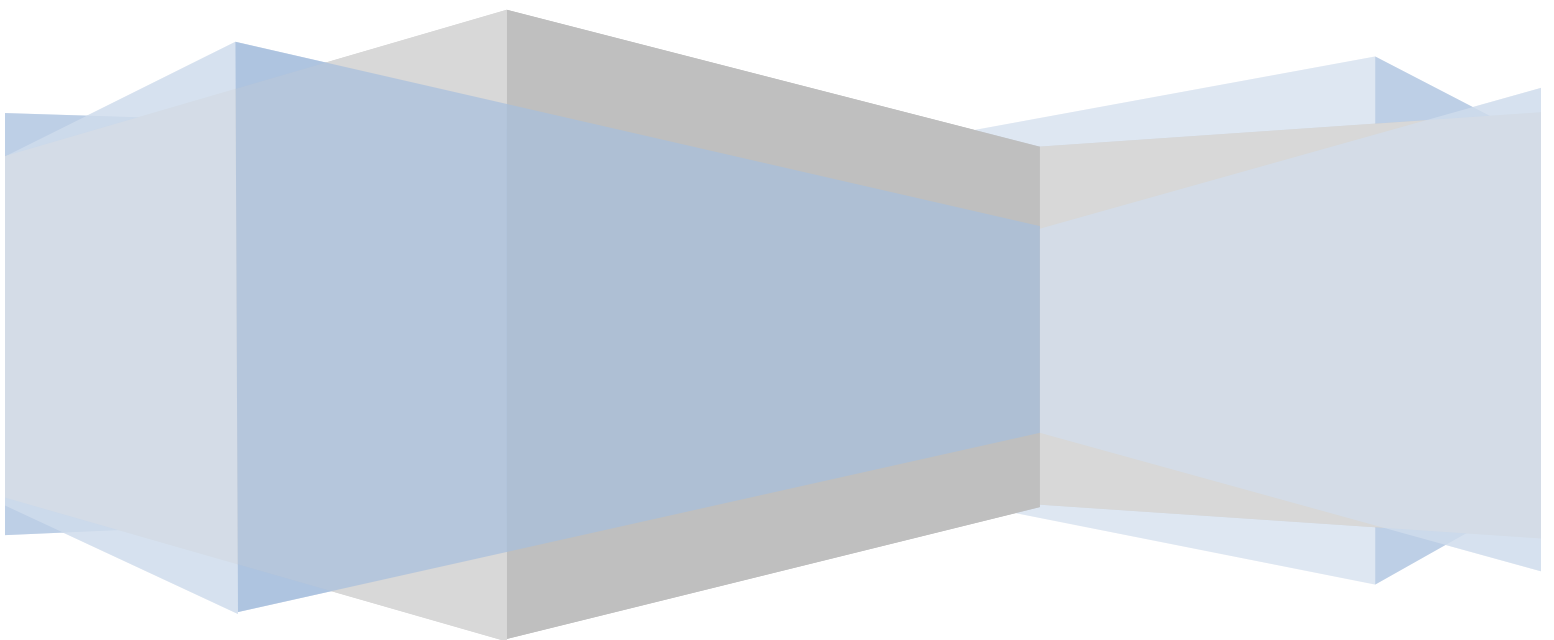


# Creating a Vancouver Social Innovation Centre

## Concept Consultation Document

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**Commissioned by:**

Vancity Credit Union  
Simon Fraser University

## Introduction

Commissioned by Vancity Credit Union and Simon Fraser University, this document presents early thinking around a proposed social innovation centre for Vancouver. The new centre is envisioned as a catalyst and support to help entrepreneurs, organizations, government, and communities develop and implement creative solutions to some of our toughest shared challenges.

Preliminary research to date has gleaned insights from a variety of global centres pursuing innovative solutions to social issues, and sought to better understand existing activities and needs in our region. Section 1 of this document introduces a preliminary concept discussion, while Section 2 presents a highly condensed version of these local and global research findings to date.

This document and the accompanying survey aim to solicit broad community input. With deep local expertise and a strong network of social innovation activities already occurring in the region, the centre will seek to serve, accentuate, and amplify, rather than duplicate existing efforts. Your feedback will be important to ensure this is the case.

