



A RESPONSE TO *GETTING TO MAYBE*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report compares Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo's (SPWB) five years of work (2010-2015) with *Getting to Maybe* (2006), a "playbook" for funding/supporting social innovation. To facilitate this comparison, it uses reports created over the project's lifetime, and thirty interviews with SPWB participants, including Steering Committee and backbone team members, social profit agencies, local government, funders and academics.

The report uses *Getting to Maybe's* chapter topics to structure its discussion of SPWB's decision-making and goals, its interventions and outcomes. These topics are: to start the journey; how to get to maybe; how to stand still; how to engage the powerful stranger; how to let it find you; how to survive a cold heaven and; how to catch the moment when hope and history rhyme. Within each of these categories, this report follows SPWB history, structure and interviewees' reflections on SPWB's process and outcomes.

There was a general sense among interviewees that SPWB created a safe space for change among participating social profits in Wood Buffalo through intense interaction, education, support for inquiry, and developmental evaluation. Developmental evaluation, surveys, and SPWB's Theory of Change allowed partners and participants to find meaning in the messiness they encountered every day and over time working in Wood Buffalo. Interviewees reported a greater sense of vision in the sector, and many feel more prepared to take advantage of emergent opportunities.

It took SPWB time, effort and transparency to gain the necessary trust with Wood Buffalo-based participants. Trust needed to be built between new partners (within Wood Buffalo and beyond), in new ideas and in new practices. This was helped by small wins, which proved the possibilities of collaboration and seemed to lower the risk of trying new things. SPWB was an ongoing, unfolding process, whose partners constantly learned from the system they sought to influence, adapting their approaches and interventions.

Small wins must be a means to greater exploration and collaboration, or else pernicious problems may be ignored in favour of the easily achievable - the tension between action and reflection constantly haunted SPWB. It is too soon to tell how deep or how wide SPWB's ideas spread in Wood Buffalo over the long term. However, the increased sense of the possible interviewees reflected in their discussion of their sector and their community certainly suggest that for many, SPWB was part of the process that got them to maybe.

INTRODUCTION

Is it possible for a community investment strategy to create the necessary conditions for a culture of social innovation? This question inspired Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo (hereafter SPWB), a cross sector partnership that sought to support the nonprofit sector in Wood Buffalo, Alberta (the region home to Canada's oil sands), starting in 2011. SPWB brought together the Suncor Energy Foundation (a registered charity created by Suncor), its original funder, the United Way of Fort McMurray, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and the University of Waterloo, as well as representatives from Wood Buffalo's nonprofit sector. SPWB sought to take advantage of the knowledge and theory emerging around social innovation – a topic of increasing interest among academics, practitioners, government, and private sector funders.¹ Partners sought to leverage social innovation thinking into a new form of community investment strategy and nonprofit culture – building capacity in a stressed nonprofit sector and hopefully building a more resilient Wood Buffalo.

This report compares SPWB's work with the social innovation theories and examples in *Getting to Maybe* (2006) by Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patton. It aims to understand how participants in SPWB understood, applied, and reflected on the new ideas and interventions they encountered; it does not seek to determine if SPWB 'passed' the social innovation test, but how practitioners' concerns and the Wood Buffalo context interacted with, and sought to use theory for their aims. Social innovation has often relied on practitioners leaping ahead of theorists,² and SPWB brought the two together, hoping to create mutual benefit. The SPWB experience can inform both practitioners seeking to learn from SPWB as an example, and academics interested in the point of contact between the academy and the world.

¹ Eduardo Pol & Simon Ville, "Social Innovation: Buzz Word or Enduring Term?" *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 38.6 (December 2009): 878-885; Geoff Mulgan, w. Simon Tucker, Rushanara Ali & Ben Sanders, *Social Innovation: What it is, Why it Matters & How it Can be Accelerated* Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship Working Paper (Young Foundation, UK: 2007), 4, 8; Frances Westley, "Social Innovation and Resilience: How one Enhances the Other," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Summer 2013.

² Robin Murray, Julie Caulier-Grice & Geoff Mulgan, *The Open Book of Social Innovation*. Social Innovation Series: Ways to design, Develop, and Grow Social Innovation (The Young Foundation, UK: March 2010).

INTERVIEW SELECTION CRITERIA AND INTERVIEWEE PROFILE(S)

Interviewees were less selected than they were invited and welcomed. Invitations were sent to all previous and current Steering Committee Members, and to agencies and individuals who participated in SPWB's workshops since 2011. Anyone willing to be interviewed was accommodated, over the phone or in person when time and schedules permitted.

In all, 30 interviews were conducted; interviewees were concentrated among the Steering Committee's current and previous members (15) and social profit organizations (16), and all four current and previous backbone team members. Eight interviewees represented private or social profit funders of some kind (corporate, etc.), and five represented municipal government (elected and bureaucratic) at some point during their interactions with SPWB. Five interviewees were from Waterloo, either the University or surrounding area. Some interviewees occupied multiple roles either over SPWB's lifetime, or had overlapping roles.

