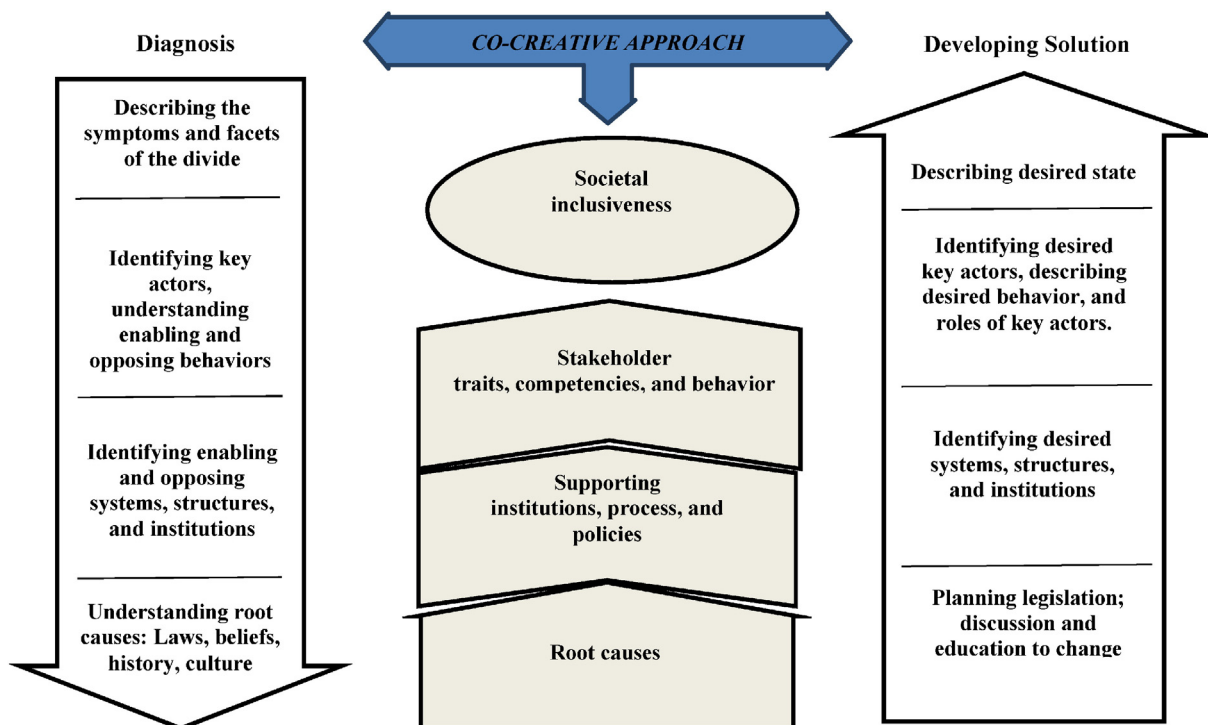


Fig. 1. Systemic approach to bridging societal divides.

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