



Finding Your North Star

**Building a Regional
Social Enterprise Ecosystem**



“

Being an entrepreneur means waking up every day with motivation, even when it's hard. You have to be willing to look a little crazy and still show up—because at the end of the day, you ask yourself, 'Was it worth it? Can I do this again tomorrow?' And the answer has always been yes.

Urban Veronique
V's Coffee, NorthSTAR Participant

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Glossary of Terms and Definitions



Blended Finance

Financing structures that use a combination of capital from public, private, and/or philanthropic sources, often to lower the overall cost of capital and provide risk mitigation for private capital.

Debt Financing

Funding that is provided to an organization in the form of a loan or a similar instrument that requires repayment over time.

Equity Financing

Funding that is provided to an organization in the form of an ownership stake in the company that is not directly paid back by the company. Returns are based on the growth/scaling of the company.

Financial Capital

Monetary resources used for the creation or expansion of a business or enterprise, such as cash, loans, grants, or equity (venture capital and/or private equity).

Holistic Solution

Tailored services and resources that address the entirety of the entrepreneurial needs of the community by providing access to financial, intellectual, and social capital.

Impact Investors

Investors who look to achieve social or environmental impact in addition to a financial return on their investments.

Impact Measurement Framework

The processes by which impact metric data are collected and analyzed.

Impact Metrics

Qualitative and quantitative metrics that are used to demonstrate the socioeconomic impact of an organization's activities on the target population.

Impact Thesis

Foundational document that provides strategic clarity on the theory of change and acts as the defining narrative for the intended impact of the organization.

Intellectual Capital

The knowledge, experience, and other intangible resources that can be used to create economic opportunities.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Metrics and indicators that help assess the effectiveness of an organization at accomplishing key internal tasks and achieving goals.

Market-Based Approach

Indicates that the activity or organization relies on principles of supply and demand, and requires minimal intervention from governments or philanthropies to function effectively.

Monetization

The act of assigning a fiscal or economic value to activities or outcomes.

Onboarding/Offboarding

The process by which participants or partner organizations formally enter or exit the ecosystem.

Place-Based Strategy

Deliberately focused on a specific geographic area, with partners, services, and programs experienced in and designed to address the needs of the community while utilizing the assets and resources located within the community.

Private Markets

Financial markets where capital and securities are not publicly accessible and are restricted to specific types of investors or organizations.

Public Markets

Financial markets where capital and securities are widely accessible i.e. listed through public exchanges, providing investors with easy access and liquidity.

Productivity

The economic and financial output and efficiency of an individual, organization, or community.

Qualitative Data

Non-numerical data, such as results from interviews and focus groups.

Quantitative Data

Numerical data.

Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystem

A place-based partnership between trusted community organizations, local residents, government, and funders to provide holistic social entrepreneurship programs and resources.

Service Provider

An organization that implements the activities of the ecosystem within the target community.

Social/Economic Mobility

The ability of individuals or communities to improve their economic or social status over time.

Social Capital

Relationships and networks that provide access to information, support, and economic opportunities.

Social Enterprise

A mission-driven organization that operates as a self-sustaining business and prioritizes social or environmental impact in addition to profit.

Social Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs starting a social enterprise and those from under resourced and under-resourced communities.

Socioeconomic

Factors that influence the social and economic experience of an individual or community.

Underrepresented and Under-Resourced Communities

Communities that lack the same access to entrepreneurial resources and opportunities when compared to other, often more wealthy and less diverse, communities.



Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Regions across the country struggle to properly support and develop their social entrepreneurs, particularly those from underrepresented and under-resourced communities.

Even areas with substantial entrepreneurship resources often find themselves unable to effectively direct these resources equitably, resulting in an entrepreneurship bubble that lacks diversity in representation, ideas, and lived experience. By leaving the underrepresented communities as an untapped segment of the market, communities are missing out on ideas and social enterprises that have the potential to revolutionize their regions and catalyze greater financial development within their communities. But these social entrepreneurs often face systemic barriers in accessing the types of capital, both financial as well as intellectual and social, necessary to launch their social enterprises. Social entrepreneurs from all backgrounds need access to regional financial and entrepreneurial-ecosystems that can connect them to the capital they need and increase their access to networks from which they were previously excluded. Increased accessibility to new and existing networks allows entrepreneurs to overcome systemic barriers discouraging entrepreneurship, improve income and wealth equality, and catalyze the social enterprise market to benefit underrepresented and under-resourced communities.

180+
New Businesses Created

Through the First Year of the Pilot
Within Orange County

The NorthSTAR (Systems to Access Resources) regional social enterprise ecosystem launched in 2022 and was designed to build an ecosystem that would address these barriers in north Orange County, California. NorthSTAR succeeded in bringing together a diverse network of social enterprise resources and community-based organizations to build a thriving, regional social enterprise development ecosystem while also creating pathways to entrepreneurship, particularly social entrepreneurship, for under-resourced communities. Through the first year of the pilot, **over 180 new businesses** were created within Orange County.

This playbook presents an overview of the opportunity posed by regional social enterprise ecosystems, the societal issues that they address, and details the successes and challenges faced by the NorthSTAR model in its pilot. We then provide a guide for how other organizations, interested in pursuing the same opportunities in their regions, can build and launch their own regional social enterprise ecosystem, including identifying the ecosystem’s impact and crafting its vision, finding implementation partners and funding, and crafting a data collection and analysis framework. Finally, the playbook explores the future of the NorthSTAR ecosystem and provides recommendations to scale the size and impact of the success of the pilot.





The Need for Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystems



The Need for Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystems

The Opportunity

A regional social enterprise ecosystem is a model that can simultaneously cultivate social entrepreneurship to address society's most pressing challenges and drive economic development to a broader population. This model was pioneered by RevHubOC through their innovative NorthSTAR partnership, which is discussed in more detail in **Section 3**. Such an approach to developing social entrepreneurship can act as a catalyst to drive both social and economic impact for underserved communities and provide a more inclusive form of capitalism.



Fundamentally, a regional social enterprise ecosystem is a **place-based** partnership between trusted community organizations, local residents, government, and funders to provide holistic social entrepreneurship programs and resources.

What do we mean by “place-based”?

- ✓ Deliberately focused on a specific geographic area
 - Geographic area can be defined as a neighborhood, a city or a county. Dependent on the scope and ambition of the initiative.
- ✓ Core partners include trusted organizations with a history of working with the local community
- ✓ Programs, services, and resources are designed to address needs and priorities of the community residents
- ✓ Ecosystem leverages unique strengths and assets of the local economy

What do we mean by “holistic”?

- ✓ Provides access to the three essential types of capital for successful entrepreneurship: intellectual, social, and financial capital
- ✓ Tailors programming, services, and resources to the unique needs of social entrepreneurs and their dual purpose of impact and financial sustainability

IMPORTANCE OF PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

Research by economist Raj Chetty shows that long-term outcomes and social mobility of children are highly dependent on the neighborhoods in which they grow up. The implication of this research is that truly meaningful progress on community outcomes, things that meaningfully impact the social and economic determinants of community wellbeing, requires changemakers to account for the system and social dynamics at the neighborhood level. Therefore, designing and concentrating social enterprise ecosystems within specific communities has the ability to boost social cohesion and increases the chances that local solutions emerge to effectively address local problems.

Moreover, a regional social enterprise ecosystem amplifies existing resources within a region by coalescing them within a larger network while also connecting them to the broad array of potential social entrepreneurs within that community. The ecosystem becomes the central hub for social enterprises within its region, acting as the consolidation nexus of knowledge and opportunities for the sector and the primary entry point for community members interested in social enterprises and entrepreneurship broadly.

MAKING REGIONAL SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ECOSYSTEMS ACCESSIBLE

When designing and implementing regional social enterprise ecosystems, partners within the ecosystem should ensure that they are enabling access for communities that have experienced persistent inequities in society. Ensuring inclusivity when designing a social enterprise ecosystem is essential to breaking the status quo of exclusion and promoting social entrepreneurship across all backgrounds. Legal and illegal discrimination throughout U.S. history led to vast disparities in socioeconomic outcomes for certain groups, including women and Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and Hispanic communities. Members of these groups have far less representation across positions of power in society and frequently face increased barriers in becoming entrepreneurs and accessing necessary resources. We broadly refer to members of low-income or marginalized groups in this playbook as underrepresented and under-resourced.

What do we mean by “underrepresented and under-resourced communities”?

- ✓ Low-income individuals and families
- ✓ Individuals and families living in areas of high poverty
- ✓ Women
- ✓ Individuals who belong to any race and ethnicity combination other than non-Hispanic and white
- ✓ Members of the LGBTQ+ community
- ✓ Immigrant communities
- ✓ Communities with limited or lacking connections to educational opportunities
- ✓ Communities with limited options for gainful employment



Underrepresented and under-resourced communities have long experienced barriers accessing and utilizing the different types of “capital”—intellectual, social, and financial—needed to become successful entrepreneurs. Similar to the experience of social entrepreneurs, the low percentage of underrepresented entrepreneurs in society leads to fewer networking and mentorship opportunities with others from underrepresented backgrounds. Accessing intellectual capital via higher education is also more challenging for these groups. According to a 2024 report from the Pell Institute, while women have surpassed men in earning bachelor’s degrees in recent years, there remains persistent inequality in degree attainment across family income levels. Representation of Black and Hispanic individuals among recipients of postsecondary degrees has improved over time, but these communities remain underrepresented relative to their percentages within the U.S. population.

Several studies illustrate the disparities faced by underrepresented entrepreneurs in accessing financial capital as well. A 2022 report from McKinsey found that Black and Latino startup founders received just 1% and 1.5% of total venture capital funding in the United States, respectively, and women founders received only 1.9%. Between 2000 and 2022, LGBTQ+ founders received 16% less funding when compared to the average founder. Even when ethnically underrepresented founders are successful, compared to start-ups owned by white men, their businesses receive 57% less total funding across all funding stages from pre-seed to exit. As for debt financing, the 2022 FED small business report on employer firms found that small businesses owned by individuals of an underrepresented race or ethnicity were half as likely to receive the full amount of financing sought than those owned by non-Hispanic white owners.

All of this aligns to showcase that these communities are under-resourced in the most literal sense of the word and that addressing this resource distribution gives these communities access to social entrepreneurship. **Deliberately directing programs and resources to underrepresented and under-resourced communities is a way to increase the accessibility and the impact of regional social enterprise ecosystems.** This approach aligns with the ecosystems’ place-based focus, which should spur partners to gain a robust understanding of local demographics, associated disparities, and the systems and history that produced them. Making regional social enterprise ecosystems fully accessible to underrepresented and under-resourced communities effectively means committing to not perpetuate systemic disparities.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ACCESSIBLE REGIONAL SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ECOSYSTEM IN PRACTICE?



