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Co-designing a social innovation model for changemakers

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Abstract As design educators we believe that continuous innovation in education is necessary if we are to imagine new ways for young people to realize their potential. It is critical to rethink our education system and ensure that it is reflective of our current, complex realities. We are especially interested in co-designing learning processes that encourage social innovation and recognize young people as active changemakers. To do this, we developed a research program titled INNOCO (**Inno**vation **Co**-designed). With support from Zayed University in Dubai, UAE we developed a humanistic research framework, an adaptable set of activities including an innovation bootcamp and a supportive community network that continues to grow. INNOCO was delivered with youth in the UAE and in Nepal and has achieved considerable impacts tracked through both quantitative and qualitative narratives. Our core work is about co-creating pathways for youth to engage in and grow social innovation in their communities.

Keywords: Empathy-Driven, Social Innovation, Changemakers, Co-Design, Transdisciplinary, Youth Empowerment, Education systems

1. Introduction

As design educators at Zayed University in Dubai, UAE, we believe in using social innovation to explore new systems of education that are relevant to the evolving needs of our communities. Particularly in the field of education, continuous innovation is both necessary and possible if we are to imagine new ways for young people to realize their full potential.

The current education system in practise in most parts of the world often represents a socially narrow and dated curriculum that is limited in its ability to cultivate empathetic, driven and holistic young leaders and changemakers. In a report titled 'Reimagining Education' by the Centre for Public Impact, the foundation wing of the Boston Consulting Group, the argument for new ways of thinking about education is made clear "*while education is our greatest lever for social change, the current system is increasingly falling short. Unacceptable gaps in academic attainment, poor social mobility, rising mental health issues and a failure to provide young people with the skills they need for life in the 21st century are just some of the consequences of a system rooted in the needs of a bygone era." (*Big Change and Centre for Public Impact, 2013)*.* There is a strong need to rethink education and socially innovate a system that is relevant and responsive to the complex realities youth experience in today's world. We were especially interested in how to encourage creative youth engagement in social innovation as a means to enable young people to realize their potential as changemakers.

The term 'social innovation' has enjoyed increased popularity in recent years and is often used to distinguish between the more traditional understanding of technological or market-based innovation that has failed to address rising social inequalities. According to the Centre for Social Innovation at Standford University, it speaks to a paradigm shift for how we collectively understand innovation and requires projects to consider and tackle significant societal issues such as poverty, unemployment, degrading environments and education. Agnes Hubert's 'Empowering People, Driving Change' report defines social innovation as "*new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society's capacity to act*" (Hubert et.al., 2010).

Considering the changing needs of education and our commitment to social innovation, the central question we explored was **'How might we co-design an immersive, educational, transformative, and sustainable changemaker pathway for social innovation?'** To do this, we leveraged community initiative and institutional support from Zayed University to build a platform to social innovation named INNOCO (Innovation Co-designed). Simply put, INNOCO actively supports young people interested in building their capacities as changemakers. Hence, it strives to disrupt linear educational approaches and builds on the need for a paradigm shift in education in the region. The INNOCO program is based on humanistic principles of co-design, meaningful participation and how the 'self' is inherently tied to the 'collective.' This foundational principle is visualized as a model titled ME=WE discussed in detail in later sections. The program activities include a set of versatile and adaptable workshops, readings and interactive exercises that marry relevant content with engaging learning methodologies. These activities enable participants to consider changemaking capacities on an individual (micro), community (meso) and systemic (macro) level. Our core work is about co-creating pathways for youth to engage in and grow social innovation in their communities.

In three years INNOCO has developed a successfully implemented research framework that has already been modeled for a partner project at Zayed University; has facilitated a youth engagement program with participants in UAE and Nepal; and, has chronicled the changemaker journeys of program participants through quantitative and qualitative narratives. Through these cumulative processes, youth explored ways in which they could connect, collaborate and contribute to their larger communities. Critical aspects of our work are detailed below with the hope that an engaged audience of educators and systems thinkers may learn from our shared experiences and enrich our collective knowledge.

