Coop4Equality

Handbook

Cultivating Empathy for Impact in Social Entrepreneurship

This handbook is part of a series that aims to equip social entrepreneurs, organizations, and stakeholders with practical strategies for integrating gender awareness into their work. By fostering a gender-inclusive mindset, we can drive positive change and sustainable growth

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Handbook number 2

Handbook overview

Introduction
This is a set of 5 handbooks on gender mainstreaming and peer-learning methodologies to help Social Entrepreneurship (SE) stakeholders foster more gender-inclusive local and European ecosystems. These handbooks provide practical tools and methodologies for embedding a gender perspective in SE practices. They will remain freely accessible and available in German, Greek, Romanian, Portuguese and French.

These handbooks are part of the Cooperation for a Gender-Equal Social Economy (Coop4Equality) project, funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme Running until July 2026, this project aims to enhance the role of women and gender minorities in the European social economy, fostering gender inclusivity, sustainable growth, and equal opportunities.

Project Partners:
- Empow'Her Global, France
- Nova SBE Leadership for Impact Knowledge Center, Portugal
- Fundația Ashoka, Romania
- Pranado gGmbH, Germany
- Digital Leadership Institute, Belgium
- Stimmuli for Social Change, Greece

This Handbook is authored by
Roxana Lupu, Ashoka România
Daniela Stoican, Ashoka România
Alina Burlacu, Ashoka România

This is handbook number 2. Apart from this handbook you may find information about the remaining 4 handbooks:

1 **Sustainably creating a gender-aware mindset in the social entrepreneurship field**

This handbook aims to empower social entrepreneurs with practical strategies to develop a gender-aware mindset, fostering inclusivity and equity in their ventures. By addressing key mindset shifts and providing actionable tools, it equips readers to overcome barriers and create lasting social impact.

2 **Reinforcing empathy-based methodologies in social entrepreneurship**

The purpose of this handbook is to provide a resource for social entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations, and all those interested in using empathy as a foundation for developing solutions to social problems.

3 **Self-assessing the gender approach when teaching and doing social entrepreneurship**

This handbook aims at supporting and guiding members of support structures and social entrepreneurs with a specific self-diagnostic tool, as case study, and further equip them a 3-stage methodological approach, useful tips, questions and key performance indicators (at external & internal level) that can facilitate them to analyze and self-assess their progress on gender lens integration within their project or initiative

4 **Implementing peer to peer & co-development mechanisms among social entrepreneurs**

This handbook introduces two impactful methodologies designed to foster support and growth among women entrepreneurs: cross mentoring and co-design sessions.

5 **Bringing out a gender-inclusive model of high-growth and scalable social enterprises**

This handbook equips readers with the necessary tools to critically reflect on various aspects of scaling, including the decision to scale, the reasons for scaling, and the methods of scaling. It encourages readers to reflect upon and implement gender-inclusive practices in their own social enterprises.

Summary

Handbook 2: Reinforcing empathy-based methodologies in social entrepreneurship

The purpose of this handbook is to provide a resource for social entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations, and all those interested in using empathy as a foundation for developing solutions to social problems. It will explore how empathy can transform not only the way organizations operate but also how they interact with target groups, communities, and the social ecosystem as a whole.

The handbook is structured as follows:
1. Key concepts
Defining the key concepts we will be using in this handbook.

2. Understanding Empathy: Its Essence and Importance
This section provides a foundational understanding of empathy, breaking down its key elements—cognitive, noncognitive and conscious empathy.

3. Why Empathy Matters in Social Entrepreneurship
The section explores the role of empathy as a fundamental component in DEI and as a tool for driving impactful changes in social entrepreneurship – as defined by Ashoka.

4. Foundations for Empathy in Social Entrepreneurship
Simple practices can be integrated in the daily life and ways of working of any organization, to foster empathetic behaviors – a few are shared in this section.

5. Empathy in Action: Examples from Ashoka Fellows
Ashoka Fellows around the world have integrated empathy at the core of their work, offering valuable insights and methodologies that can be adapted across various contexts. In this section there are some leading examples.

6. Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy
A section rich in practical exercises aiming to train and streghten social entrepreneurs' ability to cultivate empathy through reflection, practical tools, and group discussions. Empathy Map, Privilege Map and Social Identity Wheel support a deeper understanding of how to foster empathy in diverse contexts.

