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## Toolkit: Ethical human-centred design for a complex world

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## Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023

### **Toolkit: Ethical human-centred design for a complex world**

**Kathryn Krummeck, Gray Garmon and Munir Ahmad**

### **How might we leverage a system of tools to help development professionals customise and operationalise ethical, impact-oriented human-centred design work?**

The Accelerate Impact team, working closely with an Aga Khan Foundation initiative called Local Impact, has partnered with USAID to develop a robust and user-friendly innovation toolkit consisting of a set of human-centred design (HCD) guidebooks and additional tools to support teams to move through the HCD process.

This interactive session spans the pre-work of scoping and resourcing the project—to the engagement of the community in identifying problems and creating solutions—all the way to planning for implementation and scale, pitching the idea to potential partners and funders and assessing the impact of the solutions over time. The resulting resources are a systematic and cohesive set of tools and a process for customising those tools to suit the needs of a particular project. We hope this encourages more social sector folks to leverage HCD to engage the community in ethical ways while developing feasible, viable and desirable (innovative) solutions. As we prepare to launch these resources—free and open source to the global social impact community (and beyond!)—we humbly ask for this community's engagement and critical feedback to help us to refine these tools and make them the most rigorous, thoughtful and user-friendly as they can be.

KEYWORDS: human-centred design, design thinking, social impact, innovation, capacity building, design education, tools, toolkit, participatory design, community-based design

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Methods & Methodology

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## **Background**

In 2018, the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) launched the Accelerate Impact initiative to grow AKF's leadership in social innovation by inspiring everyone to put their creative ideas into action and stimulate the co-creation of innovative solutions with communities to significantly increase the measurable value, impact and scale of AKF's interventions. The Accelerate Impact team works to equip AKF staff, partners and communities with the competencies, mindsets and resources to create impactful next-generation solutions, systems and strategies.

Accelerate Impact focuses on HCD as the main modality to build this capacity and a key process that supports our staff and communities to take on complex social impact projects with fidelity and ethics. We believe that as staff and community members gain fluency and experience with human-centred design, they begin to embody the creative and innovative mindsets needed to drive meaningful and sustained change. We believe that the only way to actually develop those mindsets in people is by providing the tools, training on the tools and an opportunity and safe space to experience applying those tools to a problem in order to deliver a solution.

## **HCD guidebooks and tools**

As much as we believe deeply in HCD processes and tools to operationalise the culture change of our organisation, we also recognise that teams on the ground are stretched thin and do not have the bandwidth to explore all problems using a robust process. We also encounter cases where teams have an understanding of the problem and only need support in generating creative solutions or testing a possible solution to gauge effectiveness before scaled implementation. Because of these challenges, we know we need to streamline while also preserving the integrity of the process.

One of the more unique things about Accelerate Impact's offering are tools that evaluate a problem's innovation potential and where the team is currently at, to offer a customised design pathway that meets the project's specific needs. We realised that staff members need to be able to customise a design process—through a structured process—that speaks to the nature of the problem space, the potential for the solution to make an impact, and the resources available to the team.

The products coming out of this project will be a set of free and open source printable guidebooks and tools, as well as a set of digital tools (on MURAL), a set of "just in time" micro-videos and, aspirationally, an algorithm-driven application that would automatically generate a customised pathway and curate the relevant tools for teams.

## **Why HCD?**

While there are many design thinking/HCD tools out there, we believe our project stands out because of the structure, flexibility, and support it offers novices to take on complex projects—with little support—in an ethical, sustainable, equity-centred way. This matters because people often get trained to use HCD in a workshop setting—or are mandated to use HCD with no training—and don't have the resources they need to use the process with fidelity. This risks that the time and effort they put into a process does not yield new or novel ideas, and thus they lose faith that working in this way is valuable to them. Worse still, equipped with powerful tools and little training or support, they might unintentionally use the tools unethically or inadvertently cause harm to marginalised communities.

In fact, we believe that HCD (the movement, not the process) is at a crossroads. After years of energy and excitement, most closely characterised as a fad with insufficient regard for depth or rigour, HCD is at risk of being discarded. While we agree with many of the recent critiques of design thinking/HCD, including in the article, "Design thinking was supposed to fix the world. Where did it go wrong?" published recently in the MIT Technology Review and in Don Norman's recent book, *Design for a Better World*,<sup>1</sup> we

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262047951/design-for-a-better-world/>

worry that these critiques may get confused as a call to discard the process, instead of encouragement to deepen the process.

One of the important moves that we have made in developing these tools is to situate our work squarely in a social impact space. While our process does address human behaviour—as Norman suggests is critical to saving the planet (2023)—we have framed our tools and processes around creating sustainable, ethical solutions that are co-created with those who are closest to the problem and, often, furthest from decision-making power. This also allows us to clearly state that the goals of this work are about reducing human suffering, elevating the voices of those who are more marginalised, decolonising development work and ensuring that solutions that are implemented take into consideration the ethics and sustainability of the decisions co-created.

We believe the answer to the recent critiques of HCD is more structure, not less. We believe strongly in the critical need for those with decision-making power to engage community members in co-creating solutions. This is HARD to do for those with experience. We are working to help those with little experience to do this work effectively and ethically.

## **Summary**

By creating a scaffolded, customisable and rigorous process, we believe that our tools will not only meet people where they are in terms of the scope of their project but also provide them with the support they need to facilitate a co-creation process with the community that yields creative ideas. We believe this is missing in our larger mission to spark creative action—from our experience training thousands of people, we believe there is only a small percentage of people who might attend a workshop or pick up a less scaffolded resource and actually take action. If we want more people to take bolder, more creative action—in an ethical and equitable way in order to better the world—we need more options to support them.

## References

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## **Positionality**

While the core team developing these tools is diverse (male and female-identifying, non-binary, gay and straight, first-generation college graduates, atheist and Muslim, immigrant background, Pakistani, Indian and Anglo ethnicities, Portuguese, Indian and American nationalities), we also recognise that while we have had a wide range of experiences designing in marginalised contexts, we also represent an immense amount of power and privilege relative to most of those who we serve.

For this reason, it is all the more important that we seek critical friends to help us to see the implicit bias we may have baked into our tools so that we can address it. Because of this need, we are excited about the opportunity to engage this international community to get feedback.