2. Values of Co-design

INNOCO is a strong example of an initiative that benefits from a convergence of bottom-up and top-down approaches. The value we assigned to co-design was instrumental in deepening our understanding of social innovation and ensured that the learning process we developed would be informed by multiple perspectives. The co-design process was crucial in forming a common language of understanding to unify opinions and direction. Our foundation for co-design was inspired by Margaret Mead's famous words *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*

2.1. Leadership and Vision

The meaningful participation of diverse voices is critical to furthering social innovation, additionally, so is the presence of strong leadership. Good leaders are imperative to the success of co-design as they steer collective dialogue and facilitate the identification of a common vision. INNOCO's principal leads were able to articulate their vision for social change with transparency and passion which enabled the multiple collaborators, partners, mentors and participants involved in this work to leverage their unique expertise to further a collective vision for change.

2.2. Inclusivity and Participation

Through strategic outreach, preliminary exploratory sessions and surveys with our immediate and international communities, we initiated dialogues about reimagining education and learning that helped nurture our direction and actions. The formation of an organic team included the perspectives, knowledge, skill and guidance from students, educators, CEO's, industry experts, existing changemakers and storytellers to name a few. The elements that were generated through the co-designing process were adaptive and responsive to the interests of youth participants and collaborators to cultivate and expand our collective capacity. For example, youth who expressed an interest in facilitation were invited to co-host sessions with lead facilitators.

Although the processes for co-design can be slow, complex and highly iterative, we believe it to be a promising pathway to social change allowing community participation. From 2015-2018 our co-design process involved approximately 116 experts, facilitators and collaborators from diverse and multidisciplinary backgrounds. Understanding limitations and levels of commitment from participation is highly important in the co-design process. When done right, co-design can yield lasting, meaningful impact that permeate through individual, community and systemic levels.

2.3. Impactful Ownership and Achievement

Ideas that are collectively imagined, designed, developed and implemented, we believe this creates a lasting change because of the diverse voices that are engaged. Individuals who were able to provide meaningful input into existing areas or foresee new areas of development and could take ownership proved to be valuable to the overall growth and progress of INNOCO. The collective actions of co-design has to meet individual ownership and community driven purpose to be impactful towards systemic changes.

Through these collective contributions, acknowledging achievements and appreciative celebration creates milestones in the growth of social innovation work. Challenges and setbacks are always part of the tapestry but when on-the-ground action and team effort leads to successes it brings us closer to the realization of a collective vision as changemakers.
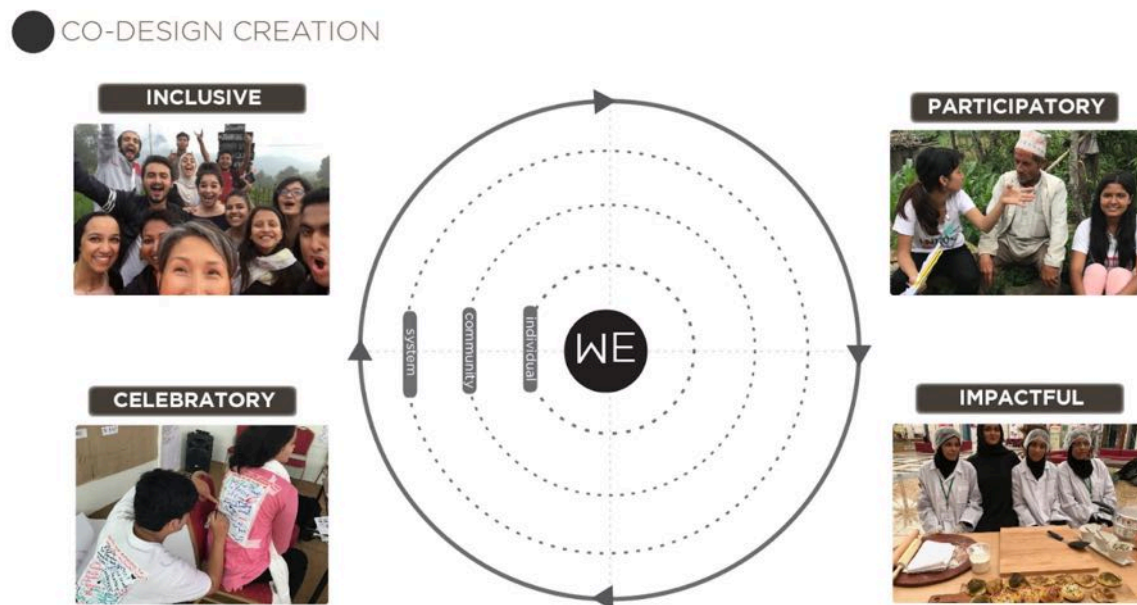