7. References & Further Readings on Empathy
To deepen your understanding, this section provides a curated list of references and further readings on empathy.

Key concepts

Definitions - according to Ashoka

Social Entrepreneurship: The practice of using entrepreneurial qualities—such as innovation, vision, and determination—to solve large-scale societal problems. The focus is on transforming reality for the better, especially for the most vulnerable, by developing and spreading innovative solutions that address root causes and create systemic change. Social entrepreneurship is not limited to a specific legal form: it can be for-profit, non-profit, or hybrid organizations, as long as they apply entrepreneurial strategies to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being.

Social entrepreneurs: People who identify societal problems, develop innovative solutions, and aim to spread these solutions as widely as possible. Their primary measure of success is the scale and depth of their impact on society, not financial returns.

Impact: The positive, systemic, and lasting change created by social entrepreneurs and changemakers. It is measured not just by numbers served, but by the depth and durability of change—especially shifts in mindsets, behaviors, attitudes and systems that address root causes and enable widespread, sustainable improvement.

System: A dynamic set of interconnected roles, relationships, rules, resources, and results that together shape patterns of behavior and outcomes in society. Systems are more than the sum of their parts, are self-regulating, and can be transformed by shifting their underlying structures and incentives.

Changemaker: Someone who imagines a new reality, takes action and collaborates with others to bring that new reality into being for the good of others.

Diversity: Refers to the full spectrum of human differences - across identity, experience, and perspective - being present, represented, valued, and included in all aspects of change-making and community life. This includes, but is not limited to: Race and ethnicity, Gender and sexual orientation, Age, Physical and mental abilities, Culture and life experiences. It is both a principle and a practice, essential for innovation, justice, and building an inclusive world.

Key concepts

Equity: refers to recognizing and addressing historical, structural, and institutional barriers that create unequal opportunities and outcomes. Unlike equality, which assumes everyone starts on a level playing field, equity acknowledges that some people need additional resources or support to overcome systemic disadvantages. In Ashoka, the approach to equity is rooted in correcting past and present injustices so that everyone has a fair chance to succeed and thrive.

Inclusion: means actively creating environments where all people — regardless of their identity or background —are welcomed, respected, and empowered to participate fully. It is about removing barriers, generating accessible and friendly spaces, and ensuring that everyone, especially those who have been historically excluded, can contribute to and benefit from opportunities and decision-making. Inclusion is not about thinking for others, but with others, and making sure their voices are present in shaping policies and practices.

Empathy: is defined as "understanding the feelings and perspectives of others and using that understanding to guide our response." This definition emphasizes that empathy is not just about feeling what others feel, but also about letting that understanding inform our actions. It is seen as both a value to be cultivated and a skill to be practiced in all areas of life.

Empathy is considered a foundational skill at Ashoka, essential for empowering individuals to become changemakers.

Understanding Empathy:
Its Essence and Importance

Empathy: Definition, Components, and DEI Context

Empathy is more than simply understanding another person's feelings; it is the ability to see the world through their eyes, and act with care and respect for their lived experience. At Ashoka, empathy is seen as both a value to be cultivated and a changemaking skill to be practiced in all areas of life – and as such, also a cornerstone of the organization's vision for a world where Everyone is A Changemaker (EACH).

Empathy enables individuals and communities to connect across differences, break down barriers, and collaborate to solve complex social challenges.
In Ashoka's experience, empathy is the starting point for social innovation: it allows changemakers to identify root problems, co-create solutions with those most affected, and build trust that sustains lasting impact. Empathy is also essential for leadership in a rapidly changing world, where diverse perspectives and lived experiences are crucial for navigating uncertainty and driving positive change.

David Goleman and Paul Ekman identified the following three kinds of empathy: (*Source: David Goleman and Bill George: Authenticity and Empathy*)

- **Cognitive Empathy**: refers to the ability to grasp how another person thinks and interprets the world—their unique mental models and perspectives. By understanding how someone else makes sense of things, you can communicate more effectively and ensure your message resonates with them.

- **Emotional Empathy**: is about sensing and sharing another person's feelings. It's as if you can "catch" their emotions, creating a genuine sense of connection and rapport. This type of empathy relies on specific neural pathways that allow us to resonate with others on an emotional level.

- **Compassionate Empathy**: goes a step further by not only understanding and feeling what someone else experiences, but also caring deeply about their well-being. It's the motivation to offer support and show that their feelings matter to you—much like the instinct to care for a loved one or to reassure a colleague, "I'm here for you", or in business "I have your back".

