Social Inventions

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The purpose of this article is to provoke a discussion with the readers on Social Inventions. A thesis that Agencies Cannot Invent their Replacements is advanced. The Need for Social Inventions is examined in the context of the Canadian Special Senate Committee on Poverty. Social Procedures vs. Social Organizations are explored. Finally, Twelve Stages of Invention are suggested.

Today's methods to deal with social problems are centuries old. The methods used to investigate and solve medical, agricultural, transportation and industrial problems, on the other hand, are less than 100 years old. The success is inverse to age. If social invention centres can be established, clear solutions to our age-old social problems may be remedied. Paramount are racial strife, unemployment, crime and poverty problems that never went away.

Social invention

The creation of a *new procedure, law or organization* that changes the way in which people relate is a social invention. It solves a particular social problem, or makes possible hitherto unattainable social order or progress.

Examples of procedures that represent social inventions include: language, writing, charity, democracy, strikes, licensing, training, oath, probation, testing, psychoanalysis, or training.

Examples of *laws* as social inventions include: The Poor Law of 1388, The Indenture of Children Act of 1601, The English Bill of Rights (1689). The Compulsory School Attendance Act in Russia in 1717, The Swiss Unemployment Insurance Act of' 1789, and a law against cruelty to children enacted in the United States after 1875.

Examples of *organizations* that were important social inventions include: schools, law courts, House of Commons, labour union, jails, YMCA, Children's Aid Society, Red Cross, or the Boy Scouts.

Innovation in a social institution, on the other hand, is evidence that the organization is learning from the existing knowledge and experience of others. The initial adoption of a social invention by an organization is an innovation for that organization.

Agencies Cannot Invent their Replacements

Organizations that are overwhelmed by demands to rationalize resources and provide better services cannot be expected to re-invent processes, nor to innovate.

These agencies are frequently busy dealing with minimum budgets, that leave no capacity to create a social inventions, nor to re-engineer its processes. A similar situation would have been to expect the railway companies to invent a better alternative transportation system. It took a different industry to invent the automobile. With that significant renewal, the auto industry quickly introduced an entirely different transportation system with attendant social inventions. It is remarkable to see the spawning of road construction and maintenance, oil refineries, credit buying, motels, service stations, licenses, insurance, and a host of service industries resulting from the invention.

We would still be in the railway age if the railway companies controlled the research and experiments in transportation. This is precisely what is done with social problems and innovations. There has been little progress in reforming criminals since Pope Clement invented penitentiaries in 1700. Research and innovation in prisons has been assigned to prison officials, and they are no more likely to come up with a new method than the railway companies might have invented the car. Better methods of penal reform will be devised only by people who have no direct or indirect interest in maintaining the present system.

The Need for Social Inventions

As an example, the Canadian Special Senate Committee on Poverty recognized the need for new approaches to social problems when it wrote in the early 1970s that "the social welfare structure, so laboriously and painstakingly erected in Canada, has outlived its usefulness." These words, like many other warnings, were prophetic as our welfare system has not significantly alleviated poverty, and we are now cutting back on social services.

In spite of quarter century advance warning that the Committee gave Canadians, no serious attempts to invent a new way alleviate poverty was devised. Rather Canada relied on the old invention of schooling and paid the unemployed for training. This was a great waste of money and time, and is clearly inappropriate and ineffective.

A serious gap exists between the desire to produce social change on a massive scale, and the necessary social mechanisms to meet this objective. More than money is needed. Resources reallocation is no answer. New approaches, methods and institutions must be invented. They can be developed only by means of experimental research, which conceives, develops, tests, and evaluates experimental methods and then fuller-scale situations.

Canada's social problems are not unique and will remain until new solutions are "invented". While the need for physical and scientific research is obvious (e.g. in the medical, agriculture, energy, animals, forestry or food domains) the need for experimental stations for social ailments is absent.(e.g., in alleviating poverty, creating jobs, teaching languages, achieving interracial accord, reducing crime, increasing family harmony, overcoming addiction, providing adequate housing, settling labor disputes

Social Procedures vs. Social Organizations

Social inventions include both organizations and procedures. A procedure is a method that might be used by organizations in different contexts. Once an organization is invented it seldom concerns itself with inventing new ways to deliver its service or objectives. Instead, it becomes consumed with developing methods of self-maintenance and extension. The restriction of employment to teachers in educational institutions, and social workers in welfare agencies, etc., demonstrates the intent to preserve territorial imperatives which prevent cross breeding of ideas or methods. Therefore, most instrumental social inventions will be expected to be made outside the institutions in which they should be developed and utilized.