Figure 1. INNOCO's principles of Co-Design

3. Research Framework

Our research model is a human-centered and evidence-informed one titled 'ME=WE' that resonates with the Panarchy Theory to understand the systemic and symbiotic relationships between self (ME) and society (WE). **ANA=NAHNU (أنا=نحن) as translated in Arabic** is a core humanistic concept of empathetic understanding between the self and society. It acknowledges how personal growth can lead to creative confidence and empowerment that ultimately contributes to society.

ME=WE attaches significant value to the symbiotic relationship between an individual and the larger societies and systems he/she/they inhabit. The framework focuses on 'action and reflection'

contributing to social change that one can affect at an individual (micro), community (meso) and systemic (macro) levels.

Wise and diverse communities across our world adopt this simple philosophy. In 'The Origin of Values', Fredrik Barth discusses the Balinese principle of 'tattwa-masi', which translates to '*you are we and we are you*'. Similarly, Jacoba Mugumbate and Andrew Nyanguru explore the South African philosophy of "Ubuntu" in the African Journal of Social Work, it teaches that our humanity is reflected in the achievements and humanity of others, intrinsically connecting the 'self' with the collective. This framework also manifests in the Mobius strip, a mathematical phenomena that demonstrates infinite and continuous movement and sprouting growth.

At INNOCO the ME=WE framework was developed as a pathway that begins with the individual as a changemaker who engages with their community and systemic change through a continuous cycle of growth, action and reflection. The individual journey mirrors the expansive and moving structure of this framework as they engage in activities grounded in empathy, trust, creative confidence and communication. Through this work, the individual experiences growth points between action and reflection allowing for enriching their knowledge and capacities and deepening appreciative inquiry mode as continuously leaping from ME to WE and WE to ME.
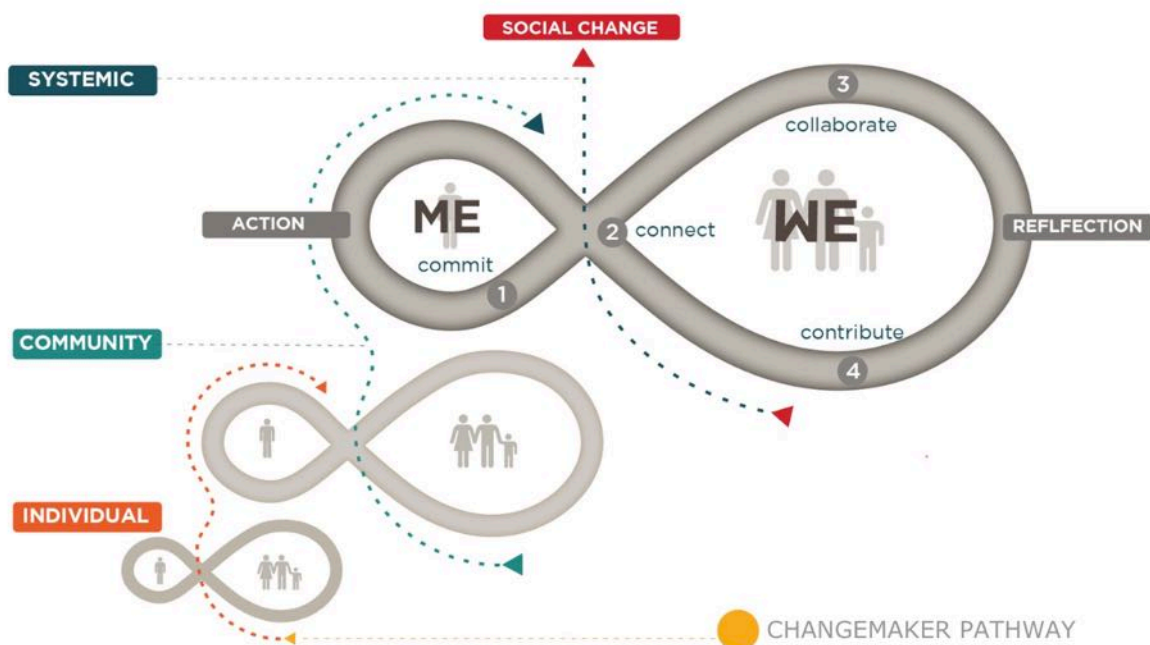

