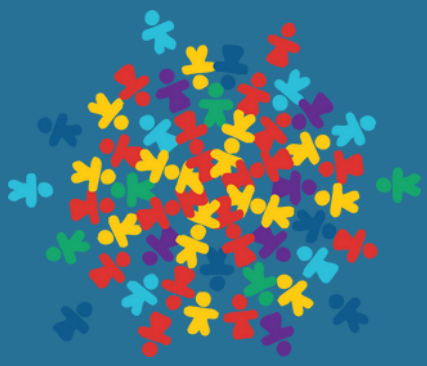
SAMUEL CENTRE FOR SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS



SCSC 2022 Global Symposium

Imagination and Action: Building Systems of Belonging

Outcomes Report

Our Partners

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FULBRIGHT Canada

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OPHI Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In bringing this year's SCSC 2022 Global Symposium to life, we owe deep gratitude to a multitude of actors for their support and contributions. Firstly, this biennial event could not have been realized without the unwavering support of the Samuel Family Foundation (SFF) and Samuel Group of Companies. We are also grateful to our partners, old and new, who have not only been a fundamental part of knowledge sharing within the Symposium but also have been guiding change-makers in our global movement for belonging. This includes Fulbright Canada, Honouring Nations Canada, Human Rights Watch, Misipawistik Cree Nation, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), Partners in Health (PIH), Special Olympics International (SOI), Synergos, TakingITGlobal, and Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement. We would also acknowledge that dedication and spirit of the entire internal and external team, including SCSC staff, Aaron Williamson, Basset Events, and the Globe & Mail Centre staff, who worked tirelessly to realize this gathering. We extend our sincere thanks to our photographers Gabriel and Steve, and our audiovisual team at 5Gear Studio, who were pivotal in capturing and documenting our time together. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge and thank all our speakers and all our participants who humbly shared their knowledge, brought their whole selves, and held space for one another in an inclusive manner.

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BACKGROUND

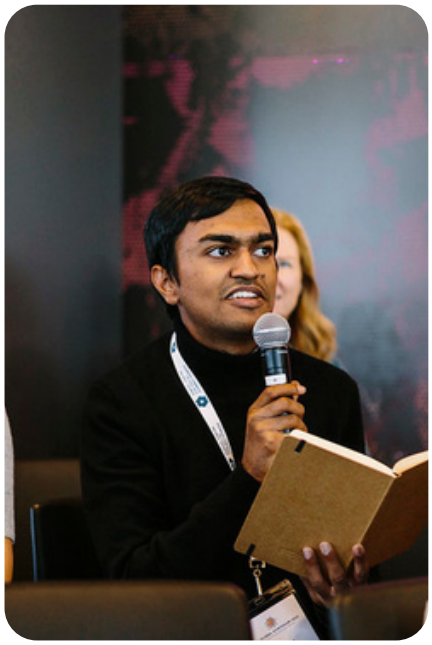
The movement for belonging has been growing since our first Global Symposium in 2014 on Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness. In the opening address of the 2014 Global Symposium, SCSC Founder and Chief Belonging Officer Kim Samuel said, "*My dream for this Symposium is to give vision and voice to the person who feels as if they are sitting at the bottom of a well. The vision to see a way out. To see a future of inclusion. The voice to sing out. And to get others to join in a chorus of inclusion.*"

Today, this chorus has grown. It has expanded to include an extraordinarily diverse group of activists, thinkers, advocates, and teachers, spanning across sectors, all united in a common mission: overcoming the interwoven crises of inequality, loneliness, polarization, and environmental degradation to build a world of belonging. We heard these voices in the 2022 Global Symposium and see them immortalized in the stories shared within Kim's trailblazing new book, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation.*

2. OVERVIEW

On October 22-25, 2022, The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC), presented the fourth Global Symposium dedicated to overcoming social isolation and building a global community of connectedness. This year's theme *Imagination and Action: Building Systems of Belonging* engaged 158 participants, from 75 organizations and 10 countries. We also offered livestreaming which connected over 200 global viewers. The Symposium featured uniquely intersectional conversations and 41 speakers who provided insights and a keen focus on practical solutions. Our conversations explored how belonging and social isolation manifest in 16 different issue areas, ranging from incarceration and education systems to disability rights and Indigenous self-determination.

