# APPLYING A SOCIAL INNOVATION LENS TO ADVANCING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: THE RYERSON UNIVERSITY LIFELINE SYRIA CHALLENGE

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Social Innovation (SI) is defined as a new combination of practices in the area of social action, designed with a view towards better coping with needs and problems than is possible through pre-existing practices or routines (Howaldt et. al. 2018). While work in this area has tended to focus on driving changes in how we meet needs for health care, education, environmental sustainability, or economic well-being, recent work has explored the usefulness of this framework for advancing goals associated with human rights, equity and inclusion. This brief article offers a case study of the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge (RULSC) through a social innovation lens in an effort to explore how new entrepreneurial approaches can help meet the growing needs of refugees and migrants.

La Innovación Social (IS) se define como una nueva combinación de prácticas en el área de la acción social, diseñada con la mira de mejorar el manejo de las necesidades y problemas, respecto a lo que en el momento resulte posible mediante las prácticas o rutinas existentes (Howaldt et al., 2018). En tanto que el trabajo en esta área ha tendido a centrarse en procurar cambios en la manera en que enfrentamos las necesidades de atención a la salud, educación, sustentabilidad ambiental, o bienestar económico, algunas obras recientes han explorado la utilidad de este marco para fomentar metas asociadas con derecho humanos, equidad e inclusión. Este breve artículo plantea un caso de estudio en el Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge (RULSC), mediante una mirada de innovación social, como esfuerzo por explorar cómo nuevos enfoques empresariales pueden colaborar a llenar las crecientes necesidades de refugiados y migrantes.

L'innovation sociale (SI) est définie comme une nouvelle combinaison de pratiques dans le domaine de l'action sociale, conçue pour mieux gérer les besoins et les problèmes que les pratiques ou les routines préexistantes (Howaldt *et al.* 2018). Bien que les travaux dans ce domaine aient eu tendance à se concentrer sur les changements dans la façon dont nous répondons aux besoins en matière de soins de santé, d'éducation, de durabilité environnementale ou de bien-être économique, des travaux récents ont examiné l'utilité de ce cadre pour faire avancer

**les objectifs liés aux droits de l'homme, à l'équité et à l'inclusion. Ce bref article présente une étude de cas du projet Lifeline Syria Challenge (RULSC) de l'Université Ryerson à travers une optique d'innovation sociale afin d'explorer comment de nouvelles approches entrepreneuriales peuvent aider à répondre aux besoins croissants des réfugiés et des migrants.**

## INTRODUCTION

SI, though becoming increasingly popular, remains an ambiguous concept (van der Have & Rubalcaba 2016). Recent work on "social" entrepreneurship has differentiated processes aimed at advancing social goals and for-profit goals, despite the fact that classic theories of entrepreneurship/innovation do not make this distinction. An entrepreneur is someone who executes "new combinations" (Schumpeter 1934); pursues opportunity without regard to resources controlled (Stevenson 1983); and "searches for change… and exploits it as an opportunity" (Drucker 1985, 1). Defining social innovation remains challenging – the recent *Atlas of Social Innovation*, for example, mapped 1,005 social innovation initiatives across the globe, that varied considerably in their objectives, history, structures and impact (see Howaldt, et. al. 2018). Adams and Hess (2010) distinguish SI from philanthropy in that it harnesses the strengths of communities to improve their condition. Moreover, SI typically involved partnerships "merging ideas, practices and resources between sectors," something that spreads the risks of SI across multiple actors, reducing the likelihood of failure (147-148). Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller (2008) depict SI as not only as a "novel solution" that is more efficient than available options, but one that creates value accrued by a community. Others challenge this, suggesting SI is a neoliberal strategy that downloads government responsibilities to already-strained nonprofit actors (Montgomery 2016). Though gaining popularity as a solution to social problems, gaps in our knowledge about SI remain with respect to it transportability across regions (Grimm, et. al. 2013) and ability to promote systems change (Cukier 2018). Shaw and de Bruin (2013) further argue that large-scale data gathering efforts on SI are required to reliably measure its impact, and to allow for the identification of best practices.

## ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

In this piece, we employ a case study methodology to analyze a prominent SI initiative in Toronto, Canada that has been examined in other existing studies (Cukier and Jackson 2018): the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge (RULSC). We use this approach to identify elements of the RULSC which facilitated its success. In turn, we aim to isolate elements of SI that can be further studied by researchers and potentially replicated by practitioners. Our archival dataset is composed of official documents and news releases prepared by different actors, including: the RULSC itself, the four participating universities, student organizations, community organizations, private sector partners, sponsors and governments. For this article, we have analyzed the evidence over the period of 2015to 2017 to assess actions, statements and responses by key actors over time to reveal the initiative's underlying logics.

## CONTEXT

The Syrian crisis is one of the worst humanitarian crises of this generation, with more than 5.6 million people fleeing the country as refugees since March 15th, 2011 (World Vision 2018). Several countries have taken in large numbers of Syrian refugees during this period, including Jordan (660,000), Germany (530,000), Lebanon (1 million) and Tukey (3.4 million) (Connor 2018). Canada has also accepted a large number (54,000) of Syrian refugees relative to its proximate neighbours, such as the U.S. (33,000) (Connor 2018). The private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) program is a unique social innovation in Canada which emerged in response to the Indochinese refugee crisis following the Viet Nam war. The Canadian government promised a 1:1 "matching" program – whereby for every refugee privately settled through citizen support, the government would fund the sponsorship of another. PSR has served as a pathway to Canada for over 233,000 migrants from 1980 to2016, or roughly 44% of all resettled refugees during this period (Statistics Canada 2016). Private sponsors must provide the equivalent of social assistance rates, distributed throughout the refugee's first 12 months in Canada (approximately $27,000 for a family of 4) to cover basic necessities (e.g. food, shelter). In addition, private sponsors provide support for resettlement including securing housing, finding a job and enrolling their children in school. The primary barriers to PSR are thus financial resources and time. Evidence shows that PSRs are generally more successful that Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) perhaps because PSRs quickly build social capital.