Empathy contributes to creating closer and healthier bonds between individuals, as it allows for more open and honest communication. It also promotes social cohesion; in community contexts, empathy helps reduce biases and discrimination, facilitating an understanding of diversity. Practicing empathy can reduce stress and anxiety for both those who offer empathy and those who receive it, improving mental health.

Understanding Empathy: Its Essence and Importance

The importance of empathy is inseparable from the commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). DEI is an approach that seeks to promote a work environment or society in which all individuals feel valued and included.

Furthermore, a 2015 McKinsey report on 366 public companies found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 15 percent more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians.

For diversity, empathy is essential in recognizing and appreciating diversity, as it allows people to understand the different perspectives and experiences of others. By fostering empathy, organizations can build a culture where all employees feel accepted and respected, even in the face of differences.

For equity, empathy enables individuals in organizations, whether business or non-profit, to understand the specific obstacles encountered by different target groups. Through this understanding, organizations can take action to remove barriers and create policies that support equity.

For inclusion, empathy is essential for promoting inclusion, as it helps individuals recognize the value of diverse contributions and adjust their behaviors to be more open and receptive to the needs of others. For example, through active listening and understanding other's concerns, employees in any organisation can create an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves.

True empathy requires recognizing and valuing the unique identities, back-grounds, and stories of every individual.
It means actively seeking out voices that have been marginalized or excluded, and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in creating impactful social changes.

The Impact of Empathy in the DEI Context:

- Empathy facilitates open and honest communication, which is essential for a healthy DEI culture.
- By understanding the experiences of others, empathy helps combat stereotypes and biases, promoting an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion.
- Organizations that value empathy create learning and development opportunities for all employees, encouraging collaboration and the sharing of experiences.

Why Empathy Matters in Social Entrepreneurship

Empathy is the bridge that connects intention to impact.
In a world facing complex challenges, social entrepreneurs must deeply understand the lived experiences of the people they serve and work with. Empathy enables this understanding, allowing entrepreneurs to co-create solutions that are relevant, equitable and transformative.

Empathy in Social Entrepreneurship
Social entrepreneurs must be deeply empathetic to comprehend the complexity of social issues and work effectively with affected communities. Empathy allows them to:
- Build authentic and trustworthy relationships with people.
- Co-create solutions that are not top-down imposed but emerge from dialogue with those who need change – based on the principle "nothing for me – without me".
- Mobilize resources and people to work together towards a common goal, avoiding the traditional "beneficiary-donor" dynamic.

Empathy as a New Social Imperative
Just as literacy was a social necessity a century ago, today empathy has become an imperative. It is viewed as an essential tool for young people to become effective changemakers capable of solving social issues in an ever-changing world. Developing empathy among young people is vital to preparing them to thrive in their roles as leaders of change.

Empathy as a Foundation for Collaboration
The success of social entrepreneurship depends on the ability to collaborate effectively in flexible teams. These teams-of-teams require each member to have empathy to understand the needs of others and to act not only as leaders, but also as contributors. In such an environment, empathy is as necessary as fundamental skills like reading or writing.

Empathy as a Driver for Change
Empathy is not just a tool for collaboration but also a driver for social innovation. In a world of changemakers, empathy enables social entrepreneurs to tailor their solutions to the real needs of communities. This creates the necessary space for developing more inclusive and effective solutions that address not just the symptoms of social problems but also their deep-rooted causes.

Foundations for Empathy in Social Entrepreneurship

> "Listening is understanding.
> The skill of empathy is a must to be able to listen.
> Then you can listen to people, the environment and sometimes to the future!"
> – Bill Drayton, Ashoka Founder and CEO

One of the most powerful methodologies for nurturing empathy within organizations is the **practice of intentional, reflective listening.**
This framework emphasizes that listening is not a passive act, but an active, mindful process that requires self-awareness, humility, and presence.

Aspects to pay attention to in organizations when practicing listening:

- Allow yourself to be vulnerable and let go of the fear of losing control (when we speak, we control what we say, but when we listen, we cannot control what we are told)

- Recognise the intention with which we listen: practice listening in order to understand, not to respond.

- Practice humility and don't underestimate anybody, everyone can help us grow.

- Identify prejudices and biases that everyone brings that can bring us to erroneous interpretations.