The most significant bias in the selection of the interviewees is that they all participated in SPWB, and usually (although not exclusively) in multiple capacities or events over the project's lifetime. This also means that those social profits that did not interact with SPWB were omitted. Interviewees were concentrated in Fort McMurray (rather than the whole Wood Buffalo region), reflecting an unfortunate and frustrating limitation of SPWB – reaching beyond the city and to the more isolated rural areas proved difficult for the small backbone team, and coming to SPWB events in Fort McMurray could be equally difficult for social profits in communities like Anzac or Fort Chipewyan.

It is important to note however that interaction with SPWB did not necessarily translate to enthusiasm for the project. Several interviewees were openly critical of the project, its composition and/or its interventions. Therefore although the interviews are biased in favour of those who worked with SPWB, they represent a wide range of opinions about the project, degrees of interaction with the project, and contexts for the interviewees (private, public and social profit sectors, Wood Buffalo and Waterloo, academic and practitioner), which reflects the wide range of organizations and perspectives SPWB sought to engage.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & *GETTING TO MAYBE*

Interview questions can be broken into four streams: questions about the interviewee's perception of the social profit sector and community prior to SPWB; questions focused on the interviewee's personal history with the project, and their perception of the project's story and legacy; evaluative questions focused on the participant's views of SPWB's outcomes, learning and challenges, and its value to their work and the sector, and; questions seeking to capture interviewees' understanding of social innovation and system entrepreneurship. For a complete list of interview questions, please see Appendix A.

Each stream of questions had a separate but related aim. The first stream, focused on context, sought to understand how interviewees saw their sector before SPWB. Although there is an obvious risk of hindsight, it is useful to compare interviews and early SPWB surveys in constructing a discussion of the project's starting conditions. The second stream of questions sought to enrich the understanding of SPWB as a community-driven process by asking those community drivers how they engaged with and saw the process develop. Again there is a risk of hindsight creating a coherent narrative of many scattered pieces, but collectively interviewees' histories present a powerful multi-perspective narrative, especially when triangulated with each other and SPWB's many reports, meeting notes and evaluations.

The third stream of questions sought to help distinguish what participants valued and found frustrating among SPWB's activities. Although clearly context-specific, this information, especially in aggregate, is meant to help future projects like SPWB. Questions that differentiated outcomes, learning and challenges sought to surface interviewees' understanding (or not) of SPWB's adaptive process. This was particularly important for Steering Committee interviewees, who were part of SPWB's decision-making, and were best able to compare the project as a partnership with the project as a series of community interventions. Answers to these questions were the most useful in much of the proceeding analysis, as interviewees reflected freely on their most valuable (and frustrating) experiences with SPWB, which when aggregated into common themes, reveal a powerful story of SPWB's successes and limitations.

The last stream of questions, focused on social innovation and systems-related theories, was intended to determine whether SPWB has made that difficult leap from practice to learning to practice again. The questions tested the depth to which these concepts resonated and had been internalized among SPWB participants. Interviewees were asked

in particular to reflect on the concepts in light of their own actions, the answers to which frequently demonstrated the interviewees' understanding and use of these concepts.

Getting to Maybe was an important piece of SPWB's story, a catalyst and inspiration. Yet it did not provide the step-by-step guide for SPWB. The project was both social innovation focused and community driven, and the latter of these two elements was extremely important in deciding what SPWB did (collected through numerous surveys and community events and recorded in the many reports SPWB created). The interviews sought to capture participants' history with and personal evaluation of the project, the sector and some of the big ideas SPWB introduced and emphasized in its learning events and tools.

While *Getting to Maybe* was not the sole playbook for SPWB, it contains significant discussion for funders about what to look for and support to foster social innovation. Many of these helped inform SPWB's structure (cross-sector³), processes (such as developmental evaluation/reflective practice⁴) and interventions (convening/intense interaction⁵; support inquiry; remove barriers to innovation⁶). If we consider *Getting to Maybe's* seven chapter topics (to start the journey; how to get to maybe; how to stand still; how to engage the powerful stranger; how to let it find you; how to survive a cold heaven and; how to catch the moment when hope and history rhyme), how do the participants' interactions with SPWB compare with many of these recommendations? How might these comparisons help inform future projects supporting social innovation, and future iterations of social innovation playbooks?

³ Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman & Michael Quinn Patton, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed* (Toronto: Random House, 2006), 86.

⁴ Ibid., 88

⁵ Ibid., 47-8.

⁶ Ibid., 48-9.

1. TO START THE JOURNEY

The authors of *Getting to Maybe* advise their philanthropist readers that to start this process, they need to have a mindset that is framed by inquiry rather than certainty and that allows space for multiple perspectives and paradoxes to exist.⁷ In SPWB's case, finding this space that allows for reflection and adaptation took the shape of a Theory of Change.