Leaders who are proximate to the communities and issues they serve have the experience, relationships, data, and knowledge that are essential for developing solutions with measurable and sustainable impact.

Excerpt from *Effective Change Requires Proximate Leaders* by
Dr. Angela Jackson
Founder of Future Forward Strategies
Tulaine Montgomery
CEO of New Profit
John Kania
Executive Director of the Collective Change Lab

To start, it means prioritizing the ecosystem partner organizations that have a long history of building trust with local underrepresented and under-resourced communities. It means conducting meaningful community engagement to center community residents’ needs and priorities in the planning and decision-making for the ecosystem. An accessible ecosystem also invites and supports individuals from these communities to explore entrepreneurship regardless of where they are at in that process, even if they had not considered it previously. In programs, resources, and events, ecosystem partners can purposefully spotlight successful entrepreneurs from underrepresented and under-resourced communities to inspire participants and create mentorship opportunities. A regional social enterprise ecosystem can also expand access in practical ways such as offering certain programs in the evening to accommodate individuals with day jobs or providing scholarships, transportation stipends, or free coworking space.

There are additional benefits to purposefully making regional social enterprise ecosystems accessible beyond simply addressing social disparities. These ecosystems open up the opportunity for communities to access groups of potential entrepreneurs that are frequently overlooked by the traditional entrepreneurship development sector. By tailoring the ecosystem both to a specific geographic area and to specific communities in that area, partners are prioritizing the development of local leaders and committing to the evidence-based concept that those who are closest to the problem, those with lived experiences, are best positioned to develop the solution. This can also lead to more meaningful peer-learning opportunities, as budding social innovators who already share a connection to place may be able to more openly learn from similarities and differences in each other’s identities and lived experiences.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Traditional public and social sector approaches are struggling to address socioeconomic and environmental challenges in the United States at the scale and speed required. Despite rising productivity over the past 50 years, real wages for most Americans have stagnated, and the poverty rate has not improved. In recent years, rising costs of housing, healthcare, childcare, and higher education have deepened financial strain and hindered wealth accumulation for many. These factors have contributed to a surge in income and wealth inequality with a decrease in social and economic mobility. At the same time, climate change and environmental degradation increasingly demand innovative, scalable solutions to drive meaningful progress.



The Social Enterprise World Forum has outlined **five key characteristics of a social enterprise:**

- 1. Purpose: Exists to solve a social and/or environmental problem
- 2. Operations: Prioritizes purpose, people, and planet over profit in operational decisions
- 3. Revenue: Has a self-sustaining revenue model
- 4. Use of surplus: Reinvests the majority of any surplus towards its purpose
- 5. Structure: Chooses legal structures and financing that protect and lock-in purpose long-term

Social enterprise and the entrepreneurs that are behind them present an exciting opportunity to effectively address these social and environmental challenges in a scalable and sustainable way. By leveraging market-based approaches, social enterprises are able to boost economic development in under-resourced regions in a sustainable manner that breaks free from traditional impact-oriented organizational structures that are often reliant on philanthropy for operational longevity. Social enterprises can be structured as for-profit or non-profit entities, and their founders are known as social entrepreneurs.



A **social enterprise** is a mission-driven organization that operates as a self-sustaining business and prioritizes social or environmental impact over profit.

Social entrepreneurs need targeted support to accelerate the growth of their enterprises, and social entrepreneurship can be cultivated in ways similar to traditional entrepreneurship. However, to do so effectively, methods and resources should be tailored to the unique needs of the social enterprise model. These methods and resources should also be grounded in the three types of capital that all entrepreneurs need to launch successful enterprises: intellectual, social, and financial.

Type of Capital	Definition
Intellectual capital	The knowledge, experience, and other intangible resources that can be used to create economic opportunities.
Social capital	Relationships and networks that provide access to information, support, and economic opportunities.
Financial capital	Monetary resources such as cash, loans, grants, venture capital, private equity, and crowdfunding.



Challenges and Opportunities Unique to Social Entrepreneurship



Social entrepreneurs represent just 3% of businesses worldwide, according to a 2024 report by the World Economic Forum, and the entrepreneurs that found them often face barriers accessing the information they need to launch their enterprises, which can in turn reduce their belief in their own capacity to make an impact. This confidence can be built through access to intellectual and social capital, however, traditional pathways for acquiring intellectual and social capital in the United States, such as higher education, do not currently provide information or resources specific to social entrepreneurship. Over the past two decades, a growing number of community organizations, universities, incubators, and accelerators have developed education, training, and technical assistance programs for social entrepreneurs. However, these programs are still far less common than those dedicated to general entrepreneurship.

Examples of Social Entrepreneurship Programs Around the World

- ✓ [City Startup Labs](#)
- ✓ [Duke University's Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship \(CASE\)](#)
- ✓ [ICA Fund](#)
- ✓ [IKEA Social Entrepreneurship Program](#)
- ✓ [Pepperdine's Masters of Social Entrepreneurship and Change](#)
- ✓ [SEA Change](#)

For more information about how these programs embody social entrepreneurship, refer to **Section 2**.



Job experience is another avenue for gaining intellectual and social capital, but the limited number of social enterprises restricts job opportunities for individuals to build nuanced expertise and relationships in the field. As a result, social entrepreneurs can face a higher barrier to growing networks of peers and mentors who could support the development of their startups. Research from the tech industry has shown that having mentors who have already achieved success in the same field can help founders be up to three times more successful than their peers.

The dual purpose of social enterprise, which requires balancing mission-driven impact with financial sustainability, calls for specialized knowledge and expertise. Understanding how to navigate complex legal and regulatory pathways, for example, can be challenging for social entrepreneurs without the proper support. States have differing regulations and various types of legal structures a social enterprise can assume, from standard nonprofit or for-profit structures to hybrid structures such as benefit corporations or L3Cs. Additionally, frameworks for measuring and monetizing impact are still nascent, and finding support for implementation can be costly for social entrepreneurs.

When it comes to financial capital, social entrepreneurs face a relatively small pool of potential investors when compared to traditional enterprises. While impact investing has been steadily growing, it remains a niche market. With approximately \$1.6 trillion in assets under management, the Global Impact Investing Network estimates that the global impact investing market represents less than 1% of total assets under management in public and private markets. Financial returns for social enterprises are often lower and take longer to realize compared to what traditional investors demand. For this reason, social enterprises are sometimes funded through more complex blended finance structures that combine grants or other forms of concessionary capital with market-rate investments.

All of these points demonstrate the substantial opportunity that exists across America to organize their resources in an ecosystem to catalyze social entrepreneurs within underrepresented and under-resourced communities. With the broad goal of cultivating social entrepreneurship and upward social mobility within local communities, RevHub piloted a regional social enterprise ecosystem in northern Orange County, California, that resulted in thousands of individuals engaged in entrepreneurship activities and over 180 new businesses established in the first year of the pilot. **Section 3** provides an overview of their approach and results. **Section 2** details the process for establishing a regional social enterprise ecosystem within your community based upon the lessons learned from the NorthSTAR pilot as well as other similar initiatives across the world.



02

Designing a Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystem



Designing a Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystem

If you are considering establishing a regional social enterprise ecosystem in your community, this section offers guidelines and examples rooted in lessons learned from the NorthSTAR pilot as well as research on best practices from comparable initiatives. The guidelines herein are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive. Rather, they are meant to be flexible and applicable to a wide range of circumstances. Every regional social enterprise ecosystem will be unique based on the local needs, partners, economy, and additional context. Whether you are part of a community-based nonprofit or local government agency, live in a rural town or a big city, are new to social entrepreneurship or well versed, we hope you will discover insights that help advance social innovation in your community.

In the following subsections, we have compiled guidelines, spotlighting lessons learned from NorthSTAR and best practices from other entrepreneurship models.

We recommend six key activities for designing a regional social enterprise ecosystem, including:

- ✓ Establishing a core team and vision
- ✓ Clarifying local needs and priorities
- ✓ Tailoring activities to local priorities and strengths
- ✓ Funding the ecosystem
- ✓ Formalizing the ecosystem
- ✓ Measuring impact and performance

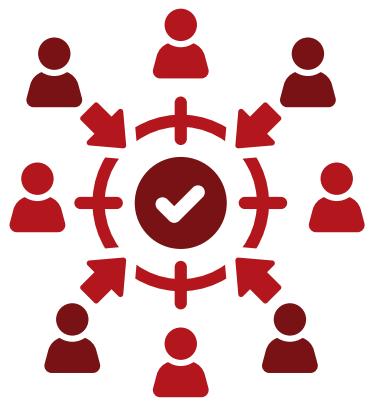


We recognize that the process of developing a regional social enterprise ecosystem will differ across partnerships and locales, so these activities may not necessarily take place sequentially.

Establishing A Core Team & Vision

An ecosystem fundamentally represents a place-based network of stakeholders united by a shared vision to facilitate the flow of resources in novel and productive ways. While larger organizations, such as universities or government agencies, may have the capacity to develop large portions of a regional social enterprise ecosystem on their own, establishing a team of core partners and involving them in collaboratively crafting the vision in the early planning phase is likely to be more effective for smaller organizations or those new to the

As one of its initial steps, RevHub recruited a small group of six local community partners who worked together to identify local needs, plan activities, collect baseline data, and define NorthSTAR's theory of change. The core partner group then brought on additional partners to shore up expertise and activity gaps based on the identified needs, with the core partners also providing key services.



ecosystem space. This approach not only builds essential trust and buy-in among partners but also fosters a sense of accountability across the collaborative as it establishes them as co-owners of the ecosystem strategy. Both NorthSTAR partners and numerous organizations that have launched similar entrepreneurial ecosystems emphasize that early partner buy-in and alignment on the vision are critical to the success and longevity of the collaborative.

INCLUDE TRUSTED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CORE TEAM

One of the most significant advantages of assembling a group of core partners early on is the additional perspectives and relationships they bring to the planning and designing of the ecosystem. For this reason, we recommend prioritizing core partners who have experience working with and are trusted by the local community that you are looking to target with your ecosystem. The knowledge and relationships of these partners will greatly enhance the processes of identifying specific community needs the ecosystem could address, onboarding additional partners, and recruiting participants. Finding these organizations to partner with is crucial and becomes much easier if you are already engaged in the entrepreneurship and social enterprise sector within your community. When selecting these partners, it can be helpful to create a checklist of criteria to consider in order to ensure that your ecosystem is composed of partners best positioned to fulfill the goals of the ecosystem. These criteria will vary from project to project and should be heavily influenced by the community your ecosystem is looking to serve, but consideration should be given to organizations that have experience and expertise in working with entrepreneurs, social enterprises, and the target communities, while also having the organizational and technical capacity to participate in the ecosystem as a fully engaged founding partner. Additional criteria we suggest you keep in consideration for choosing ecosystem partners are detailed later in this section.