Figure 2. ME=WE framework guiding a changemaker's pathway

4. Program Tools

A flexible and imaginative program as a series of independent workshops and an intensive 9-day bootcamp was developed to facilitate socially minded youth engagement. The program objective was to build collective capacity in planning and developing entrepreneurial and/or community-driven service projects and contribute to tangible change-making.

4.1. Immersive Program

The immersive program was co-designed considering changemaker character building, experiential learning, empathy driven practice and community/industry integration. Through phase one of the program, we focused on the individual changemaker and in identifying their pathway. The program consisted of four main workshop styled sessions:

- **Building Creative Confidence** focuses on the individual's paradigm shift to a confident space by considering the meaning of empathy, trust, identity and passion. It builds upon the participants identified strengths and perspectives to re-think self to society and vice-versa (ME=WE). The session ends with the participant envisioning their hero journey as changemakers and commitment to moving forward.
- **Design Thinking Practice** initiates the conversation of value creation by using empathy driven tools, establishing needs finding and point of view processes, visualizing and ideating through storytelling techniques and quick prototyping to assess assumptions towards social problems.
- **Social Innovation Space** begins with what social entrepreneurship might look like so participants can define it. This workshop introduces the Value Proposition Design (VPD), Social Business Model Canvas (SBMC) and how experience innovation stands on the pillars of desirability, viability and feasibility. These aspects are applied to the participants selected social issues to realize sustainable solutions.
- **Pitching Social Innovation Ideas** builds the participants confidence to pitch their social innovation ideas through a meaningful story, convincing and structured vision and engaging storytelling. The program concludes with the pitch presentations evaluated by a panelist from the community, for relevant feedback to action and possible connections for the changemaker to further their learning and begin to establish their ecosystem.

The INNOCO program was piloted with youth in UAE and in Nepal in varying forms. In UAE (2016-2017) a six-month workshop series was implemented where 20 youth experienced learning and collaboration towards 3 pitched ideas, participants were not ready to move forward with their social enterprise or community service projects. In Nepal (2016 – 2018) during the UAE Nepal Connect (UNC) project, the program was initially piloted with select youth and evolved into a 9-day innovation residential bootcamp with 18 youth. At the end of the Nepal bootcamp, nine ideas were pitched to a panel of community panelists, out of which seven have emerged as viable projects in ongoing development.

4.2. Cluster Development

INNOCO's next phase of programming was to mobilize youth who participated in the program to form a support and networking system to assist each other and motivate growth of project or service ideas. The aspect to further facilitation of the program and learning in the changemaker communities was also an objective. The Nepal bootcamps lead to the development of the Nepal Youth Cluster (NYC), initiated by the participating youth in 2016. Core members of NYC assisted in co-designing the 2017 bootcamp and created the conversation with new participants to establish their own not-for-profit organization in August 2018, Nepal Youth Innovators (NYI).