Those looking to trigger systems change should be open to accidents, to surprises, to emergence⁸ – systems are unpredictable things.⁹ Yet that does not mean those working with systems cannot have goals. They need a vision, with space for moving targets.¹⁰ Hence the Steering Committee met in 2012 to create a Theory of Change. Defining the nature of a problem is one of the primary sources of conflict in a cross-sector partnership like SPWB (who should be included, what direction the partnership should take, and what deserves to be on the agenda).¹¹ Participants reflected respect for facilitator Tanya Darisi, who was able to turn their complicated and messy discussion into a coherent but flexible vision for SPWB.¹²

Plans changed over SPWB's lifetime, and any individual list of project priorities represents more of a snapshot in time than a concrete plan. A comparison of the 2012-2014 Strategic Plan and the subsequent evaluations reveals the importance of process over outcome. SPWB did not meet specific expectations, yet the project's evaluations from interviews and reports suggests that the project helped build capacity in the sector and establish important foundations for a culture of social innovation. Individual planning sessions helped SPWB identify key areas of interest, but over time the community participants acted as powerful arbiters of what SPWB ultimately pursued. The process could appear messy and was definitely frustrating, but ultimately SPWB was a constant conversation between stakeholders.

Those conversations took time and trust; checking items off a to-do list, while clean and possibly satisfying in the short term, likely would not have had the transformative effects on the social profit sector for which SPWB aimed. SPWB's multiple years of stable funding helped

⁷ Ibid., 21-22.

⁸ Westley et al, 2011.

⁹ Westley et al., 2006; Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg & Paul Plsek, *Edgework: Insights from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders* (VHA Inc, 2008).

¹⁰ Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo June 2012 Update Report and Action Plan, socialprosperitywoodbuffalo.org, 5.

¹¹ Barbara Gray, "Cross-Sector Partners: Collaborative Alliances among Business, Government, and Communities," in AL Huxham, ed. *Creating Collaborative Advantage*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 1996), pp. 57-79.

¹² BG in interview; AU in interview; BE in interview; AR in interview; BB in interview.

communicate both its complex ideas, such as social innovation, but also that it was an evolution, a process.¹³

2. HOW TO GET TO MAYBE

To get to maybe, social innovation supporters should enable intense interaction, network-building and exchange; they should also look to remove barriers to innovation, often held in the simple rules that maintain our existing experiences. This is risky, and social innovators need support to express their vision, link with others, and ask questions/define the problem, rather than force them into early solutions. Did SPWB support this kind of behavior among Wood Buffalo's social profit agencies?

Support Intense Interaction. All interviewees save one discussed networking and convening as key elements of SPWB. This is consistent with a survey in April 2012 that found “workshop and event participants valued the opportunity to network” provided at SPWB events, with 62% of survey respondents asserting that their networks were strengthened and expanded at SPWB events.¹⁴ A subsequent report of SPWB's activities in 2013 found 81% of respondents felt SPWB events “provide a good opportunity to network and make new connections.”¹⁵ Self-reported connections between participants suggest that the breadth and depth of relationships facilitated through SPWB grew over time.¹⁶

SPWB's Theory of Change identified “creating a space for change” as a key short-term outcome for SPWB, and one upon which subsequent goals such as a “stronger, more proactive nonprofit sector,” were to emerge.¹⁷ 17 of 30 interviewees asserted that SPWB created a space for change for social profits in Wood Buffalo. SPWB events were a neutral space for disparate or even potentially competing organizations to meet, breaking down barriers to collaboration.¹⁸ Important to achieving this safe space was the creation of rules of conduct, particularly in the Collective Impact Strategy for Youth meetings, where the breadth of attendees' backgrounds could surface long-standing institutional conflicts and misunderstandings. The ground rules were meant to “enable all participants to contribute to

¹³ AF in an interview.

¹⁴ Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo Project Briefing Document, Sept 2012, socialprosperity.ca, 20.

¹⁵ T. Darisi, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2013 Evaluation Report, Spring 2014, socialprosperity.ca, 26.

¹⁶ T. Darisi, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2012 Evaluation Report, Spring 2013, socialprosperity.ca, 34-35.

¹⁷ T. Darisi, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2012 Evaluation Report, Spring 2013, socialprosperity.ca, 24.

¹⁸ T. Darisi Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2012 Evaluation Report, Spring 2013, socialprosperity.ca, iv-v.

their full potential, help build trust and create a safe environment for having meaningful and at times difficult conversations.¹⁹ Obstacles need to be named and addressed, and stripped of their constraining power.

Look for Simple Rules Holding the System in Place and Remove Barriers to Innovation. Did SPWB improve the starting conditions for social innovation, either by preparing those interested in exploring the possibilities for change within their system, or by reducing barriers or obstacles to that exploration? The status quo is often held in place by powerful assumptions and values, as well as perceived risks to change.²⁰ Slightly more than half of interviewees (16 out of 30, or 53%) felt that barriers against innovation and collaboration have lessened in Wood Buffalo since SPWB's launch. Although it would be inappropriate to attribute this to SPWB alone – Wood Buffalo is a complex system, defying easy attribution – that this belief is so widespread is reassuring for a long-term culture supportive of social innovation.