DRAFT A SHARED VISION WITH STAKEHOLDER INPUT

After you establish your core team, you will then need to define the vision and purpose of your ecosystem. During the vision-development phase, it's an excellent time to engage various stakeholders, including core partners and outlying community organizations. Community engagement cannot be left out at this stage—this is the best point to leverage the connections and expertise your core partners have with the community's needs.

Through this process, ask yourself, your core partners, and other stakeholders to consider the following:

- ✓ What groups need to be prioritized from the outset of the ecosystem?
- ✓ What specific challenges do those groups face?
- ✓ Which local industries and companies should be included?
- ✓ How will partner organizations' expertise be leveraged to address challenges identified in the community?
- ✓ What types of capital (intellectual, financial, social) are most needed to overcome those challenges?
- ✓ Which desired outcomes and impacts will result from your ecosystem?
- ✓ What risks do you anticipate encountering, and how can your ecosystem mitigate those risks?

Document your answers and be prepared to share them through available channels with project partners and community members. Expect to adapt your vision from your original draft—adaptation is the hallmark of a vibrant regional social enterprise ecosystem, and incorporating this feedback early is the best way to optimize your programming from the outset.

Clarifying Local Needs & Priorities

A regional social enterprise ecosystem is centered around a specific target population and their needs. Identifying this group and assessing their unique needs helps define the ecosystem's purpose and scope while also recognizing the barriers faced by the community that can be addressed through social enterprises. Spending the time to collect this data allows you to tailor the activities and programs to effectively and efficiently address unique local needs. A clear understanding of local challenges will help you to avoid the common pitfall of creating a solution that is not well suited to the actual needs of the population. Conducting this contextual research and integrating associated insights into the mission and strategy can form a strong foundation for your ecosystem's success.



AUTHENTICALLY ENGAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS KEY PARTNERS

Understanding the specific needs and priorities in the community that your ecosystem might address is one of the earliest and most important goals for your ecosystem and can give you opportunities to engage with your potential target population. Beyond producing better insights, engaging authentically with community residents as partners will help foster relationships based on trust and equity. As experts from the Collective Change Lab explain, “relationships are the essence and fabric of collective impact.” Community members may be hesitant to engage, so working through partner organizations that are familiar and trusted in the community is crucial in this process.



Authentic engagement with community residents can manifest in a number of ways, such as:

- ✓ Including a community council or representative on the core team
- ✓ Conducting focus groups about perspectives on entrepreneurship and social enterprises, challenges, and goals for their community
- ✓ Soliciting feedback on plans for the ecosystem and giving residents opportunities to vote on potential components to inform decision-making
- ✓ Compensating residents for their time providing input
- ✓ Regularly reporting back to the community about the ecosystem’s development so they remain informed

LEVERAGE DIFFERENT TYPES OF DATA TO GAIN NUANCED INSIGHTS

Collecting a mix of quantitative and qualitative data early on can help develop a clear picture of the needs and populations your ecosystem and its social entrepreneurs may address. This process can also benefit other areas of ecosystem development and implementation. Community wellbeing statistics and community members’ perceptions can provide details for your impact thesis as well as direction for your impact measurement and reporting plans. This data can represent a baseline to measure and report against over time.

Most of the relevant quantitative data can be accessed through official sources such as the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) on a county, zip code, and census tract level. Rates of household income, employment, education, incarceration, poverty, and home ownership, as well as other data focused on entrepreneurial activity and economic development, can be informative. Examining

To develop its equity maps for northern Orange County, NorthSTAR’s Advance OC, in partnership with Equity in OC and the Orange County Health Care Agency, leveraged data from the [Social Progress Index](#), [CDC PLACES](#), the U.S. Census Bureau’s [American Community Survey](#), and other local sources.

this data from multiple angles can shed light on barriers and on challenges that social enterprises could address, as many of these metrics are often considered to be social determinants of entrepreneurship. Additional quantitative data can be collected through targeted surveys within the community to explore questions such as what specific types of support community members feel would be most beneficial or how likely they are to engage with a social enterprise ecosystem.

Qualitative data is the second crucial part of developing community-informed strategies and solutions. This data primarily focuses on individuals’ attitudes and perceptions and can be captured through interviews, open-ended survey questions, focus group discussions,

and case studies. Consider engaging with individuals representing different perspectives; for example, you can interview individuals who have not considered social entrepreneurship previously to understand the reasons they haven’t or small business owners to learn more about success factors in their entrepreneurship journeys.

As surveys can be challenging to implement effectively, consider making them accessible in multiple languages and formats, providing incentives for participation, limiting the number of questions, and implementing them through pre-existing channels such as community events or partner programs. Additionally, targeted interviews or focus groups with community members can be an effective alternative to surveys for gathering this data.





NorthSTAR targeted 10 cities and communities across the northern and western parts of Orange County within its pilot project. These communities were found to have high levels of need and low Social Progress Index scores as identified by the equity mapping performed by project partners and mentioned in Section 3 of this playbook. This focus allowed NorthSTAR to target the barriers of these communities specifically and work with trusted partner organizations that have a history of working with these communities.

CLEARLY DEFINE THE ECOSYSTEM’S TARGET POPULATION

Regional social enterprise ecosystems are inherently place-based. Each ecosystem should clearly define the geographic area of focus, which should determine the places from where participants are recruited and the communities that need building solutions via social entrepreneurship. The core partners’ experience could also, in part, determine the geographic focus; conversely, you can also identify additional partners based on the geographic focus, particularly if you choose to work with neighborhoods that core partners are unfamiliar with. NorthSTAR interviewees suggested that you start first with your own local, regional, or county community, and, if necessary, expand from there.

The scope and size of your target population will indicate potential ecosystem participation levels, helping you determine funding and capacity needs of the ecosystem. As such, it is important to determine early on how broad or narrow to define this population. Broader target populations increase the number of people that you are able to serve and may unlock more potential funding sources, but these populations are likely to have higher servicing costs and can make it difficult to adequately target the unique barriers of the entire group. Narrower populations decrease the total pool of potential participants but can increase the ability of the ecosystem to effectively address community needs and measure impact.



Best Practice Example

City Startup Labs is a regional entrepreneurship ecosystem that worked with 250 participants within a Black and formerly incarcerated community in Charlotte, NC. By narrowing their focus, City Startup Labs was able to determine the unique needs of their specific target community and tailor their initiative to focus specifically on the challenges faced by this population. This led to the development of the ReEntry Entrepreneurship Program, which taught formerly incarcerated individuals entrepreneurship and business skills necessary to increase employability, reduce recidivism, and grow wealth.

Tailoring Activities To Local Needs & Strengths

After identifying the needs and barriers within your target population, you will need to develop a suite of programs and activities to address them. Develop these activities with intentionality and tailor them to the outcomes you want to achieve in your target population.

CREATE AN IMPACT THESIS TO FOSTER STRATEGIC CLARITY

An impact thesis is a foundational guiding document for mission-driven organizations, providing a concise and coherent narrative of the intended impact of their activities. It is a tool to ensure that the organization’s activities align with its impact objectives, forming a credible basis for achieving them and supporting alignment between the organization and its partners. Similar to a theory of change or logic model but with a narrative format, an impact thesis specifically defines challenges you aim to address, your strategy to address root causes, and the expected impact.

An impact thesis can provide strategic clarity in the planning phase of a regional social enterprise ecosystem and may be maintained as a living document throughout implementation. This

strategic clarity is critical, especially for initiatives involving multiple partners and stakeholders. The impact thesis can be helpful for refining and finalizing your mission and vision, which you can include as final pieces to the impact thesis. You may also want to also include specific goals and required resources in your impact thesis. The essential sections and key questions to address in each are:

- 1. The Challenge:** What are the social or environmental challenges facing the target population that the ecosystem seeks to address? What statistics or other evidence demonstrates the magnitude of the challenges? What is unique about the challenges in your specific region? What are local community residents stating as their priorities?
- 2. The Solution:** What is the overarching approach and specific activities through which the ecosystem will address the root causes of the challenges identified? How will the ecosystem address the priorities stated by community residents?
- 3. Expected Impact:** What are the expected short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes for specific stakeholder groups as a result of the ecosystem's activities? While not all outcomes will be feasible to measure, it is helpful to have clarity on the full set of outcomes activities are likely to directly influence.
- 4. The Risks:** What are the specific risks to achieving the expected outcomes and impact? How will your ecosystem mitigate each risk? Not all organizations include a risk section in their impact thesis, but we highly recommend it as it can help you clarify your assumptions and prepare for unexpected results.



The NorthSTAR team created a logic model and an accompanying theory of change in its early stages of development, and later collaborated on an impact thesis with SII to describe their unique regional social enterprise ecosystem. While there is overlap on planned activities and outcomes across the three documents, the impact thesis includes additional sections focused on challenges and risks. The NorthSTAR core team used these documents to refine its strategic aims and clarify its long-term vision to:

- 1.** Build a model, scalable social enterprise ecosystem in North Orange County.
- 2.** Create illuminated pathways and zero barriers to entrepreneurship, especially social entrepreneurship, for underrepresented, under-resourced communities.

IDENTIFY POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES TO ADDRESS NEEDS AND PRIORITIES

To finalize the “Solution” section of your impact thesis, ensure that your programming is community-informed. This was a key component of the NorthSTAR pilot, and it will be instrumental to creating effective activities and facilitating uptake within your community.

After you have a clear understanding of local needs, consider categorizing needs by capital type. As outlined in Section 1, all entrepreneurs—particularly social and underrepresented entrepreneurs—need access to intellectual, social, and financial capital to be successful. Not all needs will fit neatly into one of these categories, but this exercise can be helpful for identifying potential activities to include in your ecosystem. Intellectual and social capital are closely connected, and certain activities, such as cohort-based educational courses, can provide access to both at the same time.

Once you have categorized local needs and priorities, identify what services can be provided by the core team and what gaps exist that the core team's services may not be able to address. Conduct a landscape scan to identify relevant local service providers and the expertise they could bring to the ecosystem to fill gaps or complement other partners' services. More information about selecting the right partners is detailed in the ‘Formalizing the Ecosystem’ subsection.