- Pay attention not only to the words they say but to the non-verbal language as well (gestures, tone of voice).

- Practice being fully present or focus your attention on the present moment.

Foundations for Empathy in Social Entrepreneurship

Embedding empathy into an organization's daily life requires intentional actions and consistent habits.

Some practical ways to cultivate empathy within social entrepreneurship teams:

Create Intentional Opportunities for Dialogue:
- Hold regular Team Check-ins and Listening Circles.
- Organize Feedback Sessions where everyone can share experiences and concerns.
- Use these spaces to surface hidden insights and build trust.

Foster a Culture of Curiosity:
- Encourage open-ended questions like "What is important to you right now?" or "How can we support you better?"
- Leaders should model curiosity by seeking input from all team members, especially quieter voices, and act on that input as needed.

Embrace Diversity and Inclusion:
- Value different backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints.
- Challenge assumptions and encourage openness to new perspectives.
- Promote Diversity, as diverse teams are more creative and develop more equitable solutions.

Develop Empathy as a Skill:
- Offer training in Active Listening, Emotional Intelligence, and Bias Awareness.
- Encourage reflective practices such as Journaling or group debriefs to process experiences and improve empathetic abilities.

By weaving these practices into daily routines, social entrepreneurs can build more resilient, adaptive, and impactful organizations—honoring the deeper needs and aspirations of the people and communities they serve.

Empathy in Action: Inspiration from Ashoka Fellows

Empathy as a skill to be trained and nurtured

Empathy is woven into the very fabric of Ashoka Fellows - leading social entrepreneurs recognized by Ashoka for their innovative solutions to pressing social problems. In their daily efforts, Fellows actively engage with the communities they serve, listening deeply to diverse perspectives and ensuring that those most affected are central to the creation and evolution of new ideas. By fostering environments where every voice is valued, they build trust and mutual understanding, enabling collaborative problem-solving and more resilient, inclusive systems. This commitment to empathy shapes the way Fellows lead and inspires others to adopt more compassionate and participatory models of change.

There are various strategies to put empathy in action.

Here are a few examples, sourced from the [Ashoka.org website,](#) based on Ashoka Fellows' models of connecting with their communities:

Experience it.

Empathy cannot be transmitted through a book or a lecture: "it has to be about construction, not simply instruction," says Ashoka Fellow [Mary Gordon](#) of Roots of Empathy.

- Her methodology is based on scientific evidence and is highly innovative; they invite kids from 5 to 13 years old to watch everything that happens to a baby in front of them. They observe the body language, their breathing, the sounds they make. The idea is to perceive and describe everything that happens to the baby: What do they feel? What do they need? What do they want? This methodology has been demonstrated as highly effective for training authentic listening and for strengthening emotional and social skills in children.
- It comes of feeling, intuition, and interpersonal connection. Lasting memories—the product of emotional connections rather than mere cognitive understanding—then become a vehicle for applying those lessons outside of the classroom setting.

Practice it.

"It's not what you teach, it's what you emphasize," says Positive Coaching Alliance founder and Ashoka Fellow [Jim Thompson.](#) Lessons and experiences must be reinforced through continual practice and repetition.

- Athletes who constantly improve both themselves and their team, practice what Jim calls "Double Vision": the ability to take a hard look internally and take responsibility for your actions, and to look around externally, focusing on what's happening with your teammates and what you can do to help them be successful.

Empathy in Action: Inspiration from Ashoka Fellows

- PCA coaches use visual gestures as a constant reminder for kids to put what they've learned into practice. If a kid is sitting on the bench, the coach holds his hand up as though looking through a window, reminding him or her to focus on the rest of the team and ways to help them out.

Measure it.

Empathy is the combination of a number of different skills and aptitudes—the ability to read emotion, to appropriately express emotion, to listen effectively and accept differences, to resolve conflict, and many more—which can be measured independently through a combination of self-assessment, observation, and performance.

- As with any learning outcome, "we value what we measure," says Peace First founder and Ashoka Fellow Eric Dawson. Peace First schools learn to integrate lessons in peace-building across all subject matter, on some occasions, going so far as to include peace-building as a cross-disciplinary subject on students' report cards. Through an hour-long course each week, students learn peace-building just as they would any other subject, beginning in elementary school and going all the way through the 8th grade.
- Successful programs both measure students' empathy along a growth spectrum and connect empathy to the learning process through clear metrics that help teachers track the skill-development of their students.