Some barriers were removed by the committed work of SPWB champions, including director Nancy Mattes. As one observer reflected, “she [Nancy] constantly adapted. If she had stuck to the original blueprint, we wouldn't have built the trust [with SPWB's community partners and Steering Committee] and created a positive learning environment.”²¹ SPWB's history is full of turns, sometimes a little sharp, some of which were a little painful: “for Nancy and Katharine [Zywert] to have found their way, it's been challenging.”²² Yet, as one interviewee noted, “Nancy is stubborn, and so is Kim [Nordbye] in a positive way. Even though sometimes we have big roadblocks, personalities or attitudes, we'll just smile and carry on.”²³

Sometimes obstacles to social innovation can be hidden or obscured in the work of champions in the community. Working in a new community, SPWB relied on community advocates and champions to identify important stakeholders and potential partners. Although invaluable, there is a risk here of relying too heavily on existing community leaders and their relationships. Social innovation initiatives often require the difficult process of bringing together unusual suspects, which may be more difficult if money and activities reinforce established relationships and networks. Although a social innovation process needs local allies, it is important to be cognizant that no ally is without bias or context.

¹⁹; K. Zywert *Developing a Collective Impact Strategy for Youth-Related issues in Wood Buffalo: Meeting 2 Report*, October 2013, socialprosperity.ca, 2.

²⁰ Westley et al., 50-51, 125.

²¹ BM in interview.

²² AU in interview.

²³ BF in interview.

Expect this to Feel Risky. Embracing social innovation usually means abandoning (at least elements of) the status quo – a scary place, marked by unknowns.²⁴ 14 out of 30 interviewees asserted that they felt the risk of not shifting their work in the community was greater than the risk of change. Unsurprisingly given SPWB’s origins, SEF was identified twice by outsiders as embodying this ethos. This raises an interesting question; can those with power take risks first, and clear the way for others to follow? The role of powerful champions, those embedded in the system but able to see and affect parts of the system, are important in SPWB’s story; some seem more prepared or more able to take risks.

However, it is important to distinguish between this as a personal value and it an organizational possibility. Sometimes there are significant barriers to change within an organization, and an executive director or manager may be incapable of acting independent of their board, for instance. Risk can put one in a lonely place,²⁵ if others see the compulsion to change as a criticism of their hard work. For risk-taking to become normal within an organization, it may require a strong case to shift the whole organization out of the rules and assumptions that have held it in place.²⁶

In some cases, involvement with SPWB empowered individuals to take a risk and try something new, such as Erika Ford’s Timeraiser campaign for Volunteer Wood Buffalo.²⁷ The social profit sector has become, in their own words, “a lot bolder,” thanks in part to SPWB “opening their eyes, [and] broadening their thinking.”²⁸ SPWB was “an enabler”²⁹ of change and of exploration in the sector. As one interviewee creatively described SPWB: “It creates a kind of crazy stew, people feel they can take a risk and just throw those crazy ideas out there.”³⁰

Support Vision. Funders have a key role to play here, to support people with vision and emergent possibilities rather than supporting projects with specific outcomes – changing funding practices to shift systems in which you work.³¹ At first it might seem that supporting vision is outside the funders’ purview, but it is a lynch-pin in supporting social innovation; it requires seeing one’s place in the system, identifying barriers to change, and bringing others to your cause. One of the most promising, and least tangible of the pieces of the social innovation process many in Wood Buffalo identified with SPWB was the

²⁴ Westley et al, 125.

²⁵ Ibid., 50-1, 58.

²⁶ Ibid., 50, 125.

²⁷ Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo Steering Committee Notes, 19 April 2012.

²⁸ AY in interview.

²⁹ AI in interview.

³⁰ BJ in interview.

³¹ Westley et al., 47.

discovery and support of vision, usually a specific vision for the Wood Buffalo social profit sector.

Of the 30 interviewees, 18 discussed the vision they feel had emerged for the sector and the community over the course of SPWB. Was there any common ground among those 18 visions? It is a wide scope, from the vague “opening their [social profits’] eyes, broadening their thinking,”³² and “a real eye-opener”³³ to the slightly more specific “SP[WB] has helped us to learn about what we’re doing at a systems level”³⁴ to the assured, and iterative plan: “we know our collective vision, we know how we want to work together, we have the convergence annual conference to help the sector be more cohesive. This is in large part a credit to SPWB.”