## THE RYERSON UNIVERSITY LIFELINE SYRIA CHALLENGE

In 2015, in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, a group of citizens in Toronto launched the *Lifeline Syria* with the goal of privately sponsoring 1000 refugees. To help meet this goal, a group of individuals within Ryerson University launched the RULSC – with the goal of organizing ten sponsorship groups within the university community to raise $270,000, enough

to sponsor 10 families. The program design was simple: draw on leaders within the university community and its partners to spearhead a sponsorship team. A leader had to commit to donating $5000, and to mobilizing a team to raise the remainder of the funds. Other Toronto area universities joined the endeavor and RULSC wildly exceeded these original goals, eventually mobilizing more than 1000 volunteers, who raised $4.7 million to sponsor over 400 newcomers (RULSC 2018). We theorize that this success on the part of RULSC was due to its ability to 1) employ innovative technologies for crowd funding; 2) tap into resources and established infrastructure while overcoming limitations imposed by rigid bureaucratic structures; 3) leverage and support private sponsors with an expansive network of volunteers, largely students to increase access to human capital; 4) establish effective public/private partnerships to access expertise and resources; and 5) leverage entrepreneurial leadership and culture at Ryerson University.

The RULSC's crowdsourcing approach allowed it to quickly mobilize financial capital, a primary barrier to traditional PRS. Sponsorship teams developed an identity and online profile on a web platform which allowed donors around the world to directly contribute to their teams' fundraising goals. The largest donation, close to $1,000,000, and many smaller donations of $10, generated more than $4 million. The fact that the website was up and running on September 4, 2015, when the picture of four-year-old Alan Kurdi went viral, also drove massive interest and donations. Ryerson University administrators quickly adapted their existing infrastructure to support the initiative, treating each team as an applied research/experiential learning project with funds in a dedicated account. This was critical in being able to leverage the University's charitable status to provide tax receipts for donations.

RULSC was also able to mobilize university students as a source of volunteer labour, while also offering them access to community leaders and professionals, and to practical educational experiences. The Refugee Sponsorship Support Program (York University) affiliated with the RULSC initiative linked 16 Osgoode law students with Toronto-based pro-bono lawyers to provide legal support to assist sponsors in completing paperwork. Students from the Near and Middle Eastern Civilization Cultural Exchange and Support Initiative (University of Toronto) also provided language and cultural competency support for refugees. Meanwhile, OCAD students held an auction with artwork donated by them to raise funds. Students from Ryerson's Enactus group also created a Canadian financial literacy course for Syrian refugees (Carnegie Council 2016). A core of students were also administrative staff who provided central coordinating mechanisms for matching refugees with future sponsors, managing volunteers and information flows.

The RULSC also leveraged numerous private sector organizations to connect newcomers to employment opportunities. This reduced the resettlement responsibilities placed on private sponsors. In May 2016, for example, Ryerson hosted an event to aid Paramount Fine Foods' goal of providing 100 Syrian refugees with employment across its more than 20 franchise locations. More than 100 refugees attended the job fair, and were provided with assistance in applying to entry-level positions at Paramount restaurants. Key to Paramount Fine Foods involvement was a perception on behalf of their CEO that refugees were not an economic liability, but rather, a useful asset. A dozen students volunteered their time to helping refugees fill out application forms at the fair, further demonstrating the role of students in this initiative. Other employers also made a commitment to hire Syrian refugees more broadly, including Starbucks Canada, who pledged to hire 1,000 refugees over a 5-year period (Hire Immigrants 2017). RULSC also worked with Magnet, a job-matching platform created by Ryerson University and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, to link Syrian refugees with employers who had expressed an interest in hiring refugees (Rizza 2016).

It is often said that "culture eats strategy." A critical factor affecting the success of the initiative was Ryerson's innovative leadership and entrepreneurial culture which allowed the institution to move quickly and efficiently. Indeed, reaching an agreement to act on the crisis took approximately 90 minutes of email exchanges on June 17th, 2015, and the time to launch was approximately a month (July 20th, 2015) (Cukier 2017). This agility was key to the success of the initiative. As were the internal processes and approach of the RULSC team, which saw sponsors as "clients" and adapted to their needs to ensure maximum engagement.

## CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the development of the RULSC, several aspects of the initiative that are present within the SI literature stand out as catalysts of its success. We see the use of 1) cutting edge information technologies for crowd-funding, 2) the mobilization of existing resources and infrastructure across varied sectors, and 3) a more "entrepreneurial" disposition on the part of initiative leaders, as key to its success. Combined, such traits allowed the RULSC to make a valuable contribution to the refugee resettlement process. However, numerous questions remain. Is the innovative RULSC model transportable to other universities with disparate organizational cultures and less engaged students, faculty or administrators? Can the RULSC model be as successful in geographical regions where local corporate leaders are not as diverse, and thus, perhaps lacks the foresight to view refugees from an asset-based perspective? Moreover, can the model be adapted to other at risk or marginalized populations in need of support – other newcomers, marginalized youth, persons with disabilities. The PSR model is not without its critics, having been labelled by some as paternalistic (Lenard 2016). Research into these dynamics is essential to understanding the poten-

tial for initiatives like RULSC to be replicated across regions, and prospective scaled.

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