Treat vulnerability as an asset.

Core to unlocking empathy is creating a trust-based environment, often termed a "safe space"—one where vulnerability is a learning asset, where genuine reflection and emotional expression are encouraged, and where traditional boundaries that separate what's happening at school from what's happening at home are absent.

This means inviting vulnerability, allowing individuals to look beyond narrow preconceptions and stereotypes at the person beyond the performance.

- For example, students at Antioch School of Law, founded by Ashoka Fellow Edgar Cahn, begin classes with an essay about an injustice they were witness to, in which they examine what they did at the time and what they would do now. The first day and a half is spent sharing that story.

Empathy in Action: Inspiration from Ashoka Fellows

Reverse role dynamics.
Where there are imbalances of power, whether between individuals or at a societal level, the side with power has little incentive to practice empathy. Genuine expressions of empathy thus require reversing traditional roles and doing away with long-standing hierarchies, and both sides must recognize they have something to teach and something to learn.

- Through Ashoka Fellow [Christa Gannon](#)'s Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY), for example, police and probation officers switch roles with incarcerated youth in a "mock trial", with dramatic impact on both parties.

Uncover, understand, and deconstruct discriminatory attitudes
Too often, educators and community organizers rely on tools and formulaic interventions to tackle pressing social challenges, without examining the reasons behind their existence, and the means through which they are perpetuated.

- Through the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Ashoka Fellow [Ron Chisom](#) has pioneered a new approach that allows people to put empathy into practice.
- He works with government agents, non-profit leaders, educators, and social service providers to understand the foundations of race and racism and how they continually function as a barrier to community self-determination.

Highlight shared values
At its core, empathy is about recognizing the shared humanity in another: approaching others—be they team members or negotiating parties—as equals, and finding ways that advance the good of the whole.

- Ashoka Fellow [Eboo Patel](#)'s Interfaith Youth Core is out to create "interfaith literacy", wherein members of different faiths understand not only one another's specific practices and traditions, but how the two faiths relate to one another.
- To that end, they use what they call a "Shared Value Methodology," in which all dialogues and shared service projects begin with a look at the values and personal histories participants share, and what they can do to act on those shared values.

Empathy in Action: Inspiration from Ashoka Fellows

Train future leaders in systems-thinking

A common strategy for embedding empathy skillsets across entire communities involves creating transformative life experiences for future leaders, thereby leveraging the "trickle down" effect.

- Following a rigorous selection process, Ashoka Fellow [Rebecca Onie](#)'s Health Leads trains college volunteers to connect low-income patients with the basic resources-such as food, housing and heating assistance— they need to be healthy.
- By working sideby-side with doctors, lawyers, social workers, and patients and their families, students quickly learn to take multiple perspectives, and through active listening, discover how to bridge connections between players in the system.
- The result is a corps of future medical professionals equipped with the knowledge, understanding, and efficacy to identify and tackle the social determinants of health.

Empathy in Action: Inspiration from Ashoka Fellows

Theo Vaes' Approach to Combating Poverty

Ashoka Fellow [Theo Vaes](), elected in 2020 in Belgium, offers a powerful example of empathy-driven social change. Theo's work centers on restoring dignity and self-esteem to people living in poverty, while challenging the societal stigmas they face. Rather than focusing on short-term fixes, Theo builds a case for addressing the root causes of poverty by measuring the social and economic impact of his approach and advocating for policy change.

The "Buddyship" Methodology

Theo's methodology is grounded in empathy and behavioral science. At its core is a two-year "buddyship" program that pairs individuals experiencing extreme poverty with volunteers. This relationship is designed to break social isolation and foster trust, support, and self-worth.

Key Elements of the Methodology
- **Identifying Participants:** The program reaches out to marginalized individuals, inviting them to join and be paired with a volunteer "buddy."
- **Non-Judgmental Relationships:** Volunteers are intentionally selected without prior experience in poverty work, ensuring the relationship is free from traditional charity dynamics. The volunteer's unpaid status reinforces the message that everyone deserves attention and respect, not charity.
- **Volunteer Training:** Volunteers complete a 6-day training program co-developed with experts in social work, academia, and psychology. The Training focuses on:
  a. **Understanding the realities of poverty** and recognizing personal biases.
  b. **Building trust, inspired by the Thinking Environment Theory**, to empower participants in their own decision-making.
  c. **Using Appreciative Inquiry** to identify and reinforce participants' strengths and expand their social networks.
  d. **Practicing the "Together, Not For" approach**—offering presence and support without directing or prescribing solutions, helping individuals rediscover their inner resources.