4.3. Ecosystem Mapping

This area of the program was to consider the changemakers' journey on a systems scale to affect social change at the macro-level. Taking into consideration the ME=WE framework, an 'Ecosystem Mapping' tool was co-created by the INNOCO team and paired with a mentorship component to strengthen the changemakers' self-growth and the scalability of their project. Seven mentors were identified and recruited from Nepal and internationally, matched with seven NYI changemakers to foster learning and expansion of their projects pitched during the bootcamp. This is an ongoing relationship and supports the growing needs of the changemakers.
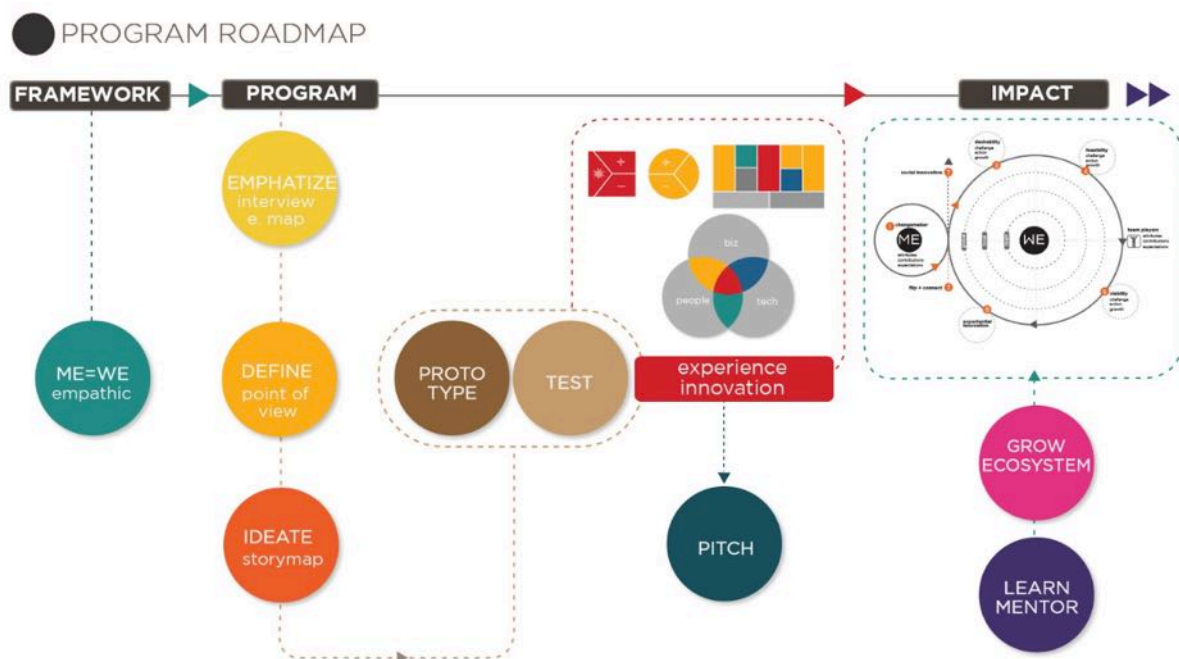

Figure 3. INNOCO program roadmap

5. Impact Stories

INNOCO emerged as an exploration of how we might reimagine education as a meaningful pathway for youth to changemaking and community building. This exploration evolved into an immersive, transformative, and sustainable educational program wherein youth could realize their potential as changemakers and active players in society. The program underwent multiple renditions that consisted of pilot modules, workshops, bootcamps and co-design sessions in both UAE and Nepal and therefore the impact data gathered is fairly vast. To determine INNOCO's key impacts we considered the original objective and structured a mixed-methods data collection plan that allowed us to gather rich qualitative narratives of change from youth participants along with quantitative measures of program effectiveness. Data was collected following the pilot program delivered to local youth in the UAE, the first phase of the program in Nepal, and the second phase or innovation bootcamp. The impacts of our work are illustrated through these sets of data and by the stories they tell.

5.1. Local Impact

The INNOCO program was initially piloted with youth in the U.A.E. and consisted of a series of workshops and talks that introduced youth to key concepts of social innovation, co-design, community collaboration and creative confidence. 20 participants were asked to complete feedback forms at the end of the sessions and were also interviewed for added input. Data indicated that young people found the concepts of social innovation useful but the current environment they found themselves in did not enable them to translate their understanding into actionable change-making projects.

