

Supercharging Our Theory of Change

Implementation of FASTBreak™ Participatory Systems Mapping to Formulate a Theory of Change for Social Work Power Building

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Introduction

Systems thinking can help leaders make decisions to solve complex problems. Social work, a field committed to collaborative action to address social and public health issues, promotes health equity and human rights. During a two-day facilitated planning session in February 2024, the Center for Innovation in Social Work and Health at Boston University School of Social Work used FASTBreak™ participatory systems mapping to articulate its new theory of change.

Problem → Opportunity

The Center's previous strategic plan was:

- linear and siloed
- lacked details and leverage points for systems change
- lacked a strategy portfolio
- had inconsistent stakeholder buy-in

This put the Center's mission at risk. The 2024 planning process provided an opportunity to develop a dynamics-based theory of change, a structure fit to mission, and a strategy portfolio to drive success and reinvigorate support for the Center.

Preparation

Before and during the two-day planning session, 20 hand-selected participants:

- were briefed on 100+ 1:1 semi-structured interviews, eight SWOTs, and a landscape analysis
- explored systems archetypes
- practiced systems mapping

FASTBreak™ Participatory Systems Mapping

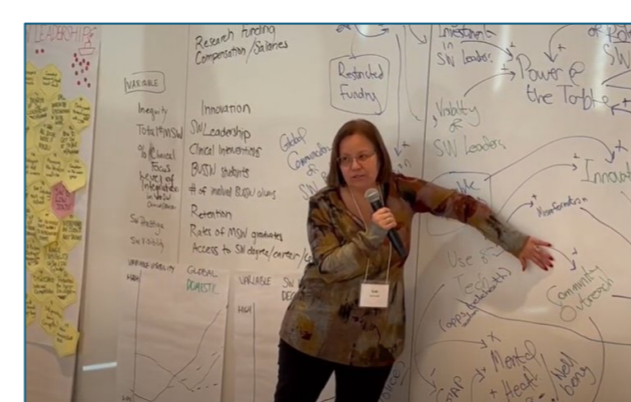
Two consultants facilitated FASTBreak™ mapping process to help participants identify and cluster 133 responses to the prompt: **What can we do to build and leverage social work power for health equity nationally and globally?** (Img. 1). Four small groups of 4-5 participants created behavior charts and causal maps for eight cluster topics (Imgs. 2-4).



Img. 1. Clustering 133 Responses



Img. 2. Behavior Charting



Img. 3. Storytelling Causal Map



Img. 4. Storytelling Causal Map

Consultants compiled and narrated individual causal maps into a V1 systems map (Fig. 1) and then facilitated a group process to prioritize leverage points (Fig. 2).