Social invention centres are frequently isolated from the delivery institutions. An example may be found in a college that conducts research on teaching and creates a new instructional procedure for the schools, but does not follow these method in its own teaching!

Many other instrumental social inventions are under-used or misused because they are prisoners of old social institutions. Many instrumental inventions are only partially implemented because they are "contained" to preserve the *status quo*.

A social invention such as the law court, school, municipal government, or prison, spawns many ancillary inventions that ultimately create a social system. For instance, the social system developed around the civil law court includes the judge, jury, lawyer, plea, coroner, justice of the peace, code of law, law schools, etc. Each component of the system was itself an invention, but adapted to fit the system.

Each social system comprises a series of social inventions. Some systems, such as education, are relatively well developed and unchangeable, while other systems, such as inter group relations, have so few methods to rely on that the system is more a constellation of problems than a cluster of solutions. Mediation, on the other hand, represents a solution that is finding several applications.

We do not have a well-developed system for the invention of new social procedures, although some curriculum development projects have included experimental testing of courses or units of courses. Other social systems such as welfare and corrections are stable as far as their social

technology is concerned because there are no research laboratories dedicated to create new methods.

Social problems, generally, do not have a system of social technologies to provide relief and hence we can anticipate continued frustration with little hope of improvement. Social systems, as a rule, operate as monopolies which tend to be less susceptible to change or replacement.

Studies have shown that it takes about 50 years for a new educational invention to come into use in half the schools. Other social institutions take just as long to adopt new improved methods. Because of the monopolistic nature of our social institutions and systems, and their difficulty in adapting to new circumstances or achieving a significant measure of self renewal, it may be as necessary to invent new social institutions as to invent new laws or procedures.

The Twelve Stages of Invention

1. *Concept Study:* This stage comprises a review of the problem and the attempted solutions to date. The review includes a study of the theoretical and research literature, a study of the requirements of the situation, and an assessment of various theories and methods of intervention. The concept study results in preliminary specifications for the desired outcomes, identifying the skills or other factors required to achieve the outcomes, and designing the broad strategies to achieve these goals.

2. *Exploratory Development:* This is the preparation of initial program strategies, methods and materials, and an examination to evaluate the feasibility of the proposed solutions. This stage may involve a reformulating of the concept study, but in any case, will result in more detailed specifications and cost figures.

3. *Prototype Development:* This stage comprises preparing detailed program strategies; methods and materials; evaluation systems; and training of staff to conduct assessments. Cost, time and resource estimates are made.

4. *Pilot Study:* In this stage, the new prototype is tested. Allowance is made for sufficient acquaintance with the problem and the prototype to permit necessary reformations, including the specification of logical alternatives.

5. *Advanced Development:* This stage is the redevelopment or further development of the entire program including the strategies; methods and materials; staff training program and evaluation systems.

6. *Program Experimentation:* This stage involves a formally structured, systematic, experimental effort to test alternative program elements, of the value of the program with different groups or

under different circumstances. This stage may involve repeated testing of all or selected components of the program.

7. *Program Formalization:* The program development process is essentially a sequence of trial-revision interactions with modifications after each test to approximate the consequences being sought. The cyclical nature of the process means that each stage to this point may have been repeated several times. The preparation of the program into a formal model which can be used elsewhere with predictable results must take place at the optimum time considering results of evaluation and urgency of need for the program.

8. *Field Test:* Once a satisfactory program model has been prepared, it is then tested under ordinary operating conditions.

9. *Operational Systems Development:* The systems are prepared for those who will implement the program, as well as for the administrative support personnel and the monitoring agency.

10. Dem*onstration Project:* This is the first major attempt to foster adoption of the new program.

11. *Dissemination:* Publicity, seminars, conferences, publication of' books and other documents are necessary. Get academic, professional and administrative groups to support widespread adoption of the product.

12. *Installation:* The consulting services and staff training are provided so that the program will be satisfactorily adopted.

About the Author:

Mr. Stu Conger is a consultant on educational and social issues. Formerly, Mr. Conger was the Executive Director of the Canadian Guidance and Counseling foundation. Mr. Conger held a number of senior executive positions including the Director General, Worker-Client Services at Canada's federal department of Human Resources Development.
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