During our 2022 Global Symposium, the thread of belonging took us from Ideation to Imagination to Action. In imagining new ways of doing, we learned about the importance of dismantling harmful systems and envisioning new ones, and we learned about reciprocity, representation, and inclusion as core underlying tenets when building community. In moving from imagination to action, we learned about the power of education as a tool for decolonization, inclusion, and diversifying knowledge; we learned about partnership and collaboration as they relate to taking solutions-oriented action underpinned by hope. In conceptualizing meaningful action, we came to understand the importance of inclusive and participatory research to shift narratives, strengthen community outcomes and democratize knowledge. Finally, we deciphered what must be present in order to take action and conduct successful advocacy: intersectional and intentional collaboration, purpose, belonging, accountability, and compassion.



IMAGINING BELONGING
KIM SAMUEL
STORYTELLER
INTERVIEWER
AUTHOR
EDUCATOR
CONNECTOR
GRATITUDE
IMAGINATION
WELCOME
SYSTEMS
RADICAL
ACT & IMAGINATION
ISOLATION
OTHERING
COMMUNITY

2. DAILY HIGHLIGHTS

Day 1 Imagining Systems of Belonging

"*When you're not at the table, you're most likely on the menu.*"
- Olaoluwa Abagun, Executive Director, Athena Network

During Day 1 of the 2022 Global Symposium, participants explored gaps and barriers within existing systems, and how these can be addressed to create systems with belonging at their foundation. The diversity of perspectives, fields of study and lived experiences of participants allowed the discussion to touch on a wide range of challenges including those resulting from political systems, colonial structures, education systems, ableism and more. The day's panel discussions raised important overarching themes, including questions related to stigma, access, representation, and accountability. As participants imagined innovative ways of being and doing, a critical question was raised: how can we dismantle systems whilst existing within them?

April Lee, advocate for incarcerated person's rights and member of the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program, believes that individuals hold power. She expressed that you *"...have to imagine that change first for yourself before you can imagine the change for our systems, because we all have to be accountable for what we put in the world and the change that we want to see."* This insight highlighted that action is required at both the individual and institutional levels to realize growth and innovation in our systems. At the individual level, we need connections that build collective power and fully recognize an individual's worth. At the institutional level, systems must take accountability, which should include a re-examination of the impacts and unintended consequences of policies and laws on vulnerable communities, and the ability for these communities to have meaningful representation and advocate for themselves.

Education systems were noted as a critical building block of social change. During Day 1's panel discussion on inclusive education, it was noted that education can be a tool to build more inclusive societies and communities, decolonize narratives, and diversify change-making spaces. It can also be a place of coloniality and isolation, such as for Indigenous youth and young people with disabilities. It was highlighted that for education systems to instill a sense of belonging during fundamental development years, we need to continue the work of decolonizing education so that Indigenous youth can bring, according to elder Ron Cook, their "full selves" to the classroom. We also need to design more flexible education models that allow people to structure their learning in ways that best support them. Ben Haack, Special Olympics Athlete Leader, argues that this is *"not just a nice thing to do, but a fundamental thing to do."* Most importantly, in order to move forward, we must heal those who have been harmed by our education systems. Institutions must take accountability for their harm and work to address it in concrete ways. It is only out of this healing that new frameworks can be imagined, and growth and change can occur.

Day 2 Innovation and Connection

"You can never walk alone."

- Destin Bujang, Co-Founder and CEO, the Black Creek Youth Initiative

The core themes of Day 2 centered around innovation and connection. The day began with a conversation with Kim Samuel, SCSC Founder and Chief Belonging Officer, and Jennifer Hollett, Executive Director of the Walrus, where they discussed Kim's new book – *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation*. Individuals who featured in Kim's book helped to drive the conversation, sharing insights into their lives and work. Through these insights we learned about some of the many facets of building belonging; tackling social isolation, education, community development, and measurement.

