



SAMUEL CENTRE
FOR SOCIAL
CONNECTEDNESS

Toolkit: Policy Hackathon

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Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a high demand for online events, with many individuals subject to confinement measures or simply uncomfortable with attending in-person events. Therefore, many organizations, particularly those whose programming and advocacy occurred through in-person events, had to be innovative around how to foster comparable levels of dialogue and imagination. Although online roundtables are a helpful format to guide conversation, it was difficult to translate those conversations into collaboration. Thus, the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) decided to host a Policy Hackathon for its Fellows. The opportunity to break out into teams was welcome as both a forum for policy imagination, but also to build connections between the Fellows.

About

Policy Hackathons are a format that originated in the STEM field, where participants would brainstorm, prototype and pitch a creative solution to a challenge over the course of a couple of days. They were often sources of innovation, and ideas borne out of hackathons went on to be developed into actual products or companies. This idea was adapted for the social science context, for similar purposes: to push the boundaries of policymaking.

SCSC's Policy Hackathon was a weeklong sprint for Fellows to develop policy solutions that addressed the intersection between three human rights themes (disability rights, older people's rights and domestic violence issues) and the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed Fellows to go beyond dialogue and become involved in the solution creation process. Fellows had an opportunity to present their solutions to a panel of external judges and partners, who gave feedback based on their expertise and interests.

After the Policy Hackathon, Fellows had an opportunity to revise their final outputs based on initial feedback from judges. This revised output was presented at a series of Roundtables, where Fellows had a chance to talk with experts, activists, students, and members of the community most impacted by the policy outputs.

Stakeholders & Reach

The Community: SCSC has made the concept “with, not for,” a priority for their research and advocacy. Therefore, it was important that members from the communities most impacted by the policy outputs (and with the best knowledge) were consulted and present during the formulation of the Challenge Statements, Feedback and Roundtable process.

The Fellows/Participants: The participants of SCSC’s Policy Hackathon were the 2020 cohort of Social Connectedness Fellows. They were responsible for researching, brainstorming, creating and presenting policy outputs.

Staff: SCSC staff provided support to the Policy Hackathon by contacting external partners, providing resources and guidance throughout the development process.

External Partners: External partners, such as HelpAge International, Human Rights Watch, Special Olympics, Synergos Institute South Africa, and others contributed valuable insight and critiques throughout the entire Policy Hackathon and subsequent Roundtables. They are experts in their field and were able to give guidance surrounding further research to be conducted, feasibility and gaps in the policy output to be considered.

General Public: The general public is also a stakeholder in the Policy Hackathon. Many policy outputs sought to improve awareness in the broader community surrounding these issues.

Over the course of the Policy Hackathon and Roundtables, there were **57 participants** including Fellows, SCSC Staff and External Partners.

“Venue” (Programs)



Zoom

The Policy Hackathon was hosted over a week on Zoom. Zoom was a good platform to host an online Hackathon and Roundtable because of a couple of key features:

1. Reliable and user friendly.
2. Breakout room feature: allowed teams to be split off from the main “room” and collaborate amongst themselves.
3. Other necessary features: share screen, screen recording, “raise hand” function.
4. Low cost: Although there was an institutional cost, it was free for participants to download and use.

One caveat to using this program is that Zoom has been criticized for lax security features. Therefore, if data privacy is a concern, alternative programs should be considered, like Microsoft Teams.

Otter.Ai

Otter.Ai provided a live transcription service (albeit imperfect) that improved the accessibility of the event. Participants were able to follow along by text during the event.

Google Docs/Sheets/Drive

Most of the collaborative work happened through Google Docs/Sheets. Collaboration happens seamlessly here because multiple participants are able to contribute concurrently.