### Your Feedback

The document contains exploratory questions at the end of most major sections, intended to provoke further discussion, and explain current thinking.

***Your direct feedback is being solicited via an online survey, found at:***

**<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6DZJN8W>**

Completion of the online survey is appreciated in order to generate comparable information. We are also seeking in-depth input via ongoing interviews and planning sessions - please be in touch if you are interested in a longer conversation:

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**Please note: Concept development is at an early stage. The ideas proposed below are intended to provide context rather than illustrate finalized plans.**

## Section 1 - Preliminary Concept

The vision for the centre is that of a vibrant, inclusive, entrepreneurial hub to spark, connect and amplify innovation. It would help actors from diverse sectors work independently and collectively to address complex social issues, bring our top innovations to the world, and help our region adapt global lessons to local conditions.

Over 60 local interviews to date, and lessons drawn from more than 30 global models, point to the following potential components of a successful social innovation centre. Conversations are ongoing and we seek your feedback to better understand how the centre might serve and add value to our collective work.

### Centre Design

The following four complimentary key functions are proposed for the Vancouver centre:

#### **Key function #1: Incubation/acceleration of early stage social ventures.**

**Description** – As currently envisioned, the centre would focus on earlier stage ventures, and draw from intensive cohort acceleration models seen elsewhere (see [Y Combinator](#), [Unreasonable Institute](#), [Hub Ventures](#), [Social E-Labs](#) for examples). This would contribute to building investment ready ventures through education, close mentorship from experts and peers, professional support, exposure to key networks and funders, and connections to an entrepreneurial community.

Local seed funding is sorely needed, and would be a desirable and potentially powerful addition. The centre may include incubation and office space for ventures that require it, or work with co-working facilities elsewhere in the city.

**Target groups** - Entrepreneurs beyond the idea stage, who are actively developing and launching high impact, scalable social ventures. Those who are passionate about growing this emerging class of entrepreneurs and ventures.

**Value created** - Direct social impact via successful ventures (and lessons learned from failure), contribution to a culture of entrepreneurship and a networked support system for emerging entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial energy infused in other centre activities, strengthening the social investment pipeline for impact investors, potential venture equity or revenue share for centre.

**Consultation questions:**

- (a) Is targeted support for early stage entrepreneurs a high priority to catalyze the local social innovation sector?
- (b) What type of support do entrepreneurs most need?
- (c) What programming, space or resources would be needed to achieve this?
- (d) Who is already filling all or part of this function for social ventures?
- (e) In designing support mechanisms, how important is it to differentiate between for-profit ventures and enterprising non-profit approaches?

**Key function #2: Identifying, testing, supporting and scaling solutions to systemic social problems**

**Description** – Finding and supporting early stage ventures, as in function #1 above, is one path to identifying and helping social innovations flourish; the centre will also support a systems-level approach to tackle issues that often need government, business and the social sector to work together, and provide a neutral setting for this to occur. Acting as a social innovation lab, the centre will strive to spark, test and nurture creative solutions to complex issues. Design-thinking and arts based approaches to social change are of particular interest in identifying creative, multi-disciplinary solutions (see page 6 below).

Described by Geoff Mulgan of the Young Foundation as connecting “the bees to the trees”, the centre can play a role in connecting innovations emerging from individuals and organizations ‘on the ground’ (‘bees’), to institutions (‘trees’) that often don’t have the natural mandate or tolerance for entrepreneurial risk, but do have the resources and desire to support and scale tested solutions.

Examples of what this may look like include: ‘change labs’ to create multi-stakeholder approaches to complex problems (as pioneered by [Reos Partners](#)); ‘collective impact’ approaches to unified action, as with [Strive’s work improving education in Cincinnati](#); TACSI’s new “[Radically Redesigning Social Services](#)” program to co-design, prototype, and scale innovations in social service delivery; Young Foundation’s [Launchpad](#) to internally develop innovative ideas into new ventures; and [Social Innovation Generation’s](#) research and targeted interventions to build a functioning Canadian social finance marketplace.

Research shows potential for cost recovery based work, contracted by government, foundations, or other entities to generate innovative approaches to specific issues.

**Target groups** – Government, foundations, non-profits, corporations, arts community and others seeking creative and lasting solutions to complex issues.

