SOCIAL IMPACT LAB

Social Impact Lab
Strategy Paper 2015

How did we get here?
SIMLab grew out of the FrontlineSMS project, a suite of software that helps organizations build services with text messages. Over the last year, we realized two things: first, that the growth of FrontlineSMS was constrained by its non-profit home, as the donor environment continues to be unfriendly to improving general-purpose software, as opposed to funding new single-purpose tools, even if those tools are partially redundant; second, fueled by client demand, our consulting practice was expanding to cover work beyond implementing SMS and the Frontline toolset.

As a result, we had two separate businesses under one roof, and to optimize the growth of both, we split them up. In December 2014, FrontlineSMS was divested to a separate, for-profit social enterprise, owned and operated by the existing FrontlineSMS team. Our consulting business remains in the non-profit entity, which has been rebranded to Social Impact Lab, or SIMLab.

We have a strong portfolio of existing grant work, with six-figure projects from Google.org, Hewlett Foundation, and DFID, in addition to an array of smaller projects. SIMLab's impact has been recognized by the NGO community at large: in 2013, the Global Journal named us the #1 Tech NGO in the world, and we received a Google Impact Award jointly with Landesa. In 2011, SIMLab was awarded the Curry Stone Design Prize.

Our team and organization have developed a strong reputation for quality work, and we are parlaying that reputation into new partnerships in different sectors, from our core expertise in governance, credit, and legal, to embryonic work in climate change and resilience, education and empowerment, and inclusive digital services. The time is right for this work, as both funders and organizations face the reality of cycles of investment that have yielded many experiments but not much lasting change.

Still, the year ahead is a critical one. As our work tied to FrontlineSMS begins to wind down, it is incumbent upon our team to establish an independent reputation in the sector; contribute meaningfully to the problems we've chosen to prioritize; and structure reliable revenue streams. 2015 is an exploratory period for SIMLab to find the niches where we can most effectively deliver on our mission: to help organizations build systems and services that are more accessible, responsive, and resilient.

Why are we here?
Mission

We help people and organizations use inclusive technologies to build systems and services that are more accessible, responsive, and resilient.

Theory of Change
By focusing on siloed services and concentrated pilots in optimal conditions, technology projects fail to fulfill their true potential in helping the most marginalized. Ultimately, a person's marginalization is not caused by the mere failure of a single service. For the most vulnerable, systemic deficiencies in essential service and support structures cascade small failures into insurmountable ones. Inclusive technology can help to solve this problem, by providing the base infrastructure to help organizations and services within a system to work better together; by removing obstacles that impede systemwide responsiveness and awareness; and by better connecting those who need help the most to those who can provide it.

What lies ahead?

2015 marks a year of experimentation and exploration. Our existing portfolio provides us with the exciting opportunity to collect data that has been difficult or impossible to collect through third parties, and translate that data into advocacy for sustainable project design, good donor practice, and community best practices. This foundation of work also enables us to seek out additional opportunities in other sectors where we may be able to add value. At the end of this strategy period, we'll have identified the most feasible and high-potential of our aspirations, and build a long-term strategy around realizing them. Our areas of exploration for 2015 are:

1. Project Implementation and Support
Our project implementation strategy focuses on holistically supporting local agents of change. We believe that local groups—businesses, local government, civil society organizations, community groups, and religious networks—hold the keys to sustainable, lasting social change, and although many people already fluently leverage the new technologies reaching their respective communities, these groups lack the attention and funding to do so in a professional or systematic way.

We are leveraging our past experience deploying FrontlineSMS to develop communications context and information needs assessments, which examine the interplay between information, communities, and technology. Where feasible, we pursue direct engagements with local groups, consulting with implementers on projects in various stages of implementation, and organizing multinational consortia in pursuit of larger funding pots.

Such a multi-pronged approach is ambitious, and a middle ground may be more realistic given most project timeframes and budgets. SIMLab is likely to provide the most value before a project is implemented, or even fully developed, by contributing to a strong context

assessment and baseline for a few core services at the outset, helping build buy-in from local stakeholders, effectively supporting organizational change and ensuring that the project commits to offering as many channels as practical for people to engage with.

Our hope is that by encouraging this holistic, locally-grounded mindset at the outset, a project can develop with sustainability in mind, as service providers extend the approach to more services and geographies, and conduct local outreach to share what they've achieved with colleagues in the area. Our strategic vision for project implementation is to proliferate this new mindset of information management and communications for social change. To that end, we will document and share our learning as we go in blog posts, talks, multimedia, and longer papers.

2. Monitoring and Evaluation
As a field, we believe that the ICT4D sector lacks rigor, particularly in monitoring, evaluating, and adapting projects. There are few publicly available, robust evaluations that illuminate the contribution of inclusive technology to interventions, the effectiveness with which they are rolled out, and their impact on the organizations and communities in which they are used. We see this as one of the single largest gaps in the sector, and a difficult problem to solve. Isolating and understanding the impact of technology on an intervention, in any sector, is complicated. This is particularly the case for inclusive technologies, which are often the first foray of digitization in a particular intervention, meaning that baseline data is scarce, if it exists at all. As a result, evaluations often rely on anecdotal data, or focus on the impact of the intervention, without isolating how the technology has affected it. Many evaluations do not consider whether the rollout of the software was well-designed, training effectively delivered, troubleshooters on hand or close by, or the project sustainably planned.