Intellectual capital

Need often takes the form of:

- ✓ Minimal higher education and lack of quality job experience
- ✓ Limited access to educational programs and resources on social entrepreneurship
- ✓ A lack of knowledge on the processes and resources needed to establish social enterprises
- ✓ Missing core skills for operating a business and social enterprise
- ✓ Absence of a local talent pipeline for new social enterprises

Examples of activities that provide intellectual capital:

- ✓ Educational webinars, workshops, and bootcamps
- ✓ Sharing written and/or audiovisual educational resources
- ✓ Online and/or in-person social entrepreneurship courses and incubators
- ✓ Topics covered in these activities can include:
 - Funding and capital requirements for social enterprises
 - Processes for incorporating a business
 - Finding product-market fit and attracting customers

NorthSTAR project partners built intellectual capital through a variety of bootcamps, technical assistance events, webinars and workshops, resource sharing, and targeted social enterprise training.



Best Practice Examples

Many similar programs offer a variety of different services for developing intellectual capital within their target populations and community.

HATCH Ventures at the University of British Columbia has an 18-month residency program that provides educational resources and training to entrepreneurs.

Echoing Green in New York City provides organizational leadership training for social enterprise founders, covering topics ranging from defining the mission of the organization to managing staffing and payroll.

The Social Enterprise Greenhouse in Rhode Island has a social entrepreneurship curriculum developed in partnership with Brown University that teaches participants how to establish and scale their social enterprise.

Additionally, while many ecosystems partner with universities for intellectual capital activities, some institutions also have specific courses or even entire degree programs dedicated to social entrepreneurship, including:

- ✓ **Stanford's Social Entrepreneurship Program**
- ✓ University of Utah provides **social impact courses** through the business school and the Sorenson Impact Institute
- ✓ **The Social Entrepreneurship Program** at the University of Pennsylvania
- ✓ Pepperdine University offers a master's program in **Social Entrepreneurship and Change within the College of Education**
- ✓ **Duke's CASE Center** based at the Fuqua School of Business

Social capital

Need often takes the form of:

- ✓ Feeling isolated and lacking connections with other social entrepreneurs
- ✓ Small professional and social networks
- ✓ Lack of mentors or advisors
- ✓ Difficulty in finding and connecting with markets and potential customers

Examples of activities that provide social capital include:

- ✓ Organic connections with other social entrepreneurs
- ✓ Networking events
- ✓ Opportunities to connect with mentors and advisors
- ✓ Direct connections to customers and marketplaces

NorthSTAR provided a wide variety of advisors and mentors to participants across all of the project partners and tailored to the point in the entrepreneurship process that each participant was in at that moment. This was a key component of NorthSTAR and one that was found to be highly valuable by the participants.

DESIGNING THE ECOSYSTEM

Best Practice Example

Some entrepreneurship ecosystems reduce barriers to accessing customers and marketplaces and building social capital in unique ways.

- ✓ **Axelys**, a program based out of Quebec, connects entrepreneurs to organizations that provide low-cost or pro bono legal services.
- ✓ **AirMiners Launchpad**, a U.S.-based, globally focused social enterprise accelerator program focused on carbon removal, includes a guaranteed purchase contract through Shopify for graduates of their accelerator program.
- ✓ The **IKEA Social Entrepreneurship** program allows program participants to not only access IKEA's supply chain and support services network but also gives them the opportunity to sell their products within IKEA's stores.



Financial capital

Need often takes the form of:

- ✓ Lack of funding for social enterprises
- ✓ Inability to cover living expenses while developing a startup
- ✓ Lack of access to existing financial systems and resources for social enterprises

Examples of activities that provide financial capital include:

- ✓ Direct connections to impact investors who understand the unique needs of social enterprises
- ✓ Stipends to cover living expenses during startup development
- ✓ Pitch events with impact investors
- ✓ Competitions for monetary awards
- ✓ Provision of in-kind resources such as coworking space or equipment
- ✓ Facilitation of crowdfunding opportunities

Best Practice Examples

City Startup Labs offers non-investment financial capital by providing labs, work space, and computers to its entrepreneurs.

Echoing Green provides participants with an 18-month stipend to compensate for their time in the program.

HATCH Ventures, **SEA Change**, and **LowCarbon Earth** were either founded by or have connections with investor groups and offer participants opportunities to network and build relationships with these investors.

Elemental Excelsior, **AirMiners Launchpad**, and the **IKEA Social Entrepreneurship Accelerator** connect participants to funding opportunities through pitch events, purchase contracts, or direct investments.



LEVERAGE THE UNIQUE STRENGTHS AND RESOURCES OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Many regions across the United States possess concentrated resources and unique assets that budding social entrepreneurs can leverage for learning and innovation. Purposefully connecting your ecosystem with prevalent local industries helps foster scalable social enterprises that benefit from regional economic advantages. In practice, this can take different forms, from networking events with local corporations to thematic incubators focused on developing social enterprises within specific industries.

NorthSTAR is located in the environmental and health sciences hub of Orange County, and purposefully cultivated social entrepreneurship in these industries. NorthSTAR, in partnership with UC Irvine and Sustain SoCal, developed the Climate Action Business Incubator, held discussion panels, and created events to foster innovation in the climate tech space. This partnership exposes NorthSTAR participants to over 4,000 businesses working in sustainability that are members of Sustain SoCal.

CONTINUE SOLICITING COMMUNITY FEEDBACK TO ENSURE ACTIVITIES ARE RELEVANT AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

Throughout the planning and implementation of your ecosystem, regularly review and confirm that your activities are continuing to meet the needs of your target population. While broad feedback surveys can be challenging or costly to implement, small targeted surveys or group discussions can uncover vital insights. Adjust plans, programs, and materials accordingly as best as possible and report back to community partners.

During the pilot, NorthSTAR partners worked hard to ensure activities and materials were available in a variety of languages, as over 100 languages are spoken across Orange County. However, partners identified room for expanding their offerings in order to optimize reach through available resources.

Funding The Ecosystem

Regional social enterprise ecosystems can be funded in a variety of ways, and financial needs will be heavily dependent on each ecosystem's unique context. You may have a full set of partners already providing ecosystem services independently and just need to fund new collaboration pathways. Alternatively, you may need to obtain funding to establish wholly new entities and services to establish your ecosystem. You may need to first fundraise for planning and research activities, then fundraise for ecosystem development once specific community needs are clearer. Regardless, ensure that your fundraising strategy remains aligned to the needs of your target population, as opposed to adjusting your planned solution to fit the most readily available funding.

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL ECOSYSTEM FUNDING MODELS?



✓ **Government funding** Includes federal, state, or local grants, directly appropriated funding, loans, service contracts.

- **Examples:** NorthSTAR, Canadian Social Enterprise Ecosystem
- **Pros:** Potential multi-year funding not requiring repayment; low interest rates on loans
- **Cons:** Stability is subject to the policy positions and budget availability of the current administration; potential for high-burden reporting requirements



✓ **Philanthropic funding** Includes grants, recoverable grants, program-related investments, mission-related investments.

- **Examples:** City Startup Labs, Echoing Green
- **Pros:** Investment terms can be very favorable; grants are sometimes unrestricted with minimal reporting requirements; funders can provide in-kind support as partners in the work; high levels of mission alignment
- **Cons:** Foundations may require additional funding partners before deploying grants; grants can be smaller than needs require; typically term-limited; high competition for funds; can have onerous reporting requirements



✓ **Private funding** through one or more partner organizations Some entrepreneurial programs are funded directly by the backbone organization or the partner group. Accelerators often take equity stakes in startups in return for seed funding and resources, with startup investment returns helping to fund the ecosystem.

- **Examples:** IKEA Social Entrepreneurship Program, ICA Fund Accelerator Programs
- **Pros:** No limitations on terms from external funding
- **Cons:** Requires substantial fund reserves; if one organization is the funding sponsor it can create an unbalanced power dynamic with other partners; equity investments involve financial risk



✓ **Blended financing approach** Entails any combination of public or private funding, including self funding, grants, and investment to launch and sustain a regional social enterprise ecosystem.

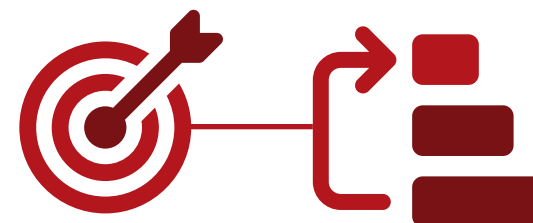
- **Examples:** Social Enterprise Greenhouse, Elemental Impact, Halcyon
- **Pros:** May provide more flexibility than reliance on one funding source; captures the benefits identified for the other sources.
- **Cons:** Can be complicated to coordinate and manage multiple differing funding streams if each has its own restrictions or requirements.

COMMIT TO FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY

NorthSTAR partners stressed the importance of financial transparency within the ecosystem, and found that an internal reporting framework that kept all partners informed about financial decisions of the collaborative was helpful in decision-making as well as increasing partner trust in the collaborative. Ensuring that ecosystem-wide funding decisions are made collaboratively and with mission-alignment was noted as a particularly important component for all partners in the pilot project.

LET COMMUNITY NEEDS, RATHER THAN FUNDING, DICTATE TIMELINES AND TERMS

Whether you are fundraising to plan and develop, launch a pilot, or implement and sustain an ecosystem over the long term, it is important to make sure your project remains aligned with local community needs and priorities. Ensure that your timeline allows for sufficient time for planning as well as data collection and analysis to tell your impact story.



The NorthSTAR pilot has so far covered over a year of programming, but many partners felt that was not enough time to fully determine the effectiveness of the established ecosystem. Giving the project enough time to adequately design the ecosystem, ramp up services, implement activities, and collect and analyze data is crucial for success. The NorthSTAR team recommends at least one year for the design and ramp-up phase, and then at least two full years of active ecosystem implementation.



PILOT, LEARN, AND IMPROVE

We recommend fundraising for and launching a formal pilot of your ecosystem as an opportunity to test and learn how to best support your target population. You may also consider testing different approaches or implementing micro-pilots and assessing effectiveness prior to offering certain activities to all ecosystem participants. Taking the time to collect pilot data and incorporating learnings into your funding proposals can be effective for long-term fundraising.

After learning much during their pilot, NorthSTAR partners are pursuing additional funding to enhance the ecosystem and sustain it over the long term. If you choose to take a similar pilot approach with your ecosystem, NorthSTAR partners have a few key recommendations:

- ✓ Allocate ample planning time and resources to robust data collection and analysis. Impact data and insights will greatly enhance your storytelling and fundraising capabilities.
- ✓ Build the brand of the ecosystem as a collection of experts in the social enterprise sector, as this is crucial to attracting both funders and participants. NorthSTAR largely succeeded in this, but some partners noted that external parties confused the ecosystem with certain partner organizations at times. They emphasized the importance of ensuring the ecosystem's brand identity is distinct from that of any one partner.
- ✓ Engage with existing and potential funders throughout the pilot, not just at its conclusion. This demonstrates interest in partnership with funders from an early stage, lowers the likelihood of an abrupt end to services once pilot funding dries up, and can strengthen opportunities for renewed funding to sustain the ecosystem long term.