3. HOW TO STAND STILL

According to *Getting to Maybe*, standing still involved the uncomfortable paradox of action and reflection; this involves supporting those who question and inquire, systems thinking and complexity, and embracing reflective practices such as developmental evaluation.³⁵ So a social innovation process requires constant learning, new information from the system(s) in which they work, and reflection, to “keep questioning what it even means to get it right.”³⁶

Support Those who Question and Inquire. More than half of interviewees (17 of 30, or 57%) felt SPWB supported inquiry, or encouraged them to ask tough, sometimes even wicked questions of their work itself and of the systems in which they work. The 2013 evaluation report underlined: “community partners noted that SPWB has contributed to a learning culture in the sector by bringing together the right people and asking the right questions.”³⁷

Support Training in Systems Thinking and Complexity Science. To tip a complex system, one must first attempt to think about the problem in question and proposed intervention(s) at a systems level. This is not a new way of saying ‘Think Big’ but more ‘Think Messy’ and ‘Think Up and Down’ as we look across scales and seek to grasp some of the key relationships that define the dynamics of our systems. The importance of whole system thinking was reflected back in the final interviews with SPWB participants.

³² AY in interview.

³³ AL in interview.

³⁴ AF in interview.

³⁵ Westley et al., 84-91

³⁶ Westley et al., 91.

³⁷ T. Darisi, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2013 Evaluation Report, 2014, socialprosperity.ca, 28.

This often means getting the whole system in the room – working across sectors, which presents challenges. Nearly half (14, or 47% - and 4 of the 5 interviewees who identified cross sector work as problematic or challenging) of interviewees discussed the absence of open communication and expectations as significant obstacles to SPWB’s work. 14 of the 30 interviewees (47%) generally valued SPWB’s cross sector emphasis, suggesting it was worth the difficulties. Over their conversations, 22 of 30 (73%) discussed the importance of grasping the whole system in their work, of which 21 (70%) believed this value was advanced through SPWB’s work in Wood Buffalo (one did not think this capacity had been wholly achieved).

For some, SPWB provided an intellectual space for engaging new ideas, which can themselves be transformative. In 2012, nearly 75% of respondents claimed they were inspired to do things differently based on new ideas they encountered attending SPWB workshops and learning events.³⁸ For a networking space to become a change space, it needs to engage participants “in a deliberate way”³⁹ that commands participants’ attention and eventually their commitment. Partly, SPWB brought people together “to talk to each other beyond what they do,”⁴⁰ but instead focused on new ideas, new tools and new perspectives. In this meeting space therefore, participants could take a precious moment “to rethink our responses to issues.”⁴¹ Space to think⁴² became space to change – an unusual space in a community that embraces action.

Support Developmental Evaluation. Developmental evaluation and adaptive decision-making were built into the SPWB process in the Theory of Change. Informed by systems thinking and complexity, developmental evaluation tracks trends as you go, moving across scales and adapting as new information and connections are revealed.

23 of 30 (77%) interviewees discussed the importance of evaluation to SPWB, and to their work in the community. This covers a broad spectrum of evaluation however, from the value of documentation (being able to follow SPWB, and hold the project team accountable through transparency), to funding research projects, and new ways of collecting information about trends and behaviours. These interviews were conducted at the same time as the Canadian Index of Wellbeing’s Community Wellbeing Survey, a process that SPWB championed, so it is possible that the focus on evaluation/data collection in the community pushed the topic to the top of interviewees’

³⁸ T. Darisi, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2012 Evaluation Report, Spring 2013, socialprosperity.ca, iii.

³⁹ AF in interview.

⁴⁰ AX in interview.

⁴¹ AI in interview.

⁴² AO in interview; AP in interview.

minds. Notably however, no interviewee spoke negatively about evaluation.

If we consider the thirty interviews as a homogeneous group, this would suggest that evaluation was generally seen as something that SPWB did, which helped build trust and adaptive decision-making. If we break interviewees into their roles however, another picture emerges. *Getting to Maybe* points out that funders' demand for proof of effectiveness can be a barrier to experimentation, where traditional metrics may be inappropriate.⁴³ It is extremely promising that all interviewees representing funding organizations (not including the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo), valued evaluation, and discussed their role in supporting evaluation. Additionally, many discussed how they used developmental evaluation in projects beyond SPWB's scope, and intended to continue. The high value many interviewees placed on SPWB's own evaluation process underlines its importance when engaging in novel – and therefore potentially threatening – new collaborations and projects.

Look for Organizations, Places and Times where Standing Still is Honoured and Savoured. Despite the enthusiasm for inquiry inspired and supported by SPWB, 7% of interviewees linked inquiry with solutions. This highlights the important conflict between valuing standing still, as described in *Getting to Maybe*, and the action-based values of Wood Buffalo. 12 of the 30 (40%) interviewees described Wood Buffalo as an action-oriented community, only 4 (13%) discussed standing still positively, but all of those interviewees placed conditions on their view – they needed permission, or the rare free time to stand still, it was not something that they could do regularly.

This concern is not a new one; in a 2012 survey, concern about SPWB delivering “real results” surfaced, although what qualified as real results was unclear, and this was balanced against an ongoing interest in the bigger picture, such as happiness and quality of life.⁴⁴ Workshop participants routinely requested more concrete action steps and “a clear focus on positive solutions” be integrated into workshops.⁴⁵ This is the land of the ‘martyr volunteer’⁴⁶ – a powerful image that provokes sacrifice as a valued attribute.

