

Proposal for a
SOCIAL IMPACT SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SISIG)
OF THE SYSTEM DYNAMICS SOCIETY

April 11, 2018

As dues-paying members of the System Dynamics Society, we hereby propose the formation of a Social Impact Special Interest Group (SISIG) and request formal recognition from the Society. The proposed mission statement is below, along with background information, the SIG's goals, a discussion of its relationship with other SIGs, code of conduct, leadership, and founding membership.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Social Impact Special Interest Group (SISIG) of the System Dynamics Society (SDS) has a simple mission: to connect system dynamics to social impact. People who work on social impact—international bodies, development agencies, foundations, philanthropists, impact investors, social enterprises, nonprofits, and sustainability-minded corporations—are concerned with finding sustainable, system-level solutions (rather than short-term fixes) to important social problems and global challenges. System dynamics (SD) is ideally suited to help them identify such solutions. The SISIG clears that market. It identifies opportunities to engage those communities on the relevance and strategic potential of SD in their social-impact ambitions. And it fosters collaborations among SDS members, including those involved in other SDS special-interest groups (SIGs), to produce models and other SD resources that could help them achieve those ambitions. Our vision is to drive breakthrough social impact by capturing and sharing the knowledge of social science in system dynamics models.

BACKGROUND

From its founding, the field of system dynamics (SD) has concerned itself with human problems at large scales. Foundational work took on the dynamics of entire cities, entire industries, and in a notable early case, the world as a whole.

Half a century later, however, the field still struggles to be visible to the very people and organizations who concern themselves with solving large-scale social problems such as poverty, homelessness, mass incarceration, gender bias, racism, political polarization, violent conflict, and corruption. Students can get advanced degrees in social policy, foreign affairs, international development, civil service, political science, and economics without once encountering the concept of system dynamics (or even the term). Mainstream think tanks and research centers regularly lead study commissions and advise decisionmakers on complex policy problems, but most have never heard of system dynamics and almost none use it in their daily work.

Yet the social-good sector has never been more ripe for an introduction to the benefits of system dynamics than it is today. Systems thinking, design thinking, and innovation have become such ubiquitous buzzwords that it is almost tempting to write them off as just another fad. And while it's true that many organizations have adopted the language of innovation without actually changing their behavior, it's equally true that many others—international bodies, development agencies, foundations, philanthropists, impact investors, social enterprises, nonprofits, and sustainability-minded corporations—are making genuine efforts to think and act in new ways.

Some funders and organizations have begun launching significant “landscaping” and “system mapping” exercises, many without realizing that there are well-established ways to go about it that are systematic and quantitative. At the largest scale, organizations such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum have set ambitious agendas for large-scale change that explicitly recognize the importance of systems and sustainability. The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals have 169 specific targets and ambitions to achieve them in 200 countries, and billions of dollars annually are being programmed around meeting those targets. The WEF's System Initiatives target 14 global challenges (industrial change, the gender gap, natural resource security, etc.) that it argues will require system-level thinking and action to solve.

The SD community can make significant contributions to these and similar goals. Social impact is concerned not with short-term solutions to social problems but with sustainable solutions to problems at all scales. System dynamics is, too: Archetypes such as “fixes that fail” and “shifting the burden,” for example, are nearly perfect descriptions of many large-scale social challenges. SD professionals who research certain social problems are well aware of this fact, but many do not have close connections to communities of social innovation, social enterprise, and social impact—the people on the ground trying to find sustainable solutions to those same problems. Those communities, in turn, are largely unaware of (potentially usable) SD modeling taking place on the very issues they struggle against every day.

There is a real opportunity, therefore, to clear the market between the demand for system-level change and the supply of system dynamics modeling. The System Dynamics Society is well positioned to take advantage of that opportunity. And the Social Impact SIG is prepared to collaborate with other SIGs and SDS members to build those connections and perhaps set the stage for strategic partnerships.

GOALS

To fulfill our vision of using system dynamics to drive social impact and our mission of fostering collaboration within and between the SD community and the broader social-good sector, the Social Impact SIG will focus its activities along the following lines:

1) Adapt existing SD models to be useful (in context) to social changemakers

Models of specific problems (e.g., sex trafficking, political polarization, etc.) already exist, some validated and published, others still in development. For example, a model of human trafficking in a particular country might only be available in an unpublished working paper, but a coalition of organizations working on that issue in a different country might find some benefit to working with SISIG members, the author of that model, and the Conflict SIG to peer-review, validate, or

replicate that research so the model is both usable to people working on that social issue in that country and—for the benefit of the original author—ready for publication.