Impact and Inspiration

Theo's approach yields tangible results: within six months, a third of participants begin building social networks, pursuing education, or finding employment. The program also improves mental health, family relationships, and opens new life perspectives.

By centering empathy and authentic human connection, Theo demonstrates how ***volunteers can become catalysts for change - not by "fixing" others, but by walking alongside them***. His work is a replicable model for social entrepreneurs working with volunteers in any domain.

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

INVITATION TO REFLECT

The exercise can be carried both individually and in your team:

Take some time to reflect or journal on the following questions. We highly recommend to both reflect on them alone and with your team members or stakeholders:

- **Before you jump in to solve a problem, do you and your team or network take the time to listen to various stakeholders and really feel their experience and perspective?**

- **Which stakeholders do you find it most difficult to listen to? What kind of triggers or judgments come up for you?**

- **What does your inner voice tend to tell you about yourself, about others as you listen?**

- **What helps you listen to others more openly?**

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

Self-Inventory sheet: "My empathy profile"
Assess your empathetic abilities by rating how frequently you engage in various empathetic behaviors, using a scale from 1 (rarely) to 5 (very often).

Question	1	2	3	4	5
I listen actively without immediately expressing my own opinion	○	○	○	○	○
I often notice feelings that others do not express directly.	○	○	○	○	○
I am good at empathizing with people who have had very different experiences from me.	○	○	○	○	○
In conflict situations, I try to understand the perspectives of everyone involved.	○	○	○	○	○
I pay attention to how my behavior affects others.	○	○	○	○	○
I ask questions when I notice that someone is not feeling well emotionally.	○	○	○	○	○
I can show empathy even if I do not share the decisions or opinions of others.	○	○	○	○	○
I recognize my own prejudices and work to question them.	○	○	○	○	○

Additional question for open reflection:
- Which question made you particularly thoughtful—and why?
- Was there a question you felt unsure about?
- Which empathic ability would you like to strengthen further?

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

SELF – REFLECTION EXERCISE

STEP 1:
Start from the four levels of Listening described below – based on Otto Scharmer's Four Levels of Listening:
- **Downloading:** Were you listening to confirm what you already knew?
- **Factual:** Were you listening out for new information and ideas that might have been different to yours?
- **Empathic**: Were you listening to understand the experience of the other (and let go of your own assumptions and judgements)?
- **Generative**: Were you listening for the deepest level of truth behind what they were trying to say?

STEP 2:
Think of daily interactions you have in various sectors of your life.

STEP 3:
Reflect upon the next questions:
- *On which level am I most of the time?*
- *What level of listening brought me the most benefits in the past?*
- *What level of listening I want to improve? And how?*
- *What is a commitment I can take in order to improve my listening skill?*

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

ROLE PLAYING

1. Identify a Social Challenge (5 minutes)
Ask participants to choose a real-world social problem they care about (e.g., education, healthcare, unemployment, disability inclusion). Write it at the top of their worksheet. **Question:** What is the social problem you want to explore?

2. Stakeholder Mapping (5 minutes)
Have participants list all the stakeholders affected by this problem.
Question: Who is affected by this problem? List as many as you can.

3. Empathy Interviews (15 minutes)
- Assign each participant a stakeholder role (or let them choose).
- In pairs, one acts as the stakeholder, the other as the social entrepreneur.
- The entrepreneur asks open-ended questions to understand the stakeholder's experiences and feelings.
    - What is a typical day like for you?
    - What are your biggest challenges?
    - How do these challenges make you feel?
    - What would make a real difference in your life?
- After 7 minutes, switch roles.

4. Reflect and Share (10 minutes)
Participants reflect individually, then share in small groups or with the whole group:
- What surprised you about the stakeholder's perspective?
- How did your understanding of the problem change?
- What new ideas for solutions emerged?

5. Translate Empathy into Action (10 minutes)
Each participant brainstorms one concrete action or solution that addresses the root needs uncovered.

6. Group Discussion (10–15 minutes)
- How did empathy change your approach to solutions?
- Why is empathy essential for social entrepreneurs?
- How can you cultivate empathy in your daily work?