Across these facets emerged some of the common threads that weave the tapestry of belonging: reciprocity, inclusion, and working *with, not for* communities. Kim expressed that we must not be prescriptive in our approach to belonging; we must center reciprocity. Loretta Claiborne, Chief Inspiration Officer of Special Olympics International, shared that belonging means not just inviting someone to the table but having them be a meaningful part of the community. The diverse perspectives shared during the opening session set the stage for the day's discussions, highlighting that the work of building belonging cannot be done in isolation, but must center community and partnership, uplifting voices typically excluded from decision-making, while holding those in power accountable.

Box 1. The Value of Storytelling

Storytelling is a vehicle for fostering belonging. It allows us to build bridges and forge common understanding, and is a powerful tool for connection. It is a way of communicating wisdom, valuing and uplifting lived experiences, and, in this context, was used as a means of connecting to voices from the movement.

We heard four remarkable stories during this year's Symposium, shared by: John Pace, Program Associate, Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program; Sethu Xabanisa, Head of Corporate Affairs, Ikusasa Lethu; Eddie Barbanell, Athlete and Global Ambassador, SOI; and, Josina Machel, Founder, Kuhluka Movement. While the lived experiences of these individuals varied greatly, there was a common thread weaved through their experiences: as their stories transitioned from isolation to connection, people and purpose played a critical role in their journey towards belonging. These sessions highlighted that is possible to find light even in the darkest of moments, and that collective action towards social connectedness is a powerful force for change.

In a later panel on innovation and connection, it was discussed that networks, partnerships, and cross-sectoral collaborations are crucial to build belonging initiatives and strengthen impacts at a systems level. It is this co-creative approach that allows individual-level work to be amplified for greater impact. Themes from Day 1 were recalled as participants discussed the importance of modelling hope and healing. Cliff Fregin, COO of Indspire, explained that in community building, it is important to show people succeeding who haven't before; this hope, as Destin raised, is what keeps people moving forward and believing that belonging and change are possible. As Lori Pompa, Founder of the Inside Out Program, expressed: *"people are longing to belong."*

Participants also explored an innovative example of collective action with Honouring Nations Canada (HNC). An initiative of Fulbright Canada, HNC empowers and inspires Indigenous youth to thrive, creates space for Indigenous learning and belonging, celebrates Indigenous innovation and achievement at the international level. This practical example of innovation sparked discussion on tools and models of partnership that encourage action at scale to realize belonging for all.

Box 2. Partner-Led Discussions

The Symposium provided many moments for participants to connect in smaller groups, to imagine, collaborate, and ideate. During Day 2, SCSC key partners led discussions around a topic within their organization's issue area. Across all discussion, imagination was raised as a critical part of change-making. The imagination and creation processes are crucial in any pathway to action; if we focus too much on the output, we miss out on the fruits of the process, such as reimagining ways of doing and operating.

In moving from imagination to the action, there was widespread discussion on how belonging can underpin new ways of working. The conversation hosted by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) brought forth strong reflections on how power – by governments, corporations, individuals and service providers – can present in disparate contexts to simultaneously increase poverty and isolation. From this point of view, belonging requires long term, cross-hierarchical relationships to serve community. Data Driven Enviro-Lab's session similarly reflected that intergenerational equity is key in creating an inclusive and sustainable world. Further, SeeChange Initiative noted how moving from imagination to action requires intentional work with communities to reshape responses to their needs: to decolonize humanitarian response, the group discussed, it is crucial that approaches start within and are informed by community. These, amongst other insights, highlight that actionable methods of community building are what will create lasting and replicable change to realize a world in which everyone has the Right to Belong.

Day 3 From Imagination to Action

"Before we can execute or assign the right to belong, we need to design the fertile atmosphere, which is [that] human connection attitudes need to be changed in terms of how we view other communities."