**Value created** – An innovation laboratory that allows for dialogue, experimentation and cross-sectoral partnerships. This will support existing work, increase its visibility, and disseminate learnings.

**Consultation questions:**

- (f) Are you aware of particular local social issues that would benefit from a multi-sector, and/or collective impact approach?
- (g) Would local organizations and institutions gain significant value from learning more about applying these approaches to issues they face?
- (h) Who is focused on systems based approaches, and/or plays a similar convening role?
- (i) Are you familiar with the use of arts and design thinking approaches to generate creative and durable solutions to social issues?

**Key function #3: Accessible space to connect, convene and learn**

**Description** – The centre will be a vibrant, purpose-designed space for dialogue, workspace, conferences, events and training for the sector, and meetings; a hub that supports local social innovation activities and helps give the sector a public presence and ‘home’. While the primary focus is on space for programming, dialogue, and sector events and activities, related organizations and individuals may have offices or desk space in order to promote the continuous exchange of information, and limited co-working or incubation space may be available.

Housing a large number of independent organizations or entrepreneurs is not currently envisioned as central to the model, but notable examples exist in the various ‘Hub’ locations globally (and particularly dynamic centres emerging in the Bay Area of California), or the Centre for Social Innovation in Toronto.

**Target groups** – The general public; practitioners seeking access to knowledge or resources; support organizations needing access to space for workshops, meetings or conferences; incubated entrepreneurs/ventures.

**Value created** – Solving for expressed lack of appropriate convening, program and event space, as well as fostering a nexus of innovation activities where possible and desired; the centre would remain open and accessible, serving and building the sector. Similar to the successful Entrepreneurship 101 series held at MaRS, an accessible speaker and event series could engage the general public, alongside more targeted educational and capacity building activities for those with more experience and expertise.

**Consultation questions:**

- (j) Do you face difficulties accessing appropriate space for your work?
- (k) What type of space, if any, do you feel is most needed?

- (l) Do you think it is desirable or possible to create a centralized hub for local social innovation activities and programs?
- (m) If appropriately designed, could your organization pay for space for meetings, training/workshops, conferences, workspace, or other uses?
- (n) Is a co-working environment to facilitate more loosely facilitated innovation and activity of interest to you? Would Vancouver have enough demand to support a significant new co-working environment?

#### **Key function #4: Research Centre and Think Tank**

**Description** – Drawing on SFU’s expertise and anchored in a very practical environment, this function will i) draw from the experiences of practitioners and entrepreneurs at the centre to support the development of academic theory and thought leadership on social innovation, ii) provide rigor and research to underpin and contribute to centre programming and practice, and iii) produce and disseminate information on lessons learned.

The research centre component is not the central focus, nor a stand-alone component – it exists to support the rest of the centre activities, and those of the broader sector, while maintaining connections to global best practices.

**Target groups** - Entrepreneurs and practitioners seeking research to support their work; policy leaders who require verifiable research to aid decision-making; academic communities generating research and knowledge around social innovation; educators and universities seeking case studies and examples of best practice; students wishing to learn more about the sector.

**Value created** – Rigorous research and academic support for to support the work of the centre and the growth of a vibrant social innovation sector in BC, and disseminate learnings. Strong connections to other global centres will also help two way sharing of information.

#### **Consultation questions:**

- (o) Do you currently commission research to support your or your organization’s social innovation activities?
- (p) Where does the best research in your focus area come from?
- (q) Would additional rigour and academic research serve the needs of the social innovation sector in Vancouver?

## **Made in Vancouver - Potential Strengths, Connections and Areas of Focus**

Metro Vancouver has its own challenges and opportunities, as well as a wealth of successful examples, knowledge and expertise. The centre is expected to have a regional focus, with strong global connections to help adapt lessons from elsewhere to a local context, and raise the profile of Vancouver's own contributions. Early research has already unearthed promising potential connections with centres across North America, Europe, Africa, Latin America, Australia and Asia. Vancouver is particularly well positioned to tap into entrepreneurial sectors down the Pacific coast and around the bay area of California, rapidly developing initiatives in Asia, and leading efforts in the rest of Canada.

The following areas have been discussed as potential strengths in making a Vancouver centre relevant to our community, and a unique global contributor.