Formalizing the Ecosystem

To make their regional social enterprise ecosystem fully accessible for underrepresented and under-resourced entrepreneurs, NorthSTAR partners assumed a “no wrong door” approach. Ecosystem partners made referrals to each other’s services, events, and resources according to each participant’s stage of entrepreneurial development. This approach likely increased NorthSTAR’s reach, but it also introduced challenges due to the ecosystem’s less-formalized structure. NorthSTAR had no formal entry and exit pathways, nor a system for closed-loop referrals, so tracking participant engagement and gathering effective data on an individual level was unfeasible.

The ecosystem’s organizational structure should foster smooth operations, efficient allocation of resources, and a positive participant experience. Ecosystem partners should clearly understand appropriate channels, timing, and destinations for referring participants to services and resources. Participants, in turn, should clearly understand how and when to engage appropriately with the ecosystem according to their interests and needs. A poorly organized ecosystem can introduce points of friction that prevent participant engagement and inhibit resource distribution. Formalizing elements of the ecosystem, such as its governance structure or participant pathways, can help ensure clarity and organization for all stakeholders.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PARTNERS

One of the most critical and difficult steps in building a regional social enterprise ecosystem is choosing the right partner organizations that will provide services to participants. When you get to this stage, you should have a clear understanding of the unique needs and priorities facing your target population as well as how to best tailor ecosystem activities to cultivate social entrepreneurship locally. Ideally, you will already have a core team established to support the onboarding of additional partners.

When selecting additional partner organizations that can fill identified service gaps, do your best to prioritize organizations with the following traits:

- ✓ A strong track record working in and with communities within the target population
- ✓ Leadership and staff who are members of communities within the target population
- ✓ Missions that complement the mission of your ecosystem
- ✓ Strong buy-in and commitment to your ecosystem’s vision and goals



A deliberate partner vetting and selection process can foster cohesion early on to enhance the effectiveness and operational efficiency of your ecosystem. Prior to beginning this process, consider as a core team how you will reach out to new potential partners. Formalized outreach requests, along with an explicit review and selection process, can be effective for remaining organized and transparent while ensuring that partners have clear expectations from the outset.



Ecosystem-wide buy-in on the values, mission, and impact thesis of the ecosystem was highlighted as incredibly important by all NorthSTAR partners.

What types of organizations are potential good fits for regional social enterprise ecosystems?

- ✓ Community-based nonprofits
- ✓ Private or public foundations
- ✓ Community development agencies
- ✓ Entrepreneurship accelerators and incubators
- ✓ Impact investors and investment funds
- ✓ Higher educational institutions
- ✓ Business service providers (accounting, marketing, legal services, etc)
- ✓ Local government agencies
- ✓ Chambers of commerce
- ✓ Impact measurement and evaluation service providers
- ✓ Marketplace organizations (For example: Shopify, IKEA)

Best Practices

The partners that you work with will vary by the needs and barriers of the communities you are serving. In the ***Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Playbook*** from the Kauffman Foundation, authors emphasize the importance of diversity of the partnering organizations in establishing an efficient ecosystem. A lack of diversity may leave your collaborative with considerable programming gaps, introducing barriers that prevent participants from interacting with the ecosystem.



DEFINE CLEAR ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Clear roles and expectations among ecosystem partners are essential for effective collaboration. These can be detailed in a charter or other governance documents to complement the impact thesis as another living document to guide your regional social enterprise ecosystem. Data collection and data sharing responsibilities are particularly important to make clear; even while these needs should be in your impact and performance measurement plan, articulating them alongside other key responsibilities helps to reinforce expectations.

Some key ecosystem functions to consider for organization or individual roles include:

- ✓ Administration/governing
- ✓ Impact and performance measurement
- ✓ Education/training provision
- ✓ Outreach/community engagement
- ✓ Marketing/communications
- ✓ Fundraising/development
- ✓ Policy/advocacy

Documenting formal processes for onboarding and offboarding partner organizations in your charter can also be helpful for establishing clear expectations and mitigating any potential future friction. Dedicate resources and staff to onboarding new organizations, ensuring their understanding of and commitment to the goals, missions, and expectations of the ecosystem. Also, include in ecosystem governing documents provisions for departing partners to transfer any necessary data and make any final referrals to the remaining partners to limit disruptions to ecosystem operations.

Specific individual roles established by NorthSTAR include Executive Director of Ecosystem Building, Community Navigator, Ideation Navigator, Incubation Navigator, Advisor Navigator, Director of Development, Climate Action Project Lead, Public Sector Engagement Lead, and a Marketing and Communications Team.

Additionally, NorthSTAR identified a need for support services for social entrepreneurs developing startups within the informal economy, particularly those in the pre-revenue stage who also have second jobs. This need was especially pronounced within local underrepresented and under-resourced communities, so NorthSTAR partnered with CIELO, which has extensive experience providing coaching, back-office support, and micro grants/loans to these types of social enterprises.



ESTABLISH A GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK THAT BALANCES COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

NorthSTAR participants and external research both stressed the importance of establishing a clear ecosystem governance structure that strikes a balance between a structured, centralized system and a democratic approach. Your ecosystem core team should collaboratively determine a structure that is appropriate for your needs. A centralized leadership or administrative organization can set guidelines, ensure accountability, and facilitate data collection and sharing to foster operational efficiency. Partner organizations, as experts within their specialties and communities, should have the independence and trust of the ecosystem to implement their services without micromanagement. Generally, a set of key partners should have equal voting rights on strategic decisions and meet regularly as an executive committee.

If possible, we recommend that the administrative organization not have a dual role as a service provider, as the mixing of roles and responsibilities can create complexity, confusion, or an uncomfortable power dynamic.

Throughout the lifecycle of the ecosystem, it is important to involve local community representation in the decision-making process as permanent or rotating members of the executive committee. In addition to ensuring ecosystem activities are meeting community needs, this inclusion supports power sharing, transparency, and accountability, all of which will strengthen ties with your target population.

MAP OUT PARTICIPANT JOURNEYS TO ENSURE SMOOTH ECOSYSTEM ENGAGEMENT

Prior to launching your ecosystem, map out the possible pathways that participants may take. Consider all possible needs and situations of potential participants to determine if sufficient resources have been dedicated to onboarding, off-boarding, and referrals. Also, consider establishing formal ecosystem entry and exit/graduation points, which can foster clarity among participants and facilitate data collection.

Building out a robust referral network is crucial to operationalizing the “no wrong door” approach that NorthSTAR promotes. Ensuring that all partner organizations are aware of each other’s expertise and services is crucial. NorthSTAR partners recommend formally documenting all partners’ services and capacity along with expected referral pathways prior to launching.

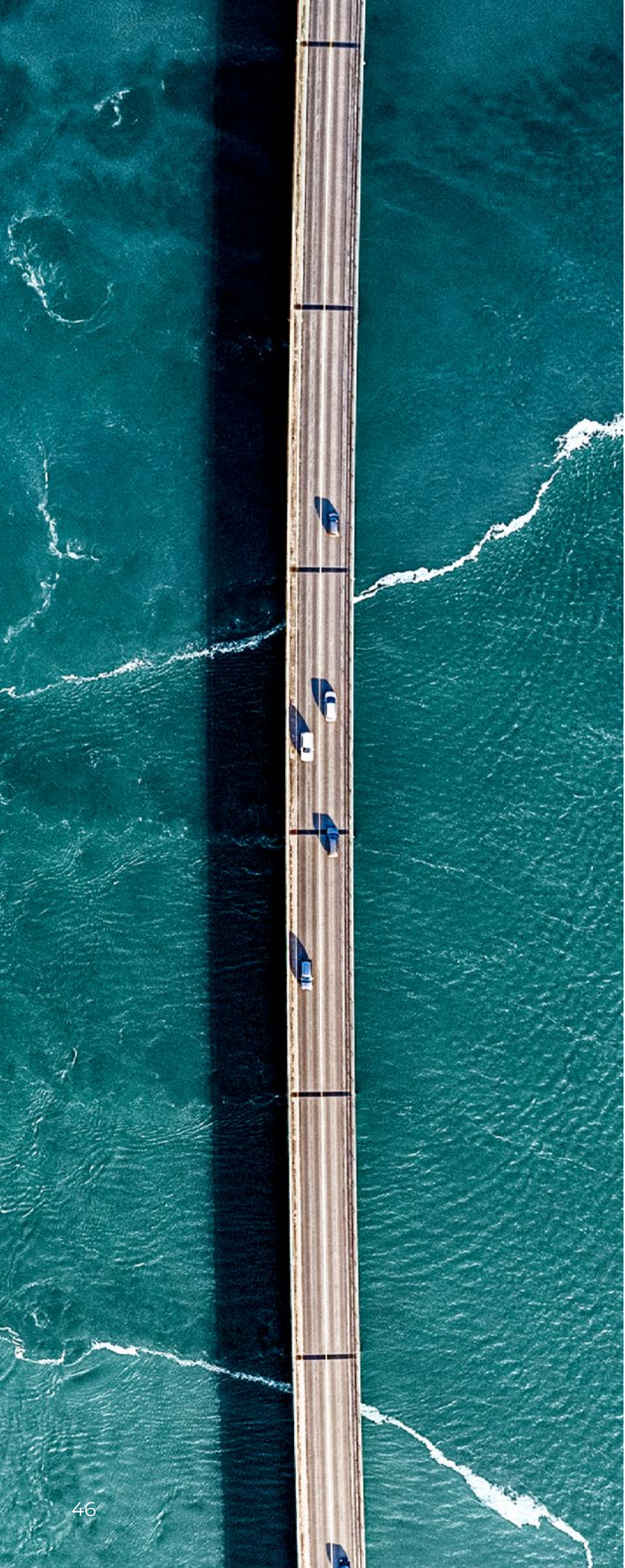
If resources allow, consider the creation of an alumni network for people and

organizations that have participated in the ecosystem. Maintaining this network can extend and reinforce social and intellectual capital access for participants, allowing the ecosystem relationships, knowledge, and experience to benefit individuals and social enterprises well into the future. Additionally, an alumni network/platform can facilitate data collection over an extended time horizon, better enabling ecosystem partners to track the ecosystem’s impact and the success of its participants.



Best Practice

Many entrepreneurial ecosystems have an alumni outreach network, including [SEA Change](#) with an annual alumni survey, and [City Startup Labs](#), which stays in contact with alumni to collect data on their recidivism rates and the health of their businesses over time.