Roadmap to Hosting a Policy Hackathon & Roundtable Series

Preparations

1. Conduct **preliminary research** on the central themes of the Policy Hackathon. The themes should be broad enough to include a diverse range of views but narrow enough to have meaningful dialogue around specific questions.
 - a. The target community should be consulted at this stage to ensure that they deem the research necessary and beneficial to them.
 - b. You can also include stakeholders such as external partners during the process, as they may be able to guide you to resources as well.
2. Reach out to **potential judges** to gauge interest and availability.
 - a. Use a spreadsheet to keep track of who you invite.
 - b. Ensure that you have a diverse panel of judges who can speak to a wide variety of experiences and have expertise in different areas.
3. Determine **format** of policy outputs. Although traditionally, Policy Hackathons require policy briefs, giving participants different options allows them to play to their strengths and different needs. Additionally, organizations may find that different formats better fit with their advocacy goals. Regardless of the format of the output, participants should prepare a slide deck as well to present a summary of their ideas to the judges. The ones SCSC offered include:

- a. Parliamentary/Policy Brief (3-4 pages):
 - i. Contact Information
 - ii. Key Messaging
 - iii. Context: Why does it matter?
 - iv. Background: What has been done thus far?
 - v. Recommendations
 - vi. Rationale
 - b. Infographic (1-page min.):
 - i. Context
 - ii. Background
 - iii. Facts and Statistics
 - iv. Recommendations
 - c. Social Media Campaign (Multiple graphics, banners, videos):
 - i. Context
 - ii. Background
 - iii. Facts & Statistics
 - iv. Recommendations
4. Create **Challenge Statements** for the participants and a **Briefing Package** for the judges.
- a. The Challenge Statement should include sections such as:
 - i. Background: This provides context to your themes and establishes why they're important to address.
 - ii. Challenge: This should be your "call to action". It should be quite broad to allow room for imagination.
 - iii. Guiding Questions: Challenges are often quite broad, so guiding questions can act as inspiration or a starting point for the brainstorming stage.
 - iv. Resources: The function of the resources is similar to that of the guiding questions. They are meant to act as a starting point for research and to inform the participants of key facts on the topic.
 - b. The Briefing Package should include:
 - i. About: Policy Hackathons may be an unfamiliar format to participants, so it is important to include a quick explanation of what it looks like.
 - ii. Theme: An explanation of the theme helps to guide judges in their critique.

- iii. Agenda: A breakdown of the schedule.
- iv. Feedback Guidelines: Judges should be free to provide feedback based on their experiences. However, having feedback guidelines ensures that feedback is in the most helpful iteration it can be. There were [four metrics](#) SCSC Hackathon participants' policy outputs were evaluated on: Clarity, Viability, Innovation and Presentation.
- v. Copy of the Challenge Statement(s).

Policy Hackathon

5. A **Welcome Session** should be held on the first day of the Policy Hackathon to allow participants to familiarize themselves with their teams and the challenges. Here you should introduce the challenge statements, deadlines, expectations, and allow participants to ask questions and clarifications.
6. Anywhere from 2-5 days should be given to participants to brainstorm, research, create their policy outputs. This period of time is longer than an in-person Policy Hackathon to account for potential time differences (our Fellows reside all over the world) and the challenges of coordinating projects online.
7. A **Closing Session** should be held at the end of the Hackathon. This is where Judges will attend and provide feedback and critiques on their policy output and presentation.

Roundtables

8. Once the initial presentations are done, send out **invitations** to a wider network of stakeholders for more feedback. These sessions will allow individuals to engage more deeply about the policy outputs and the theme.
9. Carry out the **Roundtable**. There were a couple of lessons learned from the SCSC Roundtables:
 - a. Introductions: designate time for introductions, but ask participants to limit it to name and organization.
 - b. A strong moderator is necessary to keep the flow going. Ensure the moderator has a background in the themes so they can ask strong follow up questions to facilitate discussion.
 - c. You will need fewer questions than you think. SCSC prepared 5-10 questions for each hour.

10. Follow up after the session is over. Encourage participants to carry on conversations and collaborate with individuals they met at the Roundtables.

Examples of Policy Outputs from SCSC Hackathon

Below are two examples of policy outputs from the SCSC Hackathon. On the left, a social media post was created by the Disability Rights Group to promote their Neighbourhood Ambassador Program. The ambassador program advocates for partnerships between families of/individuals with intellectual disabilities and volunteers. On the right, a social media post was created by the Domestic Violence Group to increase awareness of “The Other Pandemic,” namely, domestic violence that has been exacerbated by confinement and physical distancing measures in response to COVID-19.