⁴³ Ibid., 50-1.

⁴⁴ Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo Project Briefing Document, September 2012, socialprosperity.ca, 22.

⁴⁵ T. Darisi, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo: 2012 Evaluation Report, Spring 2013, socialprosperity.ca, iv, 38; K. Zywert, Social Innovation Workshop Series: Report, February 2013, socialprosperity.ca, 9, 15, 18, 19.

⁴⁶ AL in interview.

4. HOW TO ENGAGE THE POWERFUL STRANGER

Power is a hindrance and a help in fostering social innovation; power dynamics can maintain our current system and social arrangements, but it can also “foment change.”⁴⁷ Therefore the *Getting to Maybe* authors emphasize the importance of being thoughtful of their place in the power structures. Social innovators need to be linked directly with funders, as not only partners but also as “information allies” who hold “valuable sources of grassroots information about trends, potential tipping points and new directions in the political economy.”⁴⁸

SPWB provided opportunities to link people with ideas to power. 19 of the 30 (63%) interviewees talked about opportunities within SPWB events or SPWB resources and stories helping them in this process, where power was described as corporate funders, as well as government. Whether these connections were always successful is not always clear from the interviews, and at least three interviewees discussed this issue in the negative, particularly SPWB’s failure to reach either academic audiences or members of Wood Buffalo’s wider business community.

Power is not just located in funders’ hands; government is an important source of power. In November 2012, Steering Committee members expressed concerns about the failure to engage the Mayor in SPWB.⁴⁹ Yet in the 2013 mayoral election, social profit organizations ran their first social profit-focused forum for mayoral candidates.⁵⁰ This was partially informed by a survey community leaders asked SPWB to perform prior to approaching the mayor. This greater political voice, demanding a place in the debate over who will run Wood Buffalo, is associated with an increased confidence in the sector (20 of 30 or 67% of SPWB interviewees felt the sector was more confident now than it had been five years ago) as well as an increase in the perception that the government is aware of the social profit sector (10 of 30 interviewees or 33%).

⁴⁷ Westley et al., 125.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122-123.

⁴⁹ Steering Committee Meeting, 29 November 2012, Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo (notes).

⁵⁰ AK in interview with the author, June 2014.

5. HOW TO LET IT FIND YOU

Social innovation cannot be muscled into existence; systems change relies on alert individuals taking advantage of windows of opportunity. This means looking for and nurturing conditions that could lead to tipping points.⁵¹ This means being available. Looking for those opportunities and exchanging information, but also fostering those conditions through early wins focused on building momentum.

Let it Find You. Only 7 of the 30 interviewees (and 7 of 24 interviewees if non-Wood Buffalo/SEF members are removed, or 29%) described themselves as ready to act when SPWB presented them with the opportunity to build the capacity of the social profit sector and explore the possibilities of social innovation. Interesting however, an additional 5 interviewees, concentrated among the social profit representatives, claimed that now they are more prepared to take advantage of opportunities for collaboration, exploration and change, which they attribute, at least in part, to the SPWB educational events and general support for capacity building. It is reassuring that a feeling of increased capacity translates into a sense that one's organization or oneself can take advantage of the possibilities.

Although less than a third of interviewees felt themselves ready to act at the beginning of their engagement with the SPWB project, 19 of 30 interviewees, (63%), felt the project arrived when they or their organization was in the right place and time for such a discussion. SPWB's history points to prophetic signals that capacity building would be a welcome conversation, such as in the early win of the Redpoll Centre. Although it is extremely difficult to predict what will resonate, those interested in supporting a social innovation process should look for subtle signals in the systems in which they wish to engage. What are possibly small tests that can help guide an emergent project into the right place at the right time?

Support Small, Early Successes to Reach Momentum-Generating Tipping Points. Early wins won peoples' confidence, and advanced SPWB over time. Interviewees mentioned achievements including the Redpoll Centre (three mentions), the Heart Awards (seven mentions), and the first ConvergenceYMM (nine mentions) as important events in SPWB's work, as well as valuable to them personally and to their organizations generally. Therefore, early wins were critical to SPWB's existence, particularly in the context of Wood Buffalo: "we needed to have wins. This is an industry town...Bring people together. Give them

⁵¹ Westley et al., 155-156.

something tangible...We weren't here to provide a bunch of research and talking."⁵²

Yet is this a dangerously easy path to follow? As one interviewee explained, in stark contrast to the image of Wood Buffalo above, "people like to see tangible things, but some of the harder things in life are not quick fixes."⁵³ Stephen Huddart of the McConnell Foundation shares this sentiment, that quick wins are easy wins, and too much focus on these types of wins can actually impede delving into deeper, systems-level pernicious problems, "the hard stuff."⁵⁴ A tension emerges between early wins and the risk of an ultimately superficial initiative, balanced against the difficulty of engaging people to commit to working towards the hard wins that may actually result in greater resilience. A potential way of managing this tension is to distinguish between means and ends – early wins should be seen and used as a means to get to the place where hard wins can be discussed, rather than become ends in themselves.

