

# THE SUCCESS FACTORS

CRITICAL TACTICS FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVES  
FROM THE SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM NETWORK



**SOLUTIONS  
JOURNALISM  
NETWORK**

*CREATED BY*  
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# WHAT ARE SUCCESS FACTORS and where did they come from?

Success Factors are the tactics that are critical to the success or failure of a response to a given issue or problem. A success factor can be used as an answer to the question “what social change strategy did this solution use that made it work (or not work)?” Success Factors were developed in-house at Solutions Journalism Network (SJN). The project, headed by Tina Rosenberg, Taylor Nelson, and Matthew Zipf, involved reading hundreds of stories to see which tactics were critical to making a response work across multiple issues, locations, and populations. Much solutions journalism tells the story of a response that succeeded where others had failed, and seeks to identify how — what did this response do differently? Success factors arose out of SJN’s attempt to identify, name and classify these different tactics. The Success Factors were last updated in April 2021.

## Why are Success Factors important?

The same Success Factor can power all kinds of social initiatives. For example, “addressing underlying issues” or “building trust” can lead to successful responses in education, health, criminal justice, and many other fields. People working in all these fields can benefit by learning how successful programs use these tactics. And using the focus of Success Factors to make these connections helps people to understand the systems that create social change.

To find examples of each Success Factor, explore our [Solutions Story Tracker](#); solutions articles are tagged corresponding to each factor when appropriate.

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# CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS

## ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES

Addressing root causes means solving problems by addressing the underlying factors. By digging deep and attacking the root causes of a problem, changemakers can treat the disease rather than just the symptoms. These solutions offer help to those in need, employ a comprehensive approach to problem-solving, and address the determinants that keep individuals and communities from succeeding.

- Addressing underlying issues: Treating underlying conditions, specifically those that are structural and systemic that cause social problems. These issues arise because of the way a society is organized: for example, a solution that addresses patriarchy or a lack of jobs in a neighborhood experiencing economic hardship.
- Using a comprehensive approach: Providing people with services that address multiple, related challenges at once. This usually is a single response that helps multiple problems, not a comprehensive approach involving lots of solutions (unless all the solutions are intentionally acting together).
- Help instead of punishment: Supporting individuals with resources or care under circumstances when discipline or punishment is the norm. This includes re-allocating resources to support the needs of a community instead of relying on disciplinary structures to solve the problem. It can also include providing services to help people as a preventive measure to the criminal justice system.

Explore our [Addressing Root Causes](#) discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

## EXPANDING ACCESS

Expanding access means bringing products and services to new people, in new markets, in new ways. From developing medicines for neglected diseases to delivering contraceptives via aerial drones, these solutions focus on providing services to those in need. By expanding marketing and distribution, reducing costs, and rewriting rules in pursuit of equality, changemakers broaden the reach of their innovations and extend access to all.

- Leveraging technology: Using new technology to solve old problems, often addressing how to provide access to populations who experience economic hardship or don't have their basic needs met.
- Last-mile delivery: Building the last step in a distribution system to get products into people's hands. Distinct from building distribution systems: Last-mile delivery stories are about getting products/services into people's hands, with some implicit process involved. Last-mile delivery can encompass things like health clinics, where you wouldn't call it a distribution system. Related terms: Building distribution systems is more specifically about building ways to get that product into people's hands (much more logistics-based/it's about a business model). Distribution systems are business models, always for-profit. Figuring out how to make something affordable to people who are already there is building distribution systems but not necessarily last-mile delivery.

# CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS

- **Eliminating barriers**: Removing barriers to solving problems, especially hidden obstacles that were not initially recognized as part of the problem. Removing Barriers means making adjustments to the system of how things are done to take into account hidden factors.
- **Building distribution systems**: Creating a business model that allows a product or service to reach its audience. Must entail the development of a new system or process that allows for the movement of goods and services from a source to the target population. Related terms: Distinct from last-mile delivery, last-mile delivery stories are about getting products/services into people's hands, with some implicit process involved. Building distribution systems is more specifically about building ways to get that product into people's hands (much more logistics-based/it's about a business model). Last-mile delivery can encompass things like health clinics, where you wouldn't call it a distribution system. Distribution systems are business models, always for-profit. Figuring out how to make something affordable to people who are already there is building distribution systems but not necessarily last-mile delivery.
- **Remixing the talent pool**: Harness fresh expertise by staffing a response to a social problem with people who normally do not have access or opportunity to those positions. Initiatives or programs can include leadership opportunities for people who are not trained experts, or specialized, but develop new skills.
- **Leveling the playing field**: Addressing an inequity of power or diversity and attempting to fix it by changing the rules or adjusting current systems to allow more fairness, thus "leveling the playing field" so more people have a fair chance to succeed.
- **Increasing transparency**: Empowering people by revealing hidden information, often about logistics or finances.