2) Create a forum for collaboration to build “big” models of specific challenges

It is sometimes the case that multiple SD models have been built that focus on different aspects of the same problem, or the structure of one problem might be similar to that of another. It might also be the case that there are multiple SD professionals interested in the same social problem, and there might be organizations and foundations focused on that problem who would be interested in a system-level view of their work. For example, the WEF might want to work with SISIG and the SDS to build a “big” model of one of the global systems it is trying to get its members to find solutions for. Or SISIG might work with an international development agency on one of the targets of the UN’s SDGs in a particular country. SISIG members might facilitate collaborations to build “big” models on specific topics such as these where there is capacity and mutual interest between researchers and changemakers alike.

3) Translate theories from social science into system dynamics models

Throughout social science, a number of self-contained theories (e.g., social identity theory, security dilemma, legitimation, etc.) are fairly well defined in the literature but have not been explicitly modeled in SD. SISIG members might collaborate with, for example, the Human Behavior and Psychology SIG on a model of system justification theory, which can be applied to a wide range of social problems (e.g., ethnic tensions, the role of misinformation in political polarization, etc.). Or SISIG members might collaborate with the Conflict, Defense, and Security SIG on a model of the security dilemma, which is useful in addressing social problems in many places affected by conflict and violence.

4) Build a repository of molecules, archetypes, and cases related to social impact

It is often encouraged that SD professionals build libraries of reusable model components (modules, molecules, entities, etc.) to facilitate and speed model-building. For example, in supply chain modeling, a library of molecules has been developed reflecting common themes in that field. SISIG members might collaborate with other SIGs to identify and build components like this for issues relevant to social impact and make them available in open repositories: theory molecules (as in the previous goal), entities common across social systems (e.g., demographic groups, policymaking institutions, etc.), or other molecules/modules that can be used as submodels in a variety of system models.

Similarly, the standard SD archetypes are directly applicable to many social problems. SISIG members might compile additional archetypes (or variants of existing ones) that seem to describe common structures across social problems (e.g., a policy of “decapitation” of illicit networks might be a predictable variant of “shifting the burden”; strategy dynamics as applied specifically to nonprofits and social enterprises might turn out to have special archetypes useful for helping different social movements, etc.).

And it will be useful to add to SDS’s case repository new cases where SD has been used to help specifically with breakthrough social change. SISIG members can help to identify and collect

such cases and make them available to other SDS members as well as the broader social impact community.

5) Encourage and enable systems thinking and modeling for social innovators

Many social innovators are already trying to figure out how to achieve large-scale social change, and some understand that systems thinking needs to be part of that process. SISIG members can build relationships with those whose ambitions or mindset are ripe for an introduction to group model building, system mapping, strategy dynamics, simulation, and of course SD modeling. SISIG members who work with such organizations already might also identify opportunities for strategic partnerships with the SDS and be in a position to facilitate introductions.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER SIGS

Social impact is a cross-cutting interest area in system dynamics, and the Social Impact SIG recognizes that other SDS SIGs already work on application areas where their modeling work is relevant (or could be applied) to social impact. SISIG does not intend to duplicate or compete with other SIGs engaged in such work. Instead, it looks to fill gaps where there are opportunities for SDS members to meet the demand for better ways to find system-level solutions—facilitating collaboration among system dynamicists in other SIGs (and in SDS more broadly) in order to strengthen strategic partnerships with the social change community.

CODE OF CONDUCT

The SISIG will protect private data in its possession; for example, it will not share its email list outside of the SDS. When working on models produced by others, SISIG members will comply with fair-use standards and work in a spirit of respect and collaboration with original authors. SISIG members will not attempt to poach clients from other members who make introductions to, or facilitate collaborations with, external organizations. SISIG members will treat others with respect regardless of gender or background at all times. And SISIG members will not engage in coercive, abusive, or otherwise exploitive behavior toward anyone over whom they have professional authority or significant seniority.

LEADERSHIP

The Co-Leaders of the Social Impact SIG are dues-paying members of the System Dynamics Society:

- **Bob Lamb**, bob@foundationforinclusion.org
- **Erika Palmer**, erika.palmer@ruralis.no (alt: erika.palmer@gmail.com)
- **Angelika Schanda**, contact@youngmodeler.net

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the Social Impact SIG is open to all SDS members in good standing. Non-SDS members will be welcome to participate in some activities, such as a collaboration on a model on a particular topic, but will not be considered SISIG members as such. No dues shall be charged to join the SISIG or to participate in its activities; from time to time, a modest fee might be charged for specific events to cover certain expenses (for example, refreshments), but this is expected to be rare.

The following individuals are dues-paying members of the System Dynamics Society, and they have agreed to join the Social Impact SIG:

1. **Hamilton Carvalho**, hccarvalho@gmail.com (alt: hccarvalho@outlook.com)
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CONTACT

Any questions regarding this proposal may be addressed to the Co-Leaders, with Bob Lamb acting as the corresponding leader (bob@foundationforinclusion.org).