- Sethu Xabanisa, Head of Corporate Affairs, Ikusasa Lethu

On Day 3 we moved from imagination to action. The day began with a discussion of research for social connectedness, featuring the Samuel Belonging Lab - a newly launched research lab that will aim to redefine what research is and who can be considered a researcher or knowledge producer. The lab will rethink not only what kind of knowledge is produced, but also how we produce the knowledge.

When moving from imagination to action in the research sphere, a core question is how we can translate research to practice and policy that benefits communities. It was expressed that despite many gaps and barriers in academia, research is becoming more diverse, to the great advantage of communities, research outcomes, and academia more broadly. It was highlighted that to continue realizing these benefits and maximizing the research to policy and practice nexus, **research must be led by affected communities.** When groups or communities are excluded from data collection and analysis, social isolation is inevitable. Learnings on the intersection between research and action, and how communities can feel ownership of research outcomes included:

1) Inclusive research requires involving those being researched in the outcomes;

2) Researchers must amplify and advocate for locally-based solutions;

3) Colonized ways of measuring success result in ineffective, prescriptive, and paternalistic solutions; and

4) More focus is needed on intersectional research, so that research isn't conducted in silos, and more people can see themselves represented.

This discussion encompassed what it means to work holistically with communities and move away from conceptualization into actionable outcomes that benefit individuals at every level.

Kim opened the last session by explaining the significance of "rounding the circle of belonging," not simply closing it, which speaks to positive feedback loops and the cyclical nature of the work we are doing. Kim stated: "In any building of belonging [....], it's never one person [...], it's really the whole community." This is a key sentiment that was raised consistently throughout the Symposium: we cannot do this alone. Meaningful activism and building momentum for the belonging movement will require joint efforts and advocacy. Elsie Tellier, a disability rights advocate and law student, powerfully acknowledged that while much of activism is failure, with failure comes the movement, the friendships, the belonging, and the purpose. These are key components of building strong communities that have the capacity to take action. This is the foundation for meaningful change.

While this race against time first invites a feeling of disheartenment, we must remember to shift our focus from a mindset of scarcity to opportunity. And so, in the time we have before us, it is our hope that we can all continue to grow, and nurture this movement to build a sense of belonging for all.

4. NEXT STEPS

Awareness-Building

The Symposium explored the implications of belonging and social isolation across divergent and intersectional areas including Indigenous rights, incarceration, poverty reduction, disability rights, research, education, older people's rights, women's rights and more. We each have a powerful role to play within our networks by sharing messages and building bridges to combat harmful narratives and build inclusive community. SCSC recognizes its role as a convener and thought leader in the global movement for social connectedness. SCSC, its partners and allied organizations can further support awareness-building by creating and nourishing platforms and spaces for individuals to connect, and celebrate initiatives that build community and combat social isolation.

One of the easiest pathways for carrying forward this work is the simple task of spreading messages of social connectedness and belonging throughout our individual and social networks. By challenging harmful stigmas and offering positive stories of hope and belonging, negative and mainstream perceptions can be countered. If everyone chooses to amplify these stories and messages, change will spread beyond the participants present at the Symposium.

Collaborative and Inclusive Research

An important area for future collaboration and advocacy is inclusive research for social connectedness. As we collectively build a body of research centered on the Right to Belong, there is potential to build communities of practice grounded in anti-oppressive and participatory research methods. Many partners and individuals expressed interest in collaborating with the Samuel Belonging Lab as researchers, advisors, and advocates. SCSC intends to harness this momentum to transform ideas into action in the research sphere.

In this respect, SCSC suggests several next steps focused on collaboration. To start, research institutions or organizations can expand or create programs that allow under-represented groups the opportunity to conduct research, encouraging them to lead in the areas in which their communities would be most impacted. Data-based programs, and belonging initiatives more generally, can be re-evaluated to ensure that measurement points are inclusive and holistic of factors beyond conventional measures, such as including belonging or community-based measurements. Many partners also expressed interest in collaborating with the Belonging Lab, which is committed to the above practices, to carry research projects forward. SCSC welcomes the exploration of these potential future partnerships in our work with the upcoming Lab.