Explore our [Expanding Access](#) discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

## **EMBRACING THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS**

Embracing the power of relationships means building and leveraging human networks to solve problems. By building trust and personal relationships in a community, social entrepreneurs are able to create change on a behavioral level. They also make use of positive peer pressure and social norming to show people that certain peers are behaving well.

- **Establishing social norms**: Establishing social norms by telling people what others are doing (e.g., electricity companies giving comparison as to how your neighbors are doing). Showing people that their peers are actually behaving well.
- **Building trust**: Using interventions that increase compliance by building trust. Often this involves enabling work with people dealing with economic instability by helping them with problems they define or recruiting front-line workers who are their peers.

Explore our [Embracing the Power of Relationships](#) discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

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## EMPOWERING PEOPLE

Empowering people means building the confidence and problem-solving ability of communities. Working closely with the demographics they serve, changemakers identify communities' assets and build programs that are controlled by locals. In so doing, they encourage resilience and turn "victims" into problem-solvers. Some of these featured solutions work by teaching a community to expect more of itself, its leaders, and its government.

- Community control and ownership: Building programs managed and controlled by the people served.
- Resilience: Encouraging or incentivizing people to bounce back from adversity.

Explore our [Empowering People](#) discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

## PRACTICING HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

Practicing human-centered design means customizing and tailoring solutions to meet a person or a community's needs. In developing solutions, changemakers employ human-centered design, meeting people where they are at, employing behavioral economics, and identifying cases of positive deviance. Sometimes they even employ humor, exemplifying a technique that considers existing and natural behavior.

- Meeting people where they are: Providing services without the requirement of previous behavior change or that fit the way people behave.
- Engaging in empathic dialogue: A thoughtful, reflective conversation becomes the catalyst for change.

Explore our [Practicing Human-Centered Design](#) discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

## CULTIVATING COLLABORATIONS

Cultivating collaborations means reaching across the aisle and rounding up the community to solve problems. From partnering cops and clinicians to connecting public high school students with jobs in industry, these solutions depend on coordinating many actors to achieve success. On a macro level, collaboration-driven projects might bring together the private sector, government, and NGOs; on a local level, they might be as simple as uniting teachers, counselors, and parents to help students grow.

- Collective action: Coordinating many actors, who would not necessarily be working together, to respond to a problem. Bringing them together is key to the success of the solution.
- Reaching across the aisle: Collaboration among disparate parties is a strategic advantage to getting the work done, whether it is through a private-public partnership, or cross-sector collaboration.

Explore our [Cultivating Collaborations](#) discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

# CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS

## USING CREATIVE FINANCING

Using creative financing means harnessing the power of economics and investment. These solutions take advantage of money, not only in its ability to fund programs but also as a means of giving people autonomy and the power to solve the challenges they face in the ways they see fit. From providing freed slaves in Thailand with cash grants to offering small loans to businesswomen in developing countries, these solutions take advantage of the incentives, power, and leverage of finance.

- Providing cash instead of goods or services: Giving cash instead of food, other goods or services to support local markets and autonomy.
- Using financial incentives: Rewarding results and/or paying for success— no matter how they are achieved.
- Business with social goals: Investing in or operating businesses that pursue and weigh social goals alongside financial returns—a double bottom line.

Explore our Using Creative Financing discussion collection to learn more about these Success Factors in action.

## OVERCOMING THE BIG CHALLENGES

Overcoming the big challenges mean showing how to solve the problems all entrepreneurs face. Certain challenges — questions of scaling and impact measurement and evaluation — are endemic to social entrepreneurship. These stories illustrate how changemakers are addressing those challenges, and whether they are finding success.

- Impact measurement: Evaluating whether it works - these stories should include instruments and processes that are used to identify impact and improve the effectiveness of the solution. Measurement can be a daily process of gathering intelligence and feeding it back into the system, or a formal study of a solution's effects and outcomes.
- Learning from failure: Analyzing, adapting to, and making use of failure. By embracing and understanding the lessons of a failed solution, changemakers can turn failure into a learning experience. The learning is the journalist's responsibility, rather than the people involved in the failed initiative. Importantly, the story does not have to include a new response after learning from failure. The story itself presents an initiative or multiple initiatives as failure and goes into analysis of HOW it failed, as a learning exercise in problem solving.

Explore our Measuring Impact or Learning from Failure discussion collections to learn more about these Success Factors in action.