**This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and further input is very welcome:**

### **1: Arts and design thinking approaches**

Arts and culture are critical contributors to the fabric, and economy, of the region. With key contributions from Judith Marcuse and insights from other leading experts, a meaningful role is seen for arts and design-based methods in identifying innovative solutions to social issues. The very nature of social entrepreneurship requires us to challenge the traditional boundaries created by professional specialization and social silos. Arts and design practices provide potent ways to unearth new insights, and clarify and balance differing perspectives.

The solutions to many intractable social problems cannot be found in existing best practices or frameworks. Arts and design practices encourage the free-flow of ideas, the ability to thrive in ambiguity, and the creation of new relationships (both conceptual and personal). This comfort with uncertain outcomes also resonates with emerging 'lean start-up' and 'agile' business model development tactics. In very simple terms, having artists and designers involved can encourage risk-taking, innovation and the development of ideas for unconventional and practical solutions to complex problems.

### **2: The 'international city': diversity & inclusivity**

Vancouver is recognized as an inclusive home to a multitude of cultures, and the harmonious co-existence of communities from diverse backgrounds is a unique strength. Many interviewees, locally and globally, identified this as an obvious source of interest, research and innovation. Strong examples and leadership are to be found in various ethnic and cultural communities across the Lower Mainland, and intentional efforts to bridge these nodes and create inclusive dialogue about issues facing our collective communities is of interest.



### **3: Social Finance**

With Vancity's strong role in the burgeoning field of social finance, there is opportunity for experimentation and development of targeted financial innovations, infrastructure and intermediaries to support social innovation. Social impact bonds, seed funding for social ventures, community bonds, and peer-to-peer systems are just a few innovations worth exploring.

### **4: Environmental Innovation**

Whether a more commercial focus on cleantech and green business, the political momentum around environmental issues, concerns about a disconnect in the dialogue around social and environmental issues, inclusive economic opportunities opened up by BC's natural environment, or the relatively strong environmental ethos of the region's population, this was raised by multiple interviewees as a potential strong source and prime target for innovation in the region.

### **5: Other Issue and Focus Areas**

Looking to other global examples, the centre may focus on select issue areas, or act as a laboratory and greenhouse for innovation more broadly defined. Our consultation efforts aim to define 3-5 key issue areas that could be a focus for the centre's 'key functions' as described above

#### ***Consultation questions:***

- (r) What are your general impressions of the above?
- (s) Are there other particular strengths or characteristics of the Vancouver community and the British Columbia region that you think should influence the centre's strategic planning?
- (t) Are there specific issue areas that you believe should serve as initial focus areas for the centre's innovation programming?

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### **THIS COMPLETES THE CONCEPT CONSULTATION PORTION OF THIS DOCUMENT**

More information on preliminary research can be found in pages 8-12 below.

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## Section 2 - Condensed Research Findings

This section presents highly condensed results from a preliminary review of thirty-six well-known social innovation centre models across nine countries globally, and interviews with over sixty local individuals and organizations connected to Vancouver's social innovation ecosystem.

### 1) Global Models

While successful efforts to enable social innovation are invariably customized to local contexts and needs, several elements appear regularly. These include:

- Identifying, developing, supporting and mainstreaming innovative ideas;
- Attracting, supporting and/or funding impact oriented entrepreneurs;
- Building vibrant and effective communities of innovators;
- Generating research and information to support sector development; and
- Providing functional and inspirational space for creation and/or dialogue.

Successful models prioritize the needs of local communities, institutions and/or entrepreneurs, and include custom arrangements of these components, often in addition to others suited to their context. They also capitalize on the core competencies and interests of founding members, key financiers and technical partners.

Our research shows that social innovation efforts fall roughly into four broad models, described below:

#### **Model #1: Social Venture Incubators and Accelerators**

Social incubators and accelerators are experts in social entrepreneur selection, enterprise building and capital provision. Close parallels can be drawn with more (purely) commercially focused incubators and organizations. Incubators support prospective social entrepreneurs through business modeling and planning, often from iteration through to fundraising, although they may focus on one particular part of the business development process. There is typically a primary focus on achieving financial sustainability, with supplementary support for achieving social objectives. Incubators and accelerators may be part of a larger entity, or a stand-alone organization.