Measuring Impact & Performance

Collecting, analyzing, and reporting data in an intentional way can yield many benefits for partners and participants in your regional social enterprise ecosystem and may be a requirement from funders. Create an impact and performance measurement plan that details roles, responsibilities, processes, metrics, timelines, and other activities relevant to tracking ecosystem efficacy. “Impact” refers to changes in social, economic, or environmental outcomes caused by the ecosystem, and “performance” refers to the ecosystem’s operational efficiency and effectiveness. An impact and performance measurement plan makes continuous learning and improvement possible, increasing the ability of your regional social enterprise ecosystem to adapt in the face of a shifting landscape and changing participant needs. It also helps partners understand and tell the ecosystem’s impact story, which can be helpful for fundraising efforts. Being transparent about impact achieved and opportunities for improvement will demonstrate transparency and accountability that can strengthen buy-in among partners and participants.

SELECT IMPACT METRICS THAT ARE RELEVANT AND FEASIBLE

Determine a set of impact metrics that are relevant and feasible to measure. Relevant metrics are those that align with your ecosystem’s goals, that your activities can affect, and that demonstrate meaningful impact for stakeholders. Feasible metrics are those with data that is not too costly or burdensome on stakeholders to collect and analyze. Metric feasibility depends on data collection infrastructure, trust, and other unique contexts. Ideally, many ecosystem partners will already be collecting data for pre-existing services that your ecosystem can integrate into its data infrastructure.

Consider up front what your metrics will enable you to claim about impact, and be precise in your communications. When analyzing metric data and communicating impact claims, answer the “so what?” question in line with each claim to explain why it’s relevant and significant for the target population and your ecosystem. When possible, compare ecosystem outcomes to relevant benchmarks for additional context.

In addition to tracking core impact metrics such as the number of new social enterprises created from your ecosystem, consider metrics that demonstrate increased access to social, intellectual, and financial capital. Below are a few example metrics you may consider measuring for each.

Social capital	Intellectual capital	Financial capital
✓ Growth of professional networks ✓ Number of meaningful connections to mentors or advisors	✓ Level of awareness and confidence reported by entrepreneurs for knowing where/how to access ecosystem resources ✓ Increased confidence in launching and sustaining a successful social enterprise among participating entrepreneurs	✓ Amount of investment capital raised for businesses of entrepreneurs ✓ Value of grants, stipends, or free resources received by entrepreneurs through the ecosystem

DEVELOP KPIS TO MEASURE ECOSYSTEM HEALTH AND EFFICIENCY

Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) that can provide insight into internal ecosystem effectiveness, resource allocation efficiency, and participant engagement. They can overlap with impact metrics, but KPIs will primarily focus on ecosystem operations and are often based on output data.

Below are some KPI examples you may consider:

- ✓ Partners' level of awareness of each other's services/programs
- ✓ Number of individuals supported
- ✓ Number of referrals between partners
- ✓ Attrition rate or number of participants lost to follow-up
- ✓ Number of resources provided or events held

BE CLEAR ABOUT DATA COLLECTION TOUCHPOINTS AND MINIMIZE PARTICIPANT AND PARTNER BURDEN

As you create your impact and performance measurement plan, be as explicit as possible about data collection touchpoints and strive to minimize the burden on partners and participants for providing, collecting, and sharing data. Confirm what data partners may already be collecting and which pathways and instruments they currently utilize to explore opportunities to leverage existing infrastructure. As best as possible, design any new data collection instruments and methods to be noninvasive and minimally burdensome on participants' and partners' time and effort. Consider and strive to optimize the accessibility of your data collection tools, including issues such as readability, languages, and technology needs.

NorthSTAR frequently relied on the existing data collection frameworks of project partners to ensure that the data process was low-burden for the partners. However, they stressed that this process only works when all partners have a similar level of experience and commitment when it comes to data collection and reporting.

PLAN FOR DATA PRIVACY AND SHARING NEEDS UP FRONT

Ensure that you address data privacy and sharing needs early as you plan for data collection. When gathering personal or sensitive survey data, it is a legal requirement and best practice to clearly explain how the data will be used and to obtain informed consent from the participants. Execute data sharing agreements between ecosystem partners during the planning phase.



RIGHT-SIZE THE PLAN ACCORDING TO COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

Measuring impact and performance requires clear roles and expectations for all parties involved in data collection and analysis in your process. Programmatic partners must know up front what data they need to capture, what mechanisms they will use, and how that analysis will be performed and utilized. Throughout planning and implementation, regularly confirm that all partners have the necessary capacity and resources to fulfill their data collection/analysis responsibilities.

LEVERAGE VARIED DATA TO OPTIMIZE STORYTELLING

Highlight data and stories from both participants and partners to tell a compelling impact story of your ecosystem. Publishing impact reports, articles, blog posts, or other communications on your ecosystem regularly is a great way to foster external interest, maintain transparency and accountability, and highlight success. Mix quantitative data with qualitative case studies, stories, and quotes in your communications to tell a well-rounded story. Consider other creative communication avenues such as videos that can be powerful for featuring personal stories of impact.

Best Practice

SEA Change is a social enterprise accelerator based out of Cleveland. They send out an annual alumni survey to build out their impact reports, including data points such as:

- ✓ Number of full-time employees
- ✓ Operational status of the businesses
- ✓ Revenue of businesses
- ✓ Alumni reach





Piloting a Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystem in North Orange County



Piloting a Regional Social Enterprise Ecosystem in North Orange County, California

The story of NorthSTAR (Systems to Access Resources) is an example of how one region developed a regional social enterprise ecosystem. Thanks to the support of former California State Senator Josh Newman, RevHub piloted the NorthSTAR regional social entrepreneurship ecosystem project after receiving an \$8.5 million grant from the Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development in 2022. While most partners engaged in NorthSTAR were separately providing entrepreneurial support services prior to the pilot period and continue to do so after its conclusion, RevHub brought these entities together under the banner of NorthSTAR to realize this ecosystem. Located in northern Orange County, California, specifically the cities and communities of Anaheim, Brea, Buena Park, Cypress, Fullerton, La Habra, La Palma, Placentia, Stanton, and Yorba Linda, the NorthSTAR collaborative was fully operational as a regional social enterprise ecosystem pilot from May 2023 to June 2024.

NorthSTAR’s mission: To catalyze social impact at scale by coalescing a robust social enterprise ecosystem that equips and empowers entrepreneurs to shape our communities, our environment, and our future.

NorthSTAR’s vision: By bringing together community organizations, research, education, governments, and businesses around a common agenda, we empower individuals—regardless of background or circumstance—with the essential pillars of belief, access, and knowledge they need to create businesses that positively impact our community and our world.



To realize NorthSTAR’s ambitious mission and vision, the ecosystem centralized a representative group of entrepreneurship champions that have lived experience working with underrepresented and under-resourced communities within Orange County.



Backbone Support Partners	Founding Program Partners
✓ G3 Ventures ✓ OneOC ✓ RevHub ✓ Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton	✓ Advance OC ✓ CIELO ✓ California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) Center for Entrepreneurship ✓ Multi-EthnicCollaborative Of Community Agencies (MECCA) ✓ North Orange County Community College District ✓ Orange County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce ✓ OneOC ✓ RevHub

Founding Program Partners Overview

Partner	Description	Outreach	Mentorship and Incubation	Business Creation Support	Data Analysis
Advance OC	Organization providing a suite of services to community organizations and projects in Orange County, selected for their outreach to the AAPI community.	✓			✓
CIELO	Small business support organization for underrepresented communities in Orange County focused on informal economy entrepreneurship	✓	✓	✓	
California State University, Fullerton Center for Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship center within the business school at CSUF providing education, mentorship, and resources for social entrepreneurs	✓	✓	✓	
MECCA	Multiethnic collaborative of community agencies within Orange County with the mission to reduce and eliminate racial disparities	✓			
North Orange County Community College District	Community college offering vocational training, associate degrees, continuing education classes, and entrepreneurial assistance	✓	✓		
Orange County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	Chamber of commerce representing the more than 30,000 Hispanic-owned businesses in Orange County through development, networking, and capacity generation	✓	✓		
OneOC	Nonprofit support and coordinating organization	✓		✓	
RevHub	Social impact convening hub, with ecosystem building, programming, and fund activities	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cal State Fullerton Social Science Research Center/ Research for Social Impact	Social impact research and evaluation team				✓

About RevHub



RevHubOC was founded in 2019 with a clear conviction: regenerative businesses, which are designed to restore, uplift, and sustain, are essential to addressing the world’s most urgent social and environmental challenges. To thrive, they require the right conditions: coordinated infrastructure, robust ecosystems, and mission-aligned capital/funding.

Creating those conditions, RevHub paved the way for regenerative economies to take root, and for entrepreneurship to become a powerful engine of community well-being, economic mobility, and systemic renewal. Since its founding, RevHub has incubated 40+ impact-first startups, built a portfolio of eight early-stage (pre-seed) impact ventures through RevHubOC Social Innovation Fund I (Orange County’s first social impact investment fund), established Orange County’s first Climate Action Business Incubator (CABI), and supported tens of thousands of founders through specialized ecosystem development.

However, RevHub discovered many founders with lived experience, bold ideas, and untapped potential were consistently overlooked, not for lack of talent, but for lack of infrastructure. Market forces alone wouldn’t correct this imbalance, so RevHub architected the NorthSTAR OC Collaborative, a pilot initiative to operationalize a model for inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem building in one of America’s most diverse regions.