While youth in the pilot program did not build social innovation projects themselves their feedback allowed us to build on the program and create a more nuanced and detailed program which evolved into the innovation bootcamp offered in Nepal. Pilot participants were also actively involved in planning and facilitating the next phase of the program. They even travelled with the team to Nepal to deliver the new series of innovation workshops; the value of this exchange has manifested in meaningful cross-cultural relationships, mentorships and understanding.

5.2. International Impact

Following our experience in UAE, the team decided to pilot the program in an international setting and leveraged a partnership in Nepal to deliver the program with diverse youth based in Kathmandu. This resulted in the UAE Nepal Connect (UNC) program.

While our impact assessment data is primarily qualitative gathered through transcribed one-on-one in-depth interviews, quantitative data was also collected through post program surveys. Analysis of the quantitative narratives shows that the program was highly rated by participants especially in the areas of *bootcamp environment and cultivating culture*. These were critical areas for us as we attempted to create an unconventional learning environment and culture that valued co-design where youth could contribute to the process in fulsome ways. On a scale of 1-5 (5 is very satisfied; 1is unsatisfied) participants rated key areas of their experience, A snapshot of average rating scores demonstrate the following: *Workshop Quality: 4.1 / 5; Content Relevance: 4 / 5; Culture & Space: 4.6 / 5; Expectations Met: 4 / 5; Interaction: 4.2 / 5; Creative confidence: 4 / 5.* These scores indicate key

strengths of the program and point to the need for innovative content and learning spaces for youth that prioritize community and change-making.

Figure 4. Impact growth with UNC 2017 Program participants (0=low standard / 5= high standard)

The qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews was used to develop a set of illustrated changemaker stories to further our Knowledge Translation and Exchange (KTE) efforts. The stories follow youth participants who completed the INNOCO program and demonstrate the transformative change they experienced that led to actions on individual, community and systemic levels. While many discussed viable social enterprise projects that either resulted from or was fueled by their participation at INNOCO, many also identified key life skills they attributed to the program. These included resiliency and the tools to adapt to changing needs or project directions; confidence and the ability to present and/or communicate their creative vision; and, an understanding of the language of social enterprise along with stronger familiarity with tools such as the empathy engine and value proposition canvas. Here is what some of the participants had to say:

"I got chance to work on projects ... Take survey about different topics ... Visit the farm ... And most importantly present myself and my ideas in front of everyone which gave me confidence ... It gave me worthy lessons for life ... I feel happy about all this"

"I was a bit shy girl but now when I come front for the presentation I just cannot stop myself from giving my best. Once I got the title of 'presenter of the day" as well and it has been possible due to the strength that I got throughout those 9 days of UNC. I am much thankful for those motivating and inspiring days."

"UNC 2017 means a lot for me. It has always been a milestone for the leadership development and execution. Furthermore, it has bolstered confidence in me to take leadership initiative in different situations. I have emerged as the problem solving, inspiring and energetic, enthusiastic leader at my work."

"UNC 2017 acted like a fuel to turn my thoughts into action. I am able to witness the impact of boot camp both in my thinking process as well as my courage towards any contingent action that I have to take in my work life. The most powerful thing I have been practically applying in my life is the Value Proposition canvas and the essence of teamwork."

Additionally, there were seven viable projects that emerged from the Nepal bootcamp. All are in their initial developmental and/or operational phases. This includes a literacy and reading program in a rural community; a homestay for women facing domestic violence; a hydroponic farm; and a kiwi farm and waste management system. The Nepal youth group also realized their vision by registering as the Nepal Youth Innovators (NYI), a space for young people to connect to like minded changemakers and cultivate meaningful connections and collaborations to better contribute to social change.

5.3. Added Benefits

From 2015-2018 INNOCO's co-design process involved approximately 116 multidisciplinary experts, facilitators from diverse backgrounds and collaborators across sectors of work. Sparking this flourishing and supportive network of people passionate about social innovation is one of the program's strongest impacts. This network has elevated on-campus learning opportunities at Zayed University by introducing students to expert speakers in social innovation and social enterprise. Many of these collaborators have also supported the program by being mentors for youth participants and actively encouraging their social enterprise projects.