6. HOW TO SURVIVE A COLD HEAVEN

Failure is risky, but it is also key to social innovation. Social innovators need to be allowed (and supported) to try and fail, and try not to internalize failure.

Don't Let Fear of Failure Hold you Back. 10 of the 30 interviewees spoke of the ongoing fear of the unknown, and of change, although two of these interviewees specifically said they felt that as a sector or individually, this fear had been overcome. Two interviewees highlighted the fear of losing funding as an obstacle to collaboration or experimentation.⁵⁵ When there is discussion of change in funding structures, it inspires deep concern. When discussing possible collaboration, one interviewee described the fear of change starkly: "people's mandates would change, people would feel threatened, and they would all die."⁵⁶

Social profits are often characterized as missions or callings rather than businesses, with deep personal engagement, so hyperbole is not surprising. This fear becomes particularly prescient in light of SPWB's initial founding question, when SEF asked if there was an alternate way and means of investing in the community that might shift the system towards sustainability. This deep investment in the status quo was a

⁵² AX in interview.

⁵³ AY in interview.

⁵⁴ Stephen Huddart in interview.

⁵⁵ AX in interview.

⁵⁶ BL in interview.

significant obstacle for SPWB, and for future social innovation initiatives.

SPWB's most powerful tool to overcome this fear was experience. Fostering small, safe collaborations, and conversations alleviated or reduced the fear for participants: "we know that change isn't easy, but now we have that experience that the social profit sector can be successful by working together."⁵⁷ If this has a rippling effect through the sector, that successful collaborations breed a culture of collaboration, it could be transformative. Whether these ripples still require SPWB for support is still an open question. There is certainly some promising evidence; 17 of the 30 interviewees reported that the social profit sector in Wood Buffalo is now more capable of taking on challenges than previously, although only 11 specifically identified improved capacity and 20 reported the sector had greater confidence. 25 interviewees identified increased collaboration as an outcome of SPWB, although several asserted that obstacles remained, including fear. Concerns about the ability of the sector to continue these ripples of collaboration and trust building remain.⁵⁸

Interestingly, 6 of the 10 interviewees, or 60% (a majority of interviewees who discussed each factor) who talked about fear also identified the risk of doing nothing as greater than the risk of action. When interviewees discussed the impetus to change the status quo, they were often reflecting either on their personal inspiration, or their organization's goal, and when they discussed the fear of change, they were more often reflecting on the sector as a whole. This dichotomy is also evident in the comments of interviewees who felt that although their or their organization's involvement in SPWB had been beneficial to their work, the project's reach across Wood Buffalo (including the rural communities) had been relatively limited, and/or that the next step is to scale this project's values and the social profit sector's impact out to the broader community.⁵⁹

Very few interviewees discussed failure as a good thing (13% or only 4 of the 30), which suggests this concept was either not discussed at significant length or depth⁶⁰ at SPWB learning events and/or that it did not resonate with a significant number of SPWB participants. Given the general emphasis on positivity in many of the interviewees' discussions however, failure in general was not a popular topic. The fear interviewees projected on their sector suggests that this would not be a comfortable topic or place for social profits to find themselves in.

⁵⁷ AJ in interview

⁵⁸ BF in interview; AZ in interview; AC in interview; AX in interview; AH in interview; BI in interview; BJ in interview; BN in interview.

⁵⁹ BF in interview; AR in interview; AI in interview.

⁶⁰ K. Zywert, Social Innovation Workshop Series: Report, February 2013, socialprosperity.ca.

SPWB itself might be considered as having undergone failure to get to a deeper, more community focused place. For instance, the first major community event in the winter of 2011 “didn’t go particularly well”⁶¹ with the result that the Action Learning Teams were “artificial”⁶² as they were not motivated by community need. And yet through these challenging experiences, the project members learned, recalibrated and realigned. Perhaps then to remove the stigma of the ‘failure’ label, this issue can be reimagined as ‘learning’ – that one key goal of any project or collaboration should be next practice. This could be built into funding packages, to de-emphasize short-term success and embrace the longer term approach of building on past experiences (positive, negative and everything in between) as a means to work towards sustainable partnerships and long term goals. Failure is not the end to a social innovation initiative because such work is ongoing.