- Funded with \$8.5 million from the California Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz), NorthSTAR OC activated:**

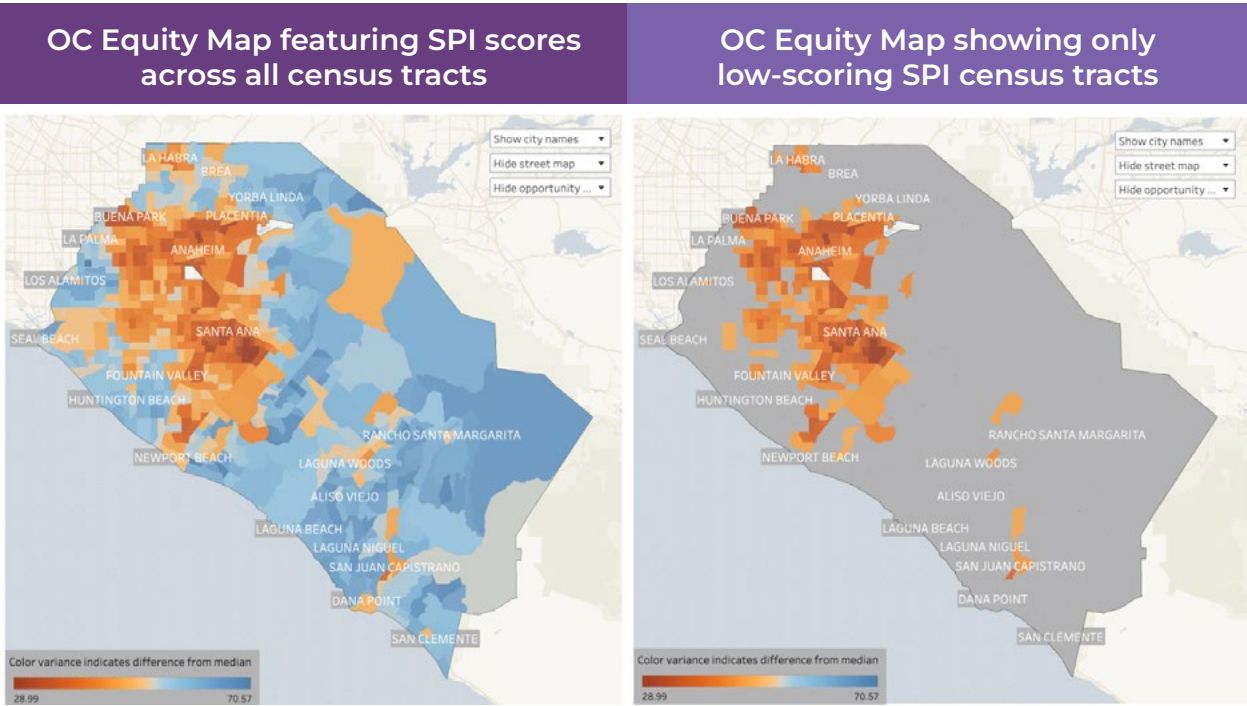
 - ✓ 1.8 million+ entrepreneurial engagements, and 10,000 +businesses
 - ✓ A coalition of 115+ ecosystem partners across community, academia, industry, and government
 - ✓ New pathways for capital access, technical assistance, and founder support.
 - ✓ Building on this success, RevHub now offers technical assistance to local leaders seeking to implement the NorthSTAR Playbook in their own regions. RevHub’s guidance is tailored to support:
 - Ecosystem design and cross-sector coalition building
 - Program development and equitable capital strategy
 - Implementation planning with impact-aligned metrics
 - Capacity building and knowledge transfer for long-term sustainability.
 - ✓ Every engagement is grounded in RevHub’s belief that regenerative entrepreneurship can transform economies when given structure, investment, and shared purpose.

Identifying the Need in Orange County

Orange County is ethnically and linguistically diverse, with large Hispanic, Asian, and foreign-born communities. The unique regional needs affecting northern Orange County’s population can be seen clearly through data. One of NorthSTAR’s partners, Advance OC, in collaboration with Equity in OC and the Orange County Health Care Agency, conducted research that helped demonstrate the opportunities for social enterprises and the areas within the county that have the most pressing needs. This data helped partners within NorthSTAR confirm that the activities and resources of the ecosystems were effectively flowing toward the communities and focus areas that had been historically under-addressed by existing models. The collaboration produced a set of [interactive equity maps](#) showing that across health, wellbeing, and economic opportunity, the largest disparities are concentrated in urban areas in the northern region. These communities living in northern Orange County are the most historically underrepresented and under-resourced, experiencing the lowest social mobility when compared to other communities across the rest of the county.

The images below show the OC Equity Map when the overall Social Progress Index (SPI) filter is selected, showing SPI scores across the County. The OC SPI combines 50 social and environmental outcome indicators to calculate an overall score for each census tract. A higher SPI score indicates better opportunities and outcomes related to health, safety, education, technology, rights, environmental quality, and more.

SPI Map for Orange County



Source: [OC Equity Map 2021](#), Equity in OC

This research gives deeper insight into the profile and experience of communities living in areas designated as “very low SPI” and concentrated in northern Orange County.

Comparing residents living in “very low SPI” areas to those in the highest SPI areas, respectively:

- ✓ Demographics
 - Low SPI: 80% of residents are Hispanic
 - High SPI: 60% are white
- ✓ Percent of residents are engaged in the labor market with at least a bachelor’s degree
 - Low SPI: 33%
 - High SPI: 80%
- ✓ Likelihood of securing a small business loan
 - Low SPI: 42%
 - High SPI: 52%
- ✓ Average net new business growth per annum
 - Low SPI: 46%
 - High SPI: 49%
- ✓ Likelihood of having diverse commercial activities in your neighborhood
 - Low SPI: 45%
 - High SPI: 56%

As with Advance OC, NorthSTAR partnered with the Orange County Community Economic Resilience Fund (CERF) to survey north Orange County residents about business-starting barriers they have experienced.

Data from 1,712 individuals indicated that the biggest barriers to starting a business included:

- ✓ Limited access to funding
- ✓ Lack of networks and mentors
- ✓ Complicated legal and regulatory environment
- ✓ Work and family responsibilities
- ✓ Bias and discrimination

Taken together, the Advance OC and CERF data validated the need for an integrated, robust regional social enterprise ecosystem to cultivate social innovation and to help remove barriers to entrepreneurship for underrepresented and under-resourced communities in northern Orange County. These results also show that NorthSTAR’s focus and activities were in alignment with the pressing issues facing the community and validated the importance of the ecosystem within Orange County.

NorthSTAR’s Strategic Aims & Targeted Activities

To realize its mission, NorthSTAR partners defined two strategic aims:

1. Build a model, scalable social enterprise ecosystem in North Orange County.
2. Create illuminated pathways by removing barriers to entrepreneurship, especially social entrepreneurship, for underr deprented, under-resourced communities.

Guided by these two strategic aims, the partners designed NorthSTAR to address the root causes of challenges faced by locals interested in social entrepreneurship; this meant structuring the ecosystem to be place-based, holistic, and accessible for underrepresented and under-resourced communities.

NorthSTAR embodied this place-based focus throughout its pilot. In the planning phase, RevHub expanded the partnership by purposefully inviting local organizations that had trust and experience working with communities in north Orange County, where NorthSTAR directed its outreach and programming. Organizations such as the OC Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Community for Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, and Opportunities (CIELO), and the Multi-Ethnic Collaborative of Community Agencies (MECCA) have decades of combined experience in northern Orange County and missions to specifically address the needs of its residents. NorthSTAR also leveraged the unique strengths of the local economy by creating opportunities to connect with venture capital and resources for social entrepreneurship in the health and climate sectors.

To leverage local assets in the climate sector and support entrepreneurs pursuing climate solutions, RevHub collaborated with UC Irvine and Sustain SoCal to launch Orange County’s first Climate Action Business Incubator (CABI) as part of NorthSTAR.



NorthSTAR also provided holistic access to the three types of capital, tailored to the needs of social entrepreneurs. The ecosystem developed robust training programs and practical workshops to give participants critical intellectual capital to understand the foundations of social entrepreneurship. The collaborative also fostered access to social capital by connecting participants to a network of entrepreneurship, legal, and marketing experts, as well as like-minded peers. These connections enabled entrepreneurs to expand their networks and benefit from new social and professional relationships with individuals who share similar backgrounds.

To address gaps in access to financial capital, NorthSTAR provided opportunities for entrepreneurs to benefit from non-dilutive funding sources. Ecosystem partners deployed micro, proof-of-concept grants for promising business ideas. NorthSTAR also facilitated networking and pitch events with funders. Some ecosystem partners, such as RevHub through its RevFund, directly invested in promising startups born from NorthSTAR.

The collaborative's second strategic aim aspired to make NorthSTAR accessible for underrepresented and under-resourced communities in several ways. By including trusted organizations such as MECCA, NorthSTAR leveraged valuable community knowledge and ensured ecosystem services were culturally responsive. NorthSTAR also prioritized having a "no wrong door" approach through which entrepreneurs were referred to appropriate services regardless of their stage in the entrepreneurship journey. Ecosystem partners deliberately targeted outreach and programming to underrepresented and under-resourced communities, and participant data shows that they were successful along certain measures: 70% were female (n=1,085), 75% were non-Hispanic and non-white (n=1,306), and 69% had incomes under \$100k (n=295).



Key Results

In the first year of its implementation, NorthSTAR's pilot propelled innovation, benefitting thousands of individuals while producing several important learnings. A selection of key results and reflections on success are detailed below.

IMPACT IN NUMBERS

188

New Businesses Created through NorthSTAR

3

New Business Ideation Programs Launched

3

New Social Enterprise Incubators Launched

115

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and Support Organizations Coordinating through the Ecosystem

1,819,133

Interactions with Individuals through Outreach Activities

10,327

Individuals Engaged in Business Exploration Activities

3,898

Individuals Engaged in Business Ideation Activities

2,518

Individuals Engaged in Business Incubation Activities

2,565

Individuals Engaged in Social Capital Programming

1,050

Individuals Engaged in Comprehensive Programming

300+

Workshops, Bootcamps, and Networking Events offered through the Ecosystem

214

Individuals or Organizations Received Funding

\$799,500

in total funds provided to entrepreneurs



REFLECTING ON PILOT SUCCESS

“

This collaborative brought with it an inclusive environment that empowers entrepreneurs of underresourced, underrepresented communities... Meeting with CIELO (a NorthSTAR collaborative partner) was a game-changer. They plugged me into their network, connected me with mentors, and even helped me with a grant proposal.

Kevin Hobby
The County Project

This program was a great opportunity to think more deeply about the social impact aspect of my business and taught me how to articulate it clearly. I built stronger connections within the community and made new friends who helped me resolve pressing issues such as the cost of protecting my intellectual property rights.

K. Khandan
Universal Informatics LLC

The efforts of the NorthSTAR collaborative led to the establishment of a robust and functional regional social enterprise ecosystem whose impact extends beyond what numbers alone can capture. Several successful startups emerged from the NorthSTAR pilot, including V's Coffee, R Green Creations, TadHealth, and California Carbon Exchange, showcasing the wide array of social enterprises that were created through the ecosystem. NorthSTAR also received multiple awards, including a public-private partnership award from the Orange County Business Council, the 2023 RevolutionHER Impact in Leadership Award from the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, and the Estrella Award for Excellence in Community Building Through Partnership from the Orange County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

While the ecosystem in its full form is currently paused as partners plan for the next phase of NorthSTAR, several partners continue to provide services and collaborate in ways that they were not doing prior to the pilot. Programs newly launched as elements of the ecosystem, such as the Center for Entrepreneurship at North Orange County Community College District and the Climate Action Business Incubator, continue to help local entrepreneurs thrive. Additionally, Cal State Fullerton's Center for Entrepreneurship expanded its focus on social entrepreneurship as part of its ongoing programming.