The ME=WE research framework and changemaker pathway developed by INNOCO has also been modeled for a partner project at Zayed University that connects communities to co-designing systems of sustainability and at Impact Hub at Georgian University in the USA. Learning from and having the ability to build on the lessons learnt from INNOCO's research and program experience has been invaluable in sustaining new ways in which to engage young people in becoming active changemakers.

6. Conclusion

INNOCO's journey is a strong example of communities co-designing systemic solutions in the field of education. Our central goal when we began this journey was to reimagine education and learning as a way for youth to further their capacity as changemakers. What we learnt is that new systemic methods of learning and driving social change are not only viable but are being actively sought out by youth and adults alike. People are ready and vested in change. The failings of our current systems in meeting social challenges are increasingly being recognized in communities across the globe and the time is ripe for an overhaul in our thinking and institutions.

A key finding through INNOCO's work has also been the understanding that people are just as committed to social change outcomes are they are to community-based processes. INNOCO's values of co-design, commitment to social innovation and humanistic research framework of ME=WE truly resonated with people who engaged in this work. This understanding allowed for a common language that allowed for stakeholders to buy-in to the vision of a changemaker pathway. Our

comprehensive and flexible set of program tools for youth engagement were positively received and the impacts have been significant. The skills, mindset and confidence gained on the individual participant level coupled with the social enterprise project levied on the community level combine to steer a path towards meaningful systemic change. Through these cumulative processes, youth explored ways in which they could connect, collaborate and contribute to their larger communities.

INNOCO's social innovation model in its entirety is both powerful and promising for future work. To continue this journey, an online hub of program tools, research framework, principles and impact stories will soon be shared as a platform for youth, educators and/or academics to easily access and adapt this model for their local communities. We believe that INNOCO is a strong example of a social innovation pathway that cultivates young changemakers and a study in co-designing alternative forms of learning that disrupt linear models. As one of the INNOCO youth participants in Nepal so aptly states *"What we learn in schools is not everything, I want kids and young adults to learn life skills that will bring out the best person that they can be"*
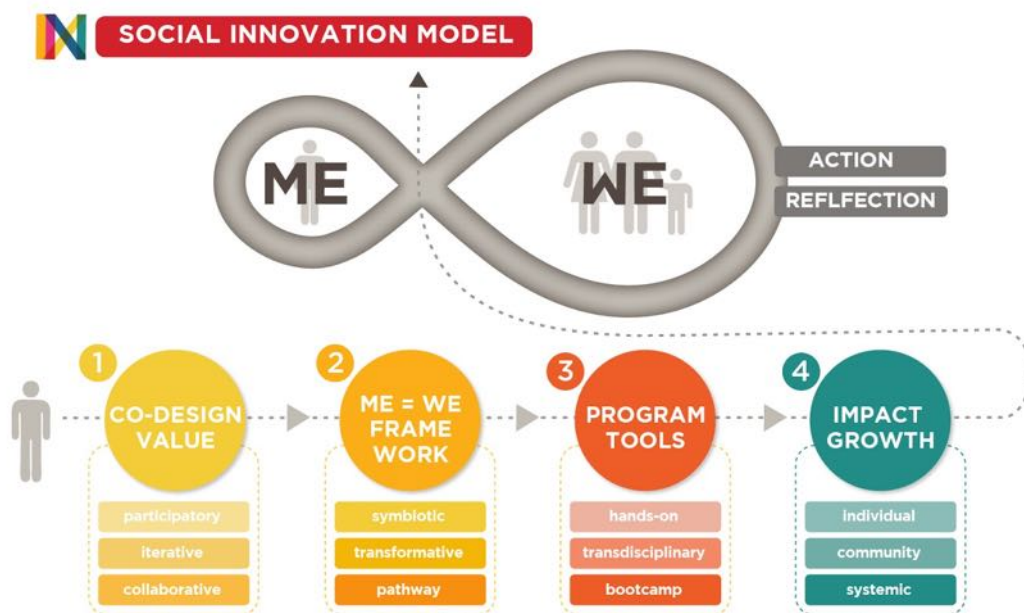

Figure 5. INNOCO Social Innovation Model

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