#### **Model #2: Think-tanks and “Do-tanks”**

There are a variety of models of idea incubators, change labs, and research, consulting and advocacy centres. These organizations invest in creating and nurturing innovative approaches to social issues, often supporting nascent ideas instead of or in addition to organizations. They may directly support the social innovation ecosystem through research or practical actions, and often exert

influence on key public and private sector decision makers. Some take a very intentional approach to tackling specific social issues, bringing together multi-sectoral stakeholders through dialogue, specific short-term projects and other mechanisms. Grounded in an appreciation of complexity, this process tries to break down silos, looking to get previously intractable problems 'unstuck', and seeking new ways to envision possible solutions.

Academic centres may produce research to underpin social innovation efforts and disseminate knowledge, particularly where work intersects with public policy. They also may prepare academic curricula and case studies, or provide in-depth educational programming. Advocacy focused centers sometimes overlap with research oriented entities, and can facilitate stakeholder conversations on policy and funding related to social innovation.

### **Model #3: Co-Location and Co-Working Spaces**

These spaces and the leaders behind them can particularly excel in diverse community development and the stimulation of new entrepreneurial ideas and connections. Adhering to the philosophy that collaboration drives innovation, these centres and hubs are intended to serve as inclusive physical spaces in which social entrepreneurs can connect, learn and grow. Often membership driven, most of the models we reviewed allow small groups to rent discrete office space while providing entrepreneurs similar access to shared facilities at a lower rate.

Conscious of using physical space to promote an atmosphere of 'planned serendipity', spaces are often animated through facilitated activities and programming to promote dialogue and action, as well as organized and impromptu training opportunities and supplemental development resources. Social entrepreneurs that engage with these spaces perceive value in a uniquely mission-driven community, where they feel especially comfortable, productive and innovative. Co-working and co-location models may also work well with other models and components.

### **Model #4: Virtual Networks and Fellowships**

In contrast to those incubation and co-location programs highlighted above, fellowships and virtual networks cultivate individual social entrepreneurs, support their pursuit of specific social innovation goals, and do not necessarily require in-person mentoring. Fellowships generally provide some element of immediate financial award, in addition to providing skill building opportunities and access to thought partners, advocates, implementers and, occasionally, follow-on funding in pursuit of scaled enterprise. Fellowship programs, often affiliated with foundations, select fellows via competitive processes that evaluate the merit and creativity of

social innovation ideas and their potential for impact, often in addition to such character-driven intangibles as ‘leadership potential’<sup>1</sup> and ‘ethical fiber.’<sup>2</sup>

### **The Process of Supporting and Scaling Social Innovation**

In a more general sense than the specific models and model components we see reflected in international social innovation efforts, those seeking to play a meaningful role in the enabling environment are often able to play three key roles to promote the complex process of solving intractable social issues. These insights help inform development of the Vancouver centre concept:

#### 1) Identify and support innovations

Most social innovations start locally, born in a certain context and in response to certain needs or problems. Some are more ‘disruptive’ than others. One enabling role is to identify impactful innovations that have the opportunity to scale beyond current use, and to nurture their development.

#### 2) Bring innovations from the margins to the mainstream

Organizations with a ‘systems-level’ perspective can convene, build system awareness, support innovations as they emerge, and connect innovations that often happen at the ‘fringe’ to more mainstream actors, institutions and infrastructure.

#### 3) Produce and share information

Individuals and organizations are constantly pursuing all manner of innovative approaches to social issues, but the lessons from success, or failure, often are not well disseminated. To build momentum and efficiency, social innovation enablers have the ability to capture and disseminate these lessons. As a node of knowledge, they can receive information from multiple sources and deliver useful knowledge and insights back to the right actors in the most useful format.

### **2) Local Insights – Vancouver Interviews**

Over sixty local interviews helped us identify potential gaps in existing efforts, and the value a new centre might add. The overall response to the idea of a new social innovation centre was very supportive, with many expressing excitement about the potential alongside reasonable concerns and questions about the various components and actors to be included; the risk of duplication and unnecessary ‘institution building’; and the final ethos, leadership and practical output.