Our long-term strategic goals are to help uncover how organizations of different sizes and types can monitor and evaluate inclusive technologies in projects of varying scales, bearing in mind that additional resources are rarely available; to help develop sample frameworks and documentation; and to continue learning and advance this conversation on a systematic level, even when it does not yield clear answers.

Supported by DFID, as part of our SIMLab:Credit project in Kenya, we're developing our own monitoring and evaluation framework, which will help us to understand the role and impact of ICTs in different organizations and on different kinds of programs. The framework will be licensed under Creative Commons and made available on our website in early 2015, in draft form, for others to freely use and provide feedback on. Funding from the Hewlett Foundation will allow us to identify additional research questions and next steps that will help us improve systematic documentation of the impact and practice of using

technology in social change work, and ultimately, to contribute to the store of usable knowledge, and thereby improve practice.

3. Documentation, Dissemination, and Community Building

Our current project portfolio of work grants us an unusually varied sector exposure for an organization of our size. This, coupled with our experience and reputation implementing and documenting technology projects using FrontlineSMS, puts us in a uniquely strong position to address documentation deficits for technology projects at the last mile.

Our long-term strategic goal is to develop and disseminate best practices for implementing inclusive technology projects in the last mile. We are exploring three potential avenues for delivering on this goal:

- Our new website, which will include a fully searchable library of resources. We will draw on our experiences and those of our partners to gather and freely publish case studies, meta-evaluations and syntheses, best-practice toolkits and guides. To help organizations achieve internal buy-in, we will help agents of change and their beneficiaries to make the case for technology with written, audio-visual, and data resources. Past resources of this type include FrontlineSMS case studies and our 2011 Data Integrity Guide. During this strategy period, our focus will broaden to encompass other software and inclusive technologies, such as radio, and we will build out our capacity and reputation as a broader advisor to anyone seeking to use inclusive technologies for social change.
- Exploring the potential for online learning in low-bandwidth environments. In October and November of 2014, we beta-tested our first online course, focused on how CSOs in the governance sector could use FrontlineSMS and FrontlineCloud in their work. We will be launching a second run of this course in February of 2015, and will evaluate the utility of the courses and next steps after that.
- Experimenting with ways to support people working with inclusive technologies to explore available solutions, compare notes and share learning, best practice, tools and ideas. One idea is to create such a space online; another is to provide tangible guidance not on which tools and methodologies to use, but how to choose them. Discussions so far have demonstrated interest from platform providers, mobile network operators, technologists, development professionals, and researchers.

4. Organizational Strategy

As implementers and donors alike begin to integrate technology into the totality of their work, we believe SIMLab is well-positioned to help those organizations do so intelligently, from sharing information on best practices and context assessment frameworks to developing project evaluation methodologies and determining what success looks like for a technology implementation or strategy.

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These opportunities are irregular and infrequent, but offer the potential of long-term relationships with large implementers and donors, from developing an overarching organizational approach to assisting with the implementation of projects that touch on technology.

5. Systems Development
With smaller organizations and service providers, we have been developing a portfolio of work in improving system-wide accessibility, from mapping social service referral systems to developing new frameworks for auditing a system's accessibility. These are often low-cost, repeatable projects working with local partners that directly target our mission of making services and systems more accessible, responsive, and resilient.

Strategically, our goal is to bring together collections of geographically concentrated partners, and help them use inclusive technology to augment system-wide administrative and organizational capacity. We are currently in the early stage of working with social service providers on referral systems and service process mapping in our hometown of Washington, DC.

6. Data Ethics In Social Change
Through our collaborations with implementers all over the world, clients and partners are asking us how they can safeguard themselves, their staff and their end clients or 'beneficiaries', as projects increasingly involve gathering and storing potentially sensitive, sometimes tightly-regulated information, in unclear or unstable legal and ethical environments. This question is a fundamental one within the sector, but is often ignored as implementers move from project to project. Our goal is to shed more light on the ethical issues inherent in proliferating data and technology use for social change, and begin to integrate what we find into our holistic frameworks for implementing inclusive technology within systems and services. SIMLab will work with partners at academic institutions, other practitioners, platform providers, and implementing organizations to support the sector's efforts to establish best practice principles for informed consent and ethical data collection, management and use.

How will we fund this?
Grant income is likely to remain a critical element of our resource base. Our new focus is an opportunity for us to renew discussions with current and potential donors, as SIMLab now offers a range of policy, research and implementation projects that hew closer to what donors are accustomed to funding.

Core funding remains a critical need: our project-based funding doesn't include adequate resources for core staff and programs. We'll work to build relationships with funders who

can help sustain our central mission and programs of work. We can and will do more to identify and recruit corporations and high net worth individuals.

Our consulting practice will continue to grow, and we will aggressively pursue multi-year projects within the frame of our social mission on a consulting basis, in addition to smaller, one-off engagements with implementers and donors.

Projects like the potential new community site and web learning platforms, which require us to build and deploy new online platforms, are opportunities to develop small, recurring, unrestricted income flows. We will be judicious with these opportunities as they come, but seek to leverage partnerships and organizational resources to develop additional income flows, where appropriate.

In September 2014 we successfully launched the Social Impact Lab brand, with a new website focused on our new approach and mission. Going forward, we will develop a new communications strategy, leveraging newer distribution channels like eBooks, podcasts, mobile sites, and our flourishing social media presence, to get our findings and expertise in front of practitioners, donors and decision-makers.

Beyond 2015
Working towards a new strategy at the beginning of 2016, we'll undertake a competitive analysis in Q1 2015, and a light-touch forecasting exercise to support a new strategic process beginning in Q3 of 2015.