The creation of a dedicated mechanism or platform for tracking work on social connectedness is also needed. Annual data could be tracked from all partner organizations on the progress of their individual belonging initiatives. It could also offer space for individuals to connect and share best practices and stories of belonging, generating opportunities for further learning on belonging-centered intersections across various sectors.

Collective Action

100% of participants surveyed post-Symposium reported building meaningful connections at the Global Symposium that will support the development of their work. With the excitement generated around collective action, there is great potential to ideate and co-create for impactful programs and solutions. This could look like, among other actions, integrating belonging perspectives and frameworks into organizational structures, approaches and solutions.

For those in the education sector, next steps may look like the integration of decolonized approaches and materials in education spaces, as well as the integration of unconventional learning approaches that offer flexible learning experiences. For those in the policy and legislative sphere, next steps include centering human rights and belonging narratives and approaches into policy decisions. Co-creating policy alongside the groups that policy most impacts, as well as re-examining active policy for systemic barriers and oppressions, are also critical steps policymakers should be taking.

SCSC intends to support this work through various initiatives to expand learning and connections, such as highlighting best practices and models of success, sharing strategies for engaging with decisions makers and amplifying social media impact, and providing learning opportunities and regular updates, such as webinars, podcasts or newsletters, to keep the conversation alive.

Through the next steps of building awareness on social connectedness, using research as an opportunity to collaborate, and generating collective action through key sectors such as policy and education, SCSC is confident that the belonging movement can be carried forward even more impactfully.

5. KEY QUOTES

"I think these approaches of listening first, of understanding and really celebrating the value of human connection are things that [...] those of us in the movement deeply align with as a value."
- Danya Pastuszek, Co-CEO, Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement

"We exist together, and we are going to fight together for a world that includes all of us."
- Bethany Brown, Human Rights Advisor, International Disability Alliance

"From an Indigenous perspective, belonging is about survival."
- Dr. Kenneth Deer, Secretary of the Mohawk Nation at Kahnawake; Director, Indigenous World Association

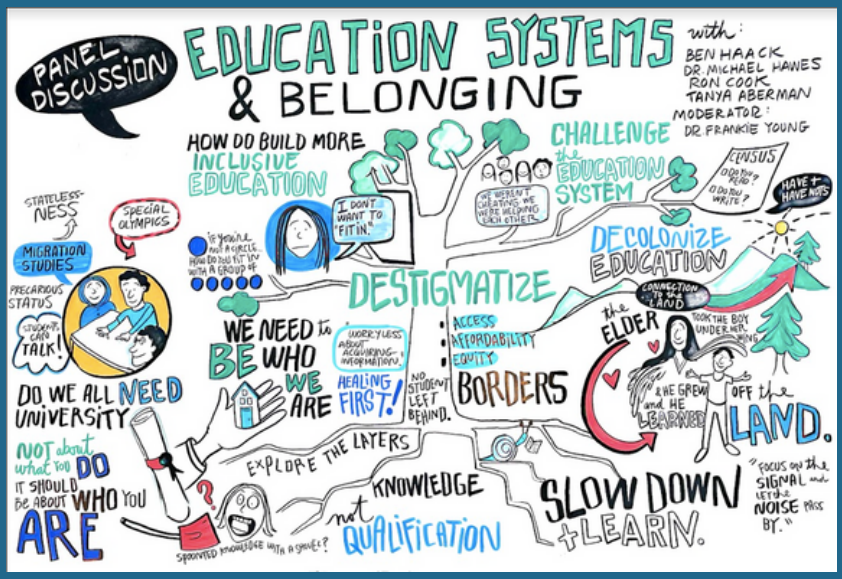
"You can't be what you can't see."
- Aaron Williamson, Global Symposium Facilitator

"We must shift from the ego system to the ecosystem."
- Marlene Ogawa, Country Director, Synergos, South Africa