In interviews, NorthSTAR partners cited several ways the NorthSTAR experience broadened their understanding and capacity. Collaborative members gained a better awareness not only of specific barriers to entrepreneurship within northern Orange County but also of specific resources available to support residents in overcoming those barriers. Connections fostered among partners have led to a sense of camaraderie, mutual support, and a more nuanced understanding of how best to collaborate. These developments also reflect a shared vision, with strong buy-in and commitment from key stakeholders, ensuring that momentum for social entrepreneurship continues to build.

Additional reflections on pilot success and areas for improvement for the next iteration of NorthSTAR are incorporated into Section 4.





What's Ahead for NorthSTAR



What's Ahead for NorthSTAR

As highlighted in [Section 3](#) of this playbook, the NorthSTAR pilot successfully established a robust, functional ecosystem for social entrepreneurship in north Orange County. Thanks to the initial program funding of \$8.5M, 188 new businesses were created, strengthened by over \$312k in micro grants and more than \$475k in equity investments distributed through ecosystem partners. With over 10,000 individuals engaged on topics ranging from business exploration to social capital programming, a budding ecosystem has been seeded to prepare for future growth and expansion over the near term. Across SII's engagement with key NorthSTAR stakeholders, the collaborative particularly excelled in the following areas:

- ✓ **Developing diverse partners:** Ecosystem partners continue to provide a wide variety of support and technical assistance while also reflecting the communities that they serve.
- ✓ **Attracting mission buy-in:** NorthSTAR partners were and continue to be deeply committed to the mission of the initiative and actively engaged with the participants, investing in their success and providing essential support services.
- ✓ **Creating trusting partner relationships:** NorthSTAR leadership demonstrated that they valued and trusted the partners to provide the key services to budding social entrepreneurs.
- ✓ **Generating program marketing:** NorthSTAR was successful in developing a brand that positioned the collaborative as a leader within the social enterprise space. Such branding was essential in ensuring buy-in and trust from the community and is a key component of its longevity strategy.
- ✓ **Attracting entrepreneurs to engage with the initiative:** The availability of resources, be it technical assistance or financial resources via micro grants, was a key factor in reaching the number of social entrepreneurs that the ecosystem engaged through the pilot.
- ✓ **Leveraging existing data sources:** The collaborative took advantage of existing data collection processes and mechanisms and expanded from there. This made the data collection process a lower burden for project partners in the initial phase.





With the pilot wrapping up over the course of summer 2025, the NorthSTAR leadership team and project partners remain dedicated to the mission of the collaborative and the people of Orange County. The high utilization numbers within the first year of the pilot project and the expansive community need demonstrated through the equity maps show that demand for a social enterprise ecosystem is strong. As such, the collaborative is looking for additional funding to capitalize on the momentum from the pilot's success and capture existing opportunities to extend current, proven pilot activities as well as expand the model to serve more communities across the county and state.

This funding will be used to work toward the following goals for NorthSTAR:

Federal	State
1. Engage and outreach to a national coalition to support social enterprise and entrepreneurial efforts across the country 2. Support funding programs and projects that expand social enterprise services to more individuals and communities	1. Expand the the initial work of NorthSTAR across Orange County and within new counties in California 2. Supportive collaborative efforts across regions of the state in support of job and industry growth

This section will look at how NorthSTAR can adapt in phase 2 to further expand its impact and continue to support the maturation of the social enterprise ecosystem across Orange County.

Enhancing the NorthSTAR Model

Looking towards the future, we have identified certain enhancements that could be leveraged to further improve the NorthSTAR model. These opportunities stem primarily from two sources—best practices that have been identified through research of similar initiatives and lessons learned from interviews with NorthSTAR partners from the pilot.

BEST PRACTICES TO BE EXPLORED

Connections to capital

NorthSTAR helped budding social entrepreneurs to solidify their capital base as they set up and scaled their businesses through connections to investors and a set of micro grants. However, this relatively modest startup capital did not enable entrepreneurs to significantly scale their enterprises and respective customer bases. An expansion of NorthSTAR will aim to increase direct access to capital for participants to enable their social enterprises to scale more effectively and increase their impact. Direct connection to capital through pitch opportunities is a clear best practice, with notable examples including HATCH Ventures, SEA Change, and LowCarbon Earth. Facilitating connections with groups of investors as part of the programming offers social enterprises the opportunity to network, build relationships, and ultimately explore various sources of capital as they grow.

NorthSTAR could further catalyze its social enterprise ecosystem by expanding to include opportunities for participants to pitch to investors for both equity and debt capital, as well as providing entrepreneurs with resources on how to access further grant opportunities.

Further increasing access to financial capital in this way for NorthSTAR participants will lead to several outcomes, notably:

- ✓ Addressing of the significant gap in funding faced by social entrepreneurs and underrepresented individuals highlighted in Section 1 of this playbook
- ✓ Increasing the understanding of social enterprises and their financial needs within the investor landscape, exposing more potential investors to the social enterprise sector and increasing its future investment capital base
- ✓ Scaling local impact generation and job creation as these enterprises grow
- ✓ Fostering a more inclusive ecosystem whereby capital allocators and social enterprises create connections and pathways for capital deployment

Including more direct connections to capital was also frequently brought up in the interviews with NorthSTAR partners as a way to enhance the second phase of the ecosystem.





Market access opportunities

Enterprises, social or otherwise, are more likely to succeed if they find product-market fit. However, accessing markets is a frequent challenge for social enterprises. As such, some entrepreneurship ecosystems provide connections to markets and customers for their participants. Providing connections with customers and marketplaces will help these enterprises blossom, growing revenue that will allow for boosting employment and scaling impact. AirMiners Launchpad and the IKEA Social Entrepreneurship program, discussed in more detail in Section 2, are examples of programs that provide direct market and customer access to social entrepreneurs completing their programs.

The future iteration of NorthSTAR should make a concerted effort to increase activities supporting social enterprises in accessing markets and customers as a means to increase the likelihood of participant success. This could be facilitated through increased partnerships with either national or local marketplaces.

Provision of workspaces and materials

Previous sections of this playbook have highlighted how social and financial capital are key components to starting an enterprise. However, certain physical resources—office space, computers, and other infrastructure—are also key aspects of starting an enterprise that can be capital intensive, especially for a startup enterprise with limited resources. Initiatives looking to boost enterprise development should also consider the provision of key business infrastructure to participants to address this barrier to starting a business.

Examples of similar programs that provide these resources are City Startup Labs and Echoing Green, discussed in more detail in Section 2, which both provide participants with non-investment financial capital through their time in the program. Many social enterprise entrepreneurs, especially those in under-resourced communities, are unable to dedicate long periods of their time to participating in unpaid entrepreneurship programs, severely limiting their ability to launch a social enterprise. By providing such key resources, or stipends, to participants, NorthSTAR would be able to eliminate a pervasive barrier to both social entrepreneurship and participation in the ecosystem itself.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCEMENTS FOR THE NEXT PHASE OF NORTHSTAR

Revamp data collection and reporting

Interviews with NorthSTAR partners showed NorthSTAR faced challenges with consistent data collecting and reporting. Ecosystem success largely depends on impact and performance data, as it can be used to demonstrate efficacy, quantify real impact generated, make internal ecosystem improvements, and enhance fundraising. For phase 2, NorthSTAR partners plan to update data collection practices, both the types of data collected and the processes through which it is collected. In addition to quantitative metrics collected in the pilot, it was noted that qualitative data—how participants feel about their access to entrepreneurship—is key to capture the full scope of the ecosystem’s impact. Moreover, it was noted that a more robust ecosystem governance framework to set and enforce data collection responsibilities for collaborative partners will help increase the usability of collected data for the evaluation partners.

In regard to quantifying the future impact of the initiative, NorthSTAR will shift to a new process for collecting and analyzing to establish the impact of the ecosystem on identified barriers. Such a data collection methodology would allow the collaborative to more effectively measure key metrics pre- and post-implementation of the initiative. This could be accomplished through a comprehensive and consistent data collection model administered by all partner organizations and facilitated through the ecosystem charter and governing organization. Finally, it was also highlighted that the team should explore new ways to collect and report data that is lower-burden and more accessible for the partner organizations to increase intra-ecosystem awareness. One potential solution that will be explored is the deployment of an online tech-enabled platform that facilitates data collection.

Partnership structure and governance

As NorthSTAR looks to the future, it is suggested that the ecosystem retool the partnership structure. A consistent, centralized governance structure with clear roles and responsibilities would enhance the operational efficiency of the collaborative. For organizational clarity and a clear demarcation between administrative and project services roles, the governing or administrative organization should be a dedicated entity or group that is not also a service provider partner. Having an independent governance body as opposed to leadership from one of the partners would help more clearly demarcate roles and simplify program management across the collaborative.

Additionally, such a revamped governance structure should have clarity around the roles and responsibilities of all members, with expectations and KPIs identified and mechanisms for increasing accountability across the ecosystem. This structure should still ensure representation from all partners at program meetings and involve these partners in the decision-making process.



Expanded collaboration and referral networks between partners

The next phase of NorthSTAR will increase the opportunities and structures to facilitate an intra-ecosystem referral network and promote joint events between partners. NorthSTAR did not have clear, formal pathways for participants to enter or leave the ecosystem. Because of this, many potential participants may have been unable to fully participate in the ecosystem because their initial exposure to the collaborative was with an incompatible partner organization. Mapping out the potential entry points for all potential entrepreneurs in the target population can help identify these friction points and highlight “off-ramps” where it makes sense to transfer a participant to another project organization to provide them more specialized support. To further facilitate this referral network, greater internal ecosystem awareness across the partner organizations and a clear guide to their unique experiences and activities would be beneficial to facilitate and encourage the referral of participants across the ecosystem to an organization that best meets their needs.

Stakeholders also highlighted that the next phase of NorthSTAR should further increase the focus on events between multiple partner organizations as a means to boost participation and create more opportunities for collaboration across the platform. Organizers should ensure that these events are co-created and have the buy-in from all the project partners to encourage sufficient participation and utilization. Such buy-in will promote higher engagement from partners and ensure representation. Expanding partner events will have the two-fold objective of increasing the numbers of participants and lives touched by NorthSTAR 2.0 while also creating pathways for referrals between partners. Finally, it was noted that producing materials that are available in all relevant languages in Orange County would also help boost participation from communities that might not have been fully engaged by the initial NorthSTAR pilot.

Designating formal participation pathways and increasing intra-ecosystem awareness among partners and participants in phase 2 will foster greater cross-pollination of learning, resources, and opportunities that can increase NorthSTAR’s overall impact.



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**For questions on this report,
please reach out to**

Juan Carrillo
juan@revhuboc.com

REV HUB
Orange County