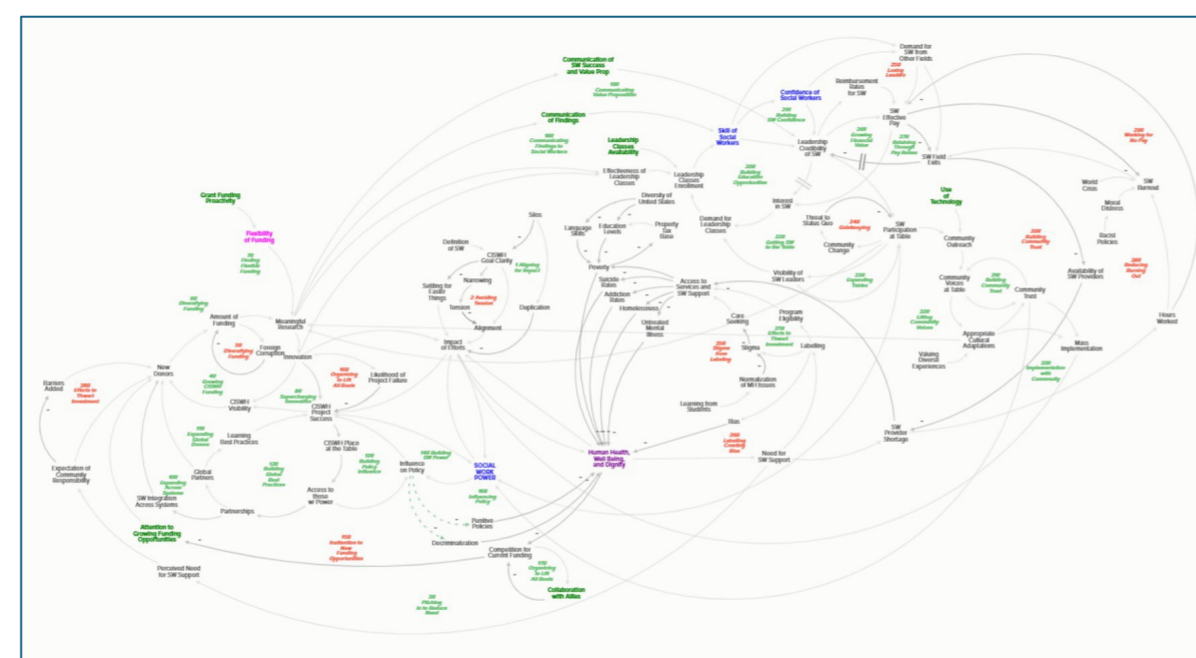


Fig. 1. V1 Systems Map

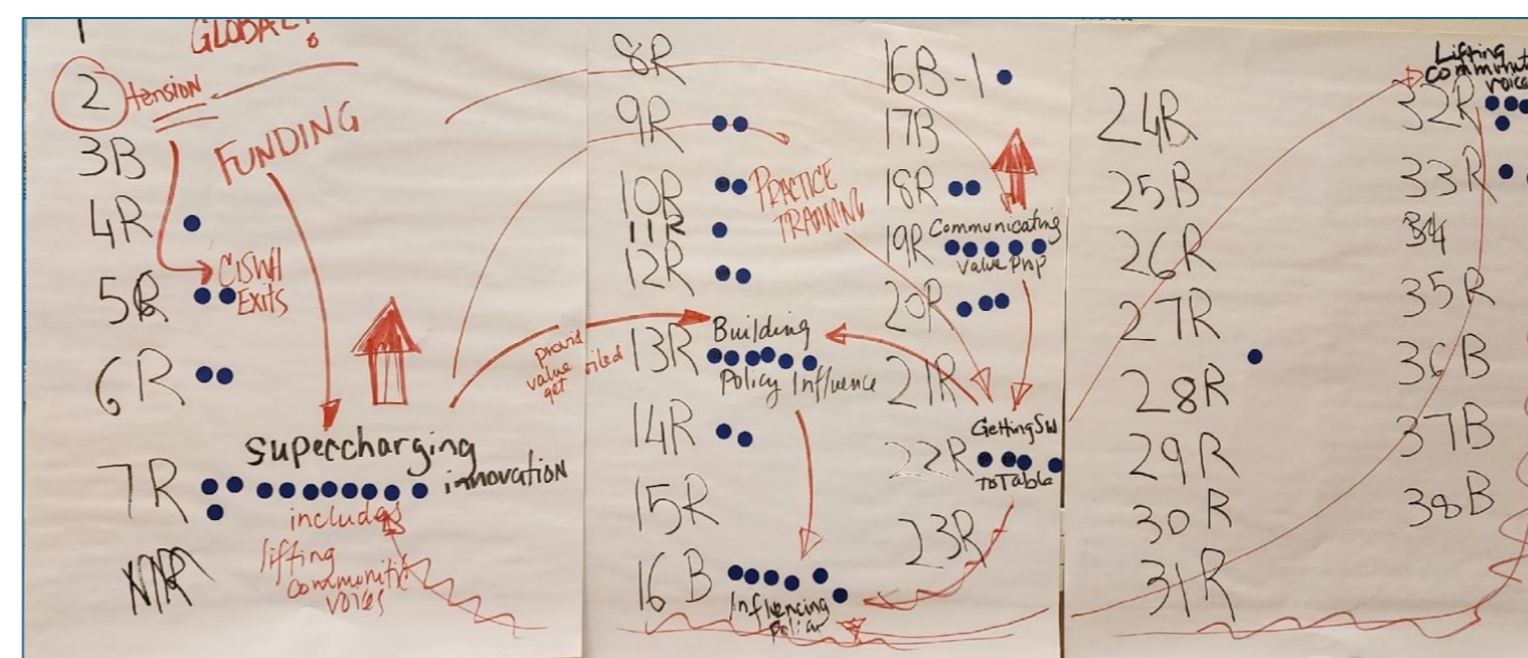


Fig. 2. Results of Group Prioritization of Leverage Points to Inform V2 Systems Map

Results

1. New theory of change (Fig. 3): **Supercharge innovation in social work research, training, and practice to build collective power and influence on the political agenda for health equity globally.**
2. Strong support and excitement for the new strategic direction and theory of change indicated by early stakeholder reactions.
3. Increased participant capacity and interest in using systems thinking, group mapping, and tools.