"I think ultimately, time is just the space that we have to try to grow, and if we don't make it all the way, if we don't become a fully grown tree, that's okay. At least we sprouted."
- Elsie Tellier, Disability Rights Activist; Articling Student, Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General

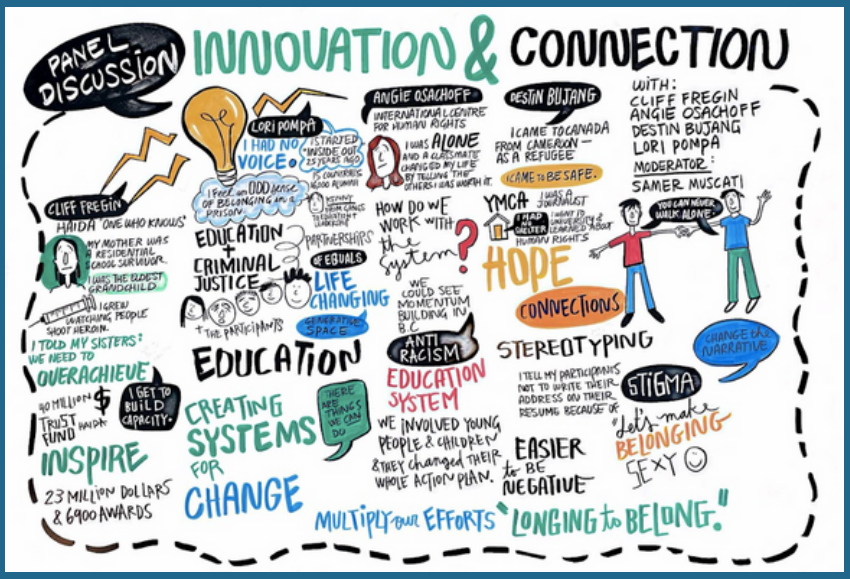
DAY 1 PANEL: IMAGINING SYSTEMS OF BELONGING

DAY 1 PANEL: EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND BELONGING



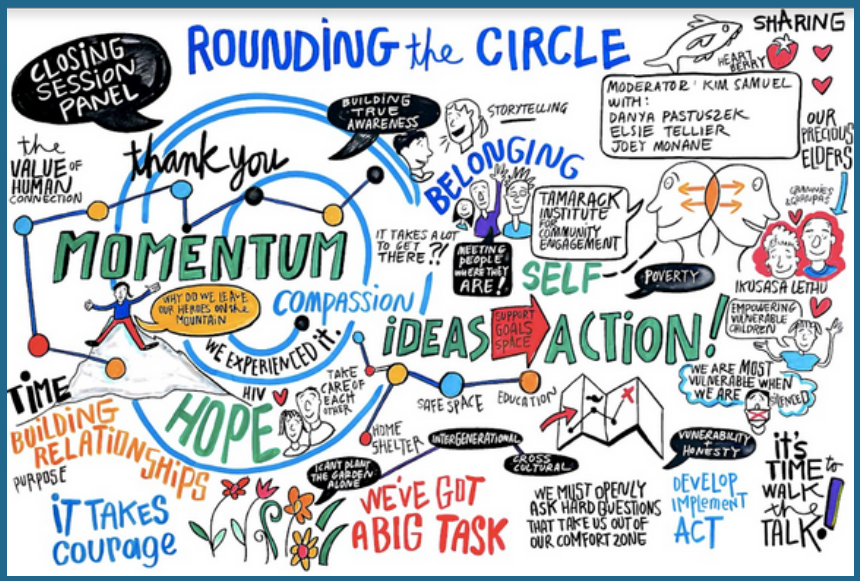
DAY 2 PANEL: IN CONVERSATION WITH KIM SAMUEL

DAY 2 PANEL: INNOVATION AND CONNECTION



DAY 3 PANEL: FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

DAY 3 PANEL: ROUNDING THE CIRCLE



We would love to hear from you! Please get in touch with any thoughts, reflections or feedback this report evokes.

We thank you for your continued support in our collective efforts to build the global movement for social connectedness.

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