Reflection questions Empathy Story Exchange

- How easy or difficult was it for you to really listen without contributing with anything?
- What did you learn about yourself or about empathy?
- What touched or surprised you about the other person's story?

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empath

Reflection Exercise - Social Identity Wheel

Source of the exercise: Social Identity Wheel - <u>Program on Intergroup Relations and the Spectrum Center, University of Michigan</u>

This exercise encourages individuals to explore and reflect on their own identities (such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) and consider how these identities shape their experiences and perceptions.

This reflection deepens empathy by helping participants recognize the complexity of others' identities and experiences as well. When we engage with the Social Identity Wheel, we become more aware of how certain identities may lead to privilege or marginalization in different contexts.
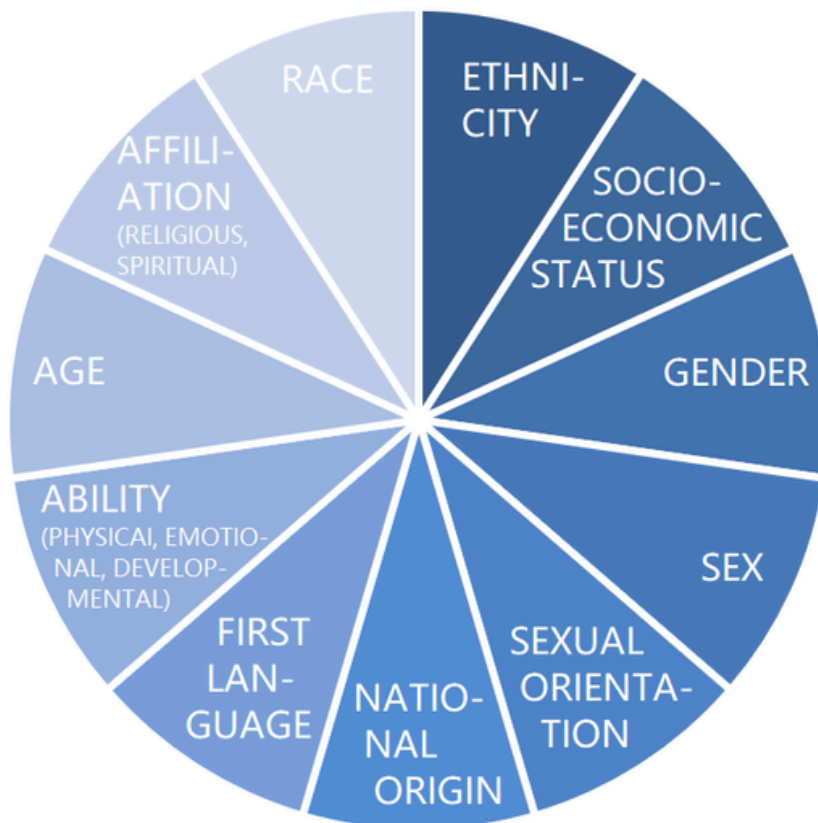
Possible debrief questions:
- How do this identities influence your life?
- How do this identities influence your relationships with other people?
- Which identities are on your mind most often?
- Which aspects of your lifer you consider to be most impacted by these identities?

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

Empathy Map

The Empathy Map is a collaborative visual tool developed by Dave Gray which enables us to better understand the motivations, behaviors, emotions and needs of a user/stakeholder.

Source: Adaptation from Empathy Map Canvas, by Dave Gray

Empathy Map Questions

- **SEE -** What do they see around them?

- **HEAR -** What do they hear people in their environment saying?

- **SAY & DO -** What have we heard them saying and what kind of behaviors we observed them having?

- **THINK & FEEL -** What do they fear about and what are their hopes?

Source: For the entire Canvas, see Empathy-Map-Canvas-006.pdf quoted in Dave Gray's 2017 article.

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

Privilege Map

The Privilege Map is a practical exercise designed to help individuals and teams reflect on the visible and invisible advantages or barriers that influence their lives and work. By mapping out these dimensions, individuals gain a clearer understanding of how privilege operates in society and within themselves.