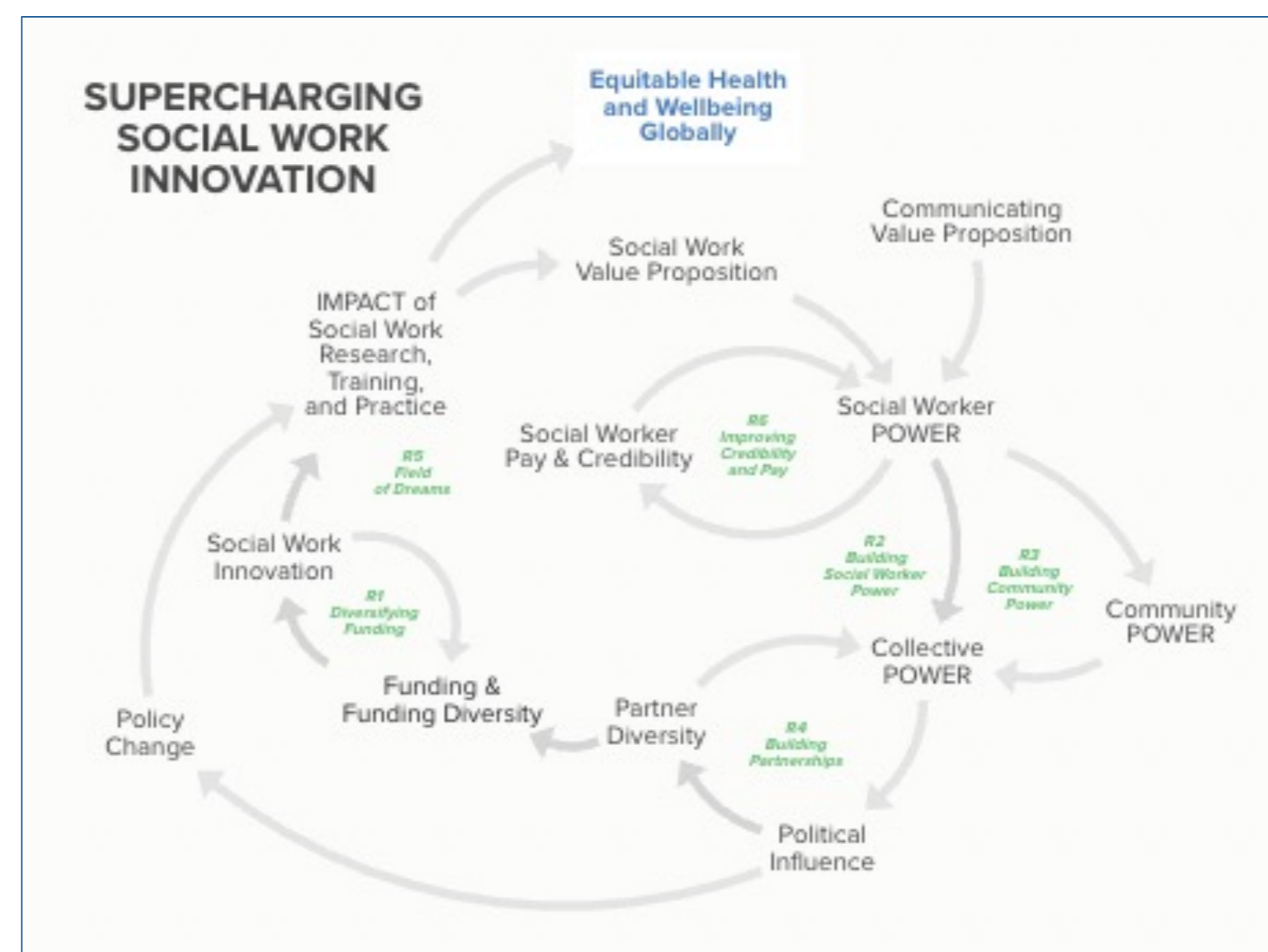


Fig. 3. V2 Theory of Change Center for Innovation in Social Work & Health

Continuing Work

To drive alignment, the Center is:

- implementing a new strategic infrastructure (Fig. 4.) to activate leverage points
- creating three new labs to accelerate learning and innovation
- developing a body of knowledge and action for social work power building
- refining domestic, global, and policy portfolios to drive outcomes

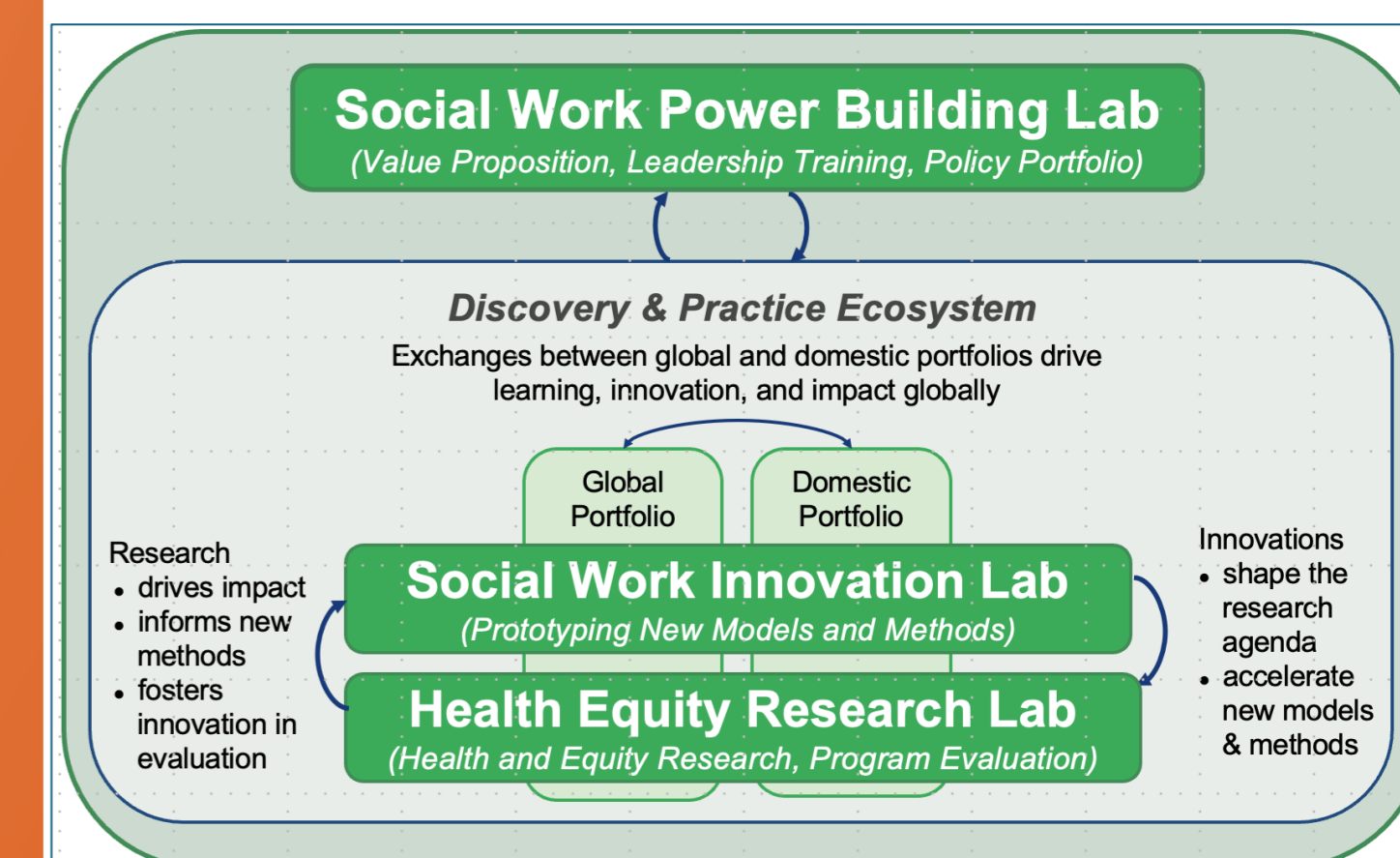


Fig. 4. New strategic infrastructure

Discussion

FASTBreak™ participatory mapping is effective at increasing stakeholder capacity in systems thinking and causal mapping. It is efficient and effective in helping an organization articulate its theory of change and leverage points. Subsequent efforts will identify balancing loops and refine the V2 map.

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