7. HOW TO CATCH THE MOMENT WHEN HOPE AND HISTORY RHYME

Taking a social innovation from a great idea or program to a system change requires regularly reviewing the “connections between local efforts and major trends,” strategic thinking as an everyday activity, and the support for innovators to leave a particular initiative when they are no longer necessary – the focus should always be on the broader system that we seek to shift, not the specific project.⁶³

SPWB itself may be considered an example of a process that sought to make hope and history rhyme. SPWB emerged through a critical (re)evaluation of SEF’s community investment strategies, with at its core a concern very similar to that included in *Getting to Maybe*: “help social innovators ask not only, are we doing things right, but also, are we doing the right thing?”⁶⁴ Throughout its work, developmental evaluation allowed SPWB’s Steering Committee to continue to ask this question of this ongoing work, measuring individual plans against the overarching goals identified in the Theory of Change. Abandoned plans or shifting initiatives are less an indication of failure as they are the reality of adopting an adaptive approach in Wood Buffalo, allowing community interests and needs to direct SPWB’s interaction with the system it sought to effect. It is a constant conversation between SPWB and Wood Buffalo, and through this, occasionally moments present

⁶¹ AR in interview.

⁶² BB in interview.

⁶³ Westley et al., 212-214.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 214.

themselves where aware and prepared SPWB members were able to make history and hope rhyme.

Are the conditions in place for social profits in Wood Buffalo to make the connection between the everyday and major goals after SPWB fades? Tools like the Canadian Index of Wellbeing's Community Wellbeing Survey, and the Strategy Road Map may empower social profits in Wood Buffalo to continue thinking across scales and about today and tomorrow. The growing interest in evaluation and data, as well as interviewees' growing belief that they are more prepared to take advantage of emergent opportunities is promising.

However, making history and hope rhyme requires a commitment to constant reflection, to process. Although there was recognition of SPWB as a process, this is not the same as an internalized value for process generally and the continued focus on action are cause for pause. In the short term, likely the greatest determinant of success is a key goal of SPWB; that the project and its aims become *of* the community itself, embraced, internalized and celebrated by the social profit sector as their own goals.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully SPWB's effects will ripple far into the future and beyond the memory of the process' specific initiatives, meetings and moments – it is too soon to tell. Yet “maybe” itself is about possibilities, not guarantees;⁶⁵ 73% (22 of 30) of interviewees spoke of more confidence in the social profit sector (either through positive events like the Heart of Wood Buffalo awards, or through the more ambiguous increased voice) and 20 felt the sector, their organization and/or themselves were more prepared to take on challenges. Only three interviewees spoke negatively about the ongoing role of social profits in Wood Buffalo, of whom two felt that there was greater capacity and promise to be achieved.

Although SPWB technically spanned five years, its interventions in the community began in 2011 and largely (although not completely) ended in 2014. It is perhaps not surprising that those interviewees with the longest and most in-depth connection with the project, its most devoted or active Steering Committee members, reflected the greatest understanding and internalization of SPWB's founding concepts (although never without a healthy critical eye). There is likely a self-selection at work here; those who stayed committed to SPWB over its lifetime were those for whom its message and/or goals resonated most strongly.

⁶⁵ Ibid., xiv.

On the one hand then, SPWB may be seen as a club of the like-minded. However, on the other hand, many of these Steering Committee members are extremely well-placed (either as funders, as executive directors, key bureaucrats and skilled advocates) to support others through a similar process of education and experimentation in social innovation as they experienced working with SPWB. Indeed, several interviewees who work for or with these Steering Committee members spoke of experiencing that support at work; they felt SPWB Steering Committee members encouraged those with vision, allowed space for training and deep connection with others, pushed for developmental evaluation and generally saw the value in individuals with good ideas over projects with specific outcomes.

SPWB required patience; in new partnerships, in new processes, new ideas and new ways of finding, measuring and celebrating value. The openness and trust SPWB built with so many social profits in Wood Buffalo to even have this conversation took work, time and stubborn commitment to process and adaptability. And yet the number of possibilities opened through this process, through participation in SPWB were numerous, varied and often unanticipated. In that way at least, SPWB definitely got many in the Wood Buffalo social profit sector to maybe, a place of possibility.

APPENDIX A



Interview Questions

1. When & why did you get involved in this project?
2. What, if any, insights have you learned about the social profit sector in this process?
3. What was the state of the social profit sector in Wood Buffalo before SPWB?
 - a. And After?
 - a. What does the social profit sector do in Wood Buffalo?
 - b. What should it do?
4. Did you find your participation in SPWB useful to your work? If so, why? If not, why not?
(Consider follow up on the following: the way you think, the way you act, the way you interact with others within your organization, with other organizations, with community members, funders)
 - a. Useful to you personally?
 - b. Useful to Wood Buffalo?
5. What do you think some of the most important outcomes of SPWB have been for the social profit sector or for the community of Wood Buffalo?
6. What were some of the challenges related to the SPWB process?
7. What have been some of your most important learnings related to the SPWB process?
8. What is the story of SPWB, in your words? What happened?
9. You are a systems entrepreneur. At what point did you activate your network(s) to support a specific initiative or the broader work of SPWB? Why at this point?
10. When you hear social innovation, what do you think?
 - a. Is it useful? Why?
 - b. Is this what you do?
11. What do you think the legacy of SPWB will be?

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