Unprivileged   Privileged
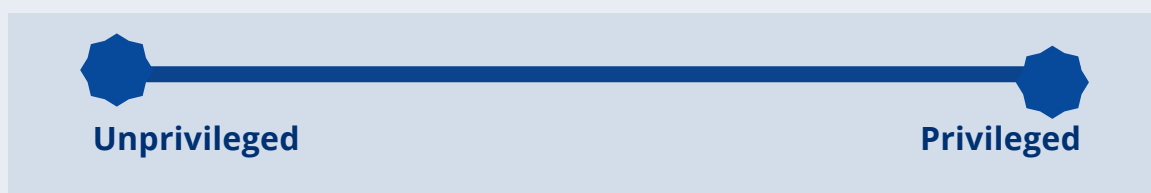
Using the Privilege Map contributes to deepening empathy by helping to understand challenges others face that may not be immediately visible.

This can help social entrepreneurs and changemakers:

✓ **Increase self-awareness** about their own starting points and advantages.

✓ **Recognize diversity** in lived experiences among colleagues, partners, and communities.

✓ **Identify blind spots** that may affect decision-making, leadership, and program design.

✓ **Foster empathy** by understanding the challenges others face that may not be immediately visible.

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

Facilitated Group Exercise

This exercise is designed to help reflect on our personal identities and experiences, and to practice seeing the world through someone else's eyes. By exploring the ways our backgrounds shape how we see ourselves and how others see us, we can build greater self-awareness and empathy.

Step 1: Social Identity Wheel Reflection
- The Facilitator presents the "Social Identity Wheel" to the group:
- Ask each participant to reflect on their own life story and answer these questions (they can write down their answers or just think about them):
  - How do this identities influence your life?
  - How do this identities influence your relationships with other people?
  - Which identities are on your mind most often?
  - Which aspects of your life you consider to be most impacted by these identities?

Step 2: Create Your Empathy Map Persona
- The Facilitator introduces the "Empathy Map" tool.
- Asks each participant to create a persona based on themselves, using their reflections from the Social Identity Wheel.
- Reminds everyone that these personas will be shared with others, so they should only include information they are comfortable sharing.
- Suggest that participants use a nickname or pseudonym for their persona if they prefer.
- Once finished, have everyone turn their persona sketches face down and place them together in a pile or on the floor.
- Each participant is invited to randomly selects one persona sketch from the pile (not their own).

Step 3: The Privilege Map
- On a blank sheet of paper, ask everyone to draw a straight horizontal line across the page and label the left end "Unprivileged" and the right end "Privileged." This is the "Privilege Map".
- Using the information from the persona they picked, each participant should place the persona on the Privilege Map for each of the 10 categories from the Social Identity Wheel.

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

Facilitated Group Exercise *(continued)*

Step 4: Sharing and Discussion
- When everyone is finished, invite each participant to present the persona they have (not revealing whose it is).
- Ask them to explain where they placed the persona on the Privilege Map and to briefly justify their choices.

Note: It is not necessary for anyone to reveal which persona they created.

Step 5: Reflection
- Ask participants to reflect on the following questions, either in writing or as a group discussion:

1. Do you agree with where someone else placed your persona on the Privilege Map?
2. How did it feel to see your persona placed by someone else—whether it matched your own view or not?
3. How might these differences affect teamwork, leadership, or team dynamic?
4. What actions can you take to be more inclusive and empathetic in our work?

Practical Tools and Exercises to Build Empathy

Listening Check-In Sheet

Working in pairs, one of the participants tells the other an 8 minutes story about a very important moment in their life.
There are 3 rules:
1. Just listen
2. No interruptions or comments
3. Maintain confidentiality on what is being shared

After the 8 minutes, swap roles. When both partners finished sharing, each of them will complete the Listening Check-in sheet below:

Presence & Attention
1. How present did I feel while listening?
2. What distracted me (internally or externally)?
3. Did I listen with my whole attention, or was I preparing my own response?

Connection & Empathy
1. What emotions or needs did I sense behind the speaker's words?
2. Did I allow space for silence, pauses, and reflection?
3. How did I show the other person that I was listening (body language, tone, presence)?

Self-Awareness
1. What judgments or assumptions arose in me while listening?
2. How did my own experiences, values, or biases impact what I heard?
3. What was difficult for me to listen to — and why?

Learning & Impact
1. What did I understand that I hadn't noticed before?
2. What surprised me in what was said — or in my reaction?
3. How might I integrate what I heard into my actions, decisions, or collaborations?

Relational Dimension (Social Economy Context)
1. Did my listening help strengthen trust or connection in this exchange?
2. How did mindful listening contribute to fairness, inclusion, or shared meaning?
3. What is one thing I can do differently next time to listen more openly?

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