With a significant number of organizations and individuals driving action and discussion the region has every opportunity to develop into a global hub for social innovation that re-envision economic, social and environmental outcomes. The

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<sup>1</sup> Echoing Green Fellowship criteria: <http://www.echoinggreen.org/fellowship/application-overview>, accessed March 23, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ashoka Fellows criteria: <http://www.ashoka.org/support/criteria>, accessed March 23, 2011.

activities of a potential centre can reasonably be expected to intersect with a number of existing organizations, and care must be taken to ensure that this creates value by supporting and amplifying existing work.

Primary opportunities our interviewees helped to identify are discussed below:

### **Convening & Connecting**

The role of connecting between various actors and activities was frequently described as a ‘side of the desk’ activity for many organizations. It is increasingly difficult to keep abreast of emerging programs and activities, resulting in missed opportunities for collaboration and learning, and duplicated efforts, among other concerns. While there is a very tightly connected network of social innovation actors in Vancouver, there is also a perception that this can (unintentionally) be a closed loop to those not already connected. The centre could be an access point, idea hub and knowledge store - a place to anchor initiatives and connect to others.

While there are impressive opportunities to bring people and organizations together around temporary events and conferences, a permanent space and focus could enhance linkages between existing activities and capitalize on their value. Many see a need to tackle complex and protracted social issues in a focused and deliberate manner, or to pursue opportunities for ‘collective impact’ as seen in the Strive model in Cincinnati. The centre can act as a space for this multi-sectoral dialogue and action.

### **Identifying and Scaling Innovations**

Organizations and individuals are continually experimenting with ways to do things better, but often these side projects peter out before reaching potential, or making the leap from local innovation to scalable solution. This in part stems from a broken funding model in the non-profit sector that leaves organizations starved for risk tolerant capital.<sup>3</sup> There is high potential impact to be realized if we can become better at recognizing, supporting and scaling or replicating key innovations. Further, the collective experiments of the sector demonstrate a multitude of experiments and projects that did not work; it would be equally valuable to collect and disseminate this information, so that the lessons from ‘failure’ can be made as valuable as those stemming from case studies of success.

### **Bridging Short and Long-wave Innovation**

There is also a perceived need to help draw connections between the ‘short wavelength’ efforts of organizations working at the individual and organizational

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the limitations inherent in the traditional donor-funded/grant-making capital model for non-profits, see Tim Brodhead, ‘On not letting a crisis go to waste: An innovation agenda for Canada’s community sector’ (2010) *The Philanthropist*, vol 23(1), 3-26.

level, and ‘long wavelength’, systemic, policy-focused efforts with a big picture perspective. Neither is better than the other, but better connections between these layers can help to ensure that the longer-term vision has practical application for those on the ground, and that the hard-won experiences of practitioners and entrepreneurs can be fed back into the long view decision mechanisms of change.

### **Research and Public Policy Support**

Attaching a think tank to a vibrant, entrepreneurial centre is an opportunity for researchers to access entrepreneurs working on nascent ideas and markets. This helps to ensure that these fresh perspectives are infused into academic thinking on social innovation, and disseminated where interesting. This think tank aspect was also raised as critical to help drive ‘longer wave’ sector building efforts, inform policy and government action, and generate fresh thinking and approaches.

### **Supporting Development of an Effective Social Finance Marketplace**

Continued innovative work in this sector could particularly draw on Vancity’s involvement and resources. A centre could act as a more concentrated ‘lab’ for social finance practitioners, while their work could have immediate and substantive effect on social ventures and ideas. Emerging concepts around social impact bonds, community bonds, revenue share mechanisms, crowd funding communities, the complexities of seed stage investing and others ideas could all form part of an active experimentation and practical application practice.

### **Raising the Profile of the Sector**

Although the tight knit social change community has strong awareness of leading social ventures and initiatives, the profile of social enterprise and social purpose business in Vancouver is perceived by entrepreneurs and practitioners to be generally low. Whether in terms of convincing funders or tax authorities of your model, gaining media attention, finding business partners, or pressing for systemic level change, the cause would be made easier by a higher profile movement.

### **Physical Space**

There was persistent discussion of the need for physical space to accommodate conferences, workshops, dialogue sessions and similar events, as distinct from office or co-working space. Several local venues were described as inadequate for current needs, and several organizations identified an interest in appropriately designed space for dialogue and convening work, training and workshops, conferences of 50-200 people (including plenary space and breakout sessions) and other events.