

SPECIAL COLLECTION

BOOK REVIEW TRANSLATIONAL MEDICINE

Sustainable, Cooperative, Inclusive, Organized Networks, and Translational Health: A Book Review of Saving Societies from Within: Innovation and Equity through Inter-Organizational Networks

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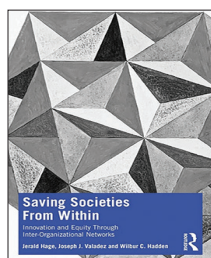
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ABSTRACT

In *Saving Societies From Within: Innovation and Equity Through Inter-Organizational Networks*, authors Jerald Hage, Joseph J. Valadez, and Wilbur C. Hadden argue that existing coordination mechanisms such as markets and governments are insufficient to address today's most complex societal challenges, from inequality to sustainability. They propose a new model, the Systemic Coordinated Inter-Organizational Network (SCION), as an institutional alternative capable of fostering innovation, adaptability, and social equity. Drawing on interdisciplinary theory, cross-national analyses, and an in-depth case study of the NicaSalud network in post-Hurricane Mitch Nicaragua, the authors demonstrate how SCIONs can strengthen public health systems, enhance organizational learning, and build collaborative capacity across institutions. A defining feature of the model is the integration of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) as a structural element that drives evidence-based decision-making. This review highlights the SCION model's relevance for translational public health and systems science, underscoring its potential to reimagine coordination, governance, and collective action. While challenges of scalability and sustainability remain, *Saving Societies* offers a timely and empirically grounded blueprint for transforming networks into engines of social innovation and resilience.

Keywords: Action Theory, Inter-Organizational Networks, Public Health Infrastructure, Systemic Coordination, Translational Public Health, Translational Medical Science

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THE SCION MODEL: A BLUEPRINT FOR COORDINATED NETWORKS

The title, “Saving Societies,” is audacious. It implies that societies need saving and, indeed, that is the opening premise. The book argues that neither market coordination nor democracy appears to be capable of solving the complex problems that all societies confront today. Markets stimulate competition, but competition has failed to solve the challenges of equity and sustainability. Governments aim to control conflicts and regulate competition, but governmental coordination has likewise failed to solve the challenges of equity and sustainability. Both market and state modes of coordination have problems because the essential actors are organizations (firms or government agencies) with managers who are risk-averse and/or driven by self-interest. Indeed, the future of humans on the planet is imperiled by these ineffective forms of social organization, as evidenced by unsustainable practices that exceed planetary boundaries and growing inequality. The solution offered is a new coordination mode called “systemic coordinated inter-organizational networks” (SCION), which is hypothesized to generate essential innovations and ensure social equality. The book makes the case that systemic networks offer the greatest competitive advantage in a global economy.

The systemic component of SCION means that a diversity of organizations is involved in the decentralized decision-making, representing all parts of the specific system being coordinated. The coordinating component is a designated unit with dedicated resources that ensures coordination is structured rather than haphazard, while providing a platform to resolve differing perspectives and strengthen relationships among participating organizations in the network. This also ensures quicker responses to new problems as they appear. This coordination mode creates radical organizational change, whether through learning, adoption, in-house innovations, or adaptiveness, as well as institutional change in the system in which it is embedded. Clusters of organizations that make up systemic networks can make decisions jointly, generate creative solutions, and integrate their efforts to rapidly produce a product or service, taking advantage of changing technologies and market conditions to develop new products and services within a short time period. The authors predict that this new institutional form will increasingly replace both markets and hierarchies as a governance mechanism.

The baseline assessment draws on historical and cross-national analyses, interdisciplinary social science research and theory, in-depth case studies, and cumulative evaluation evidence. Then, given their dismal assessment of the performance of current institutional arrangements in dealing with deepening societal and global problems, the authors set out to test the effectiveness of a systematic coordinated

interorganizational network as manifest in the *NicaSalud* Model created in Nicaragua to deal with the destructive aftermath of Hurricane Mitch.

Case Study: The NicaSalud Model in Nicaragua

The goals of the *NicaSalud* initiative were to:

- Rebuild the Public Health System after Hurricane Mitch
- Positive health outcomes for mothers and children
- Reduce social inequality
- Test the SCION approach

The extensive evidence presented in the book^[1] demonstrates the advantages of the interorganizational network for public health programs. The inter-organizational network created an inter-organizational culture that was supportive of change and committed to, and capable of, adaptiveness. Major features of the initiative included:

1. Increasing the human capital of each member organization through training programs in both tactical and managerial areas
2. Encouraging organizational adaptiveness as measured by their changes in strategies and tactics
3. Expanding institutional capacity in strengthening the healthcare system through basic functional training, new skill training of all members of the network, and healthcare personnel in the Ministry of Health and its various clinics
4. Mobilizing political advocacy and changing policies and institutional roles with stakeholders to make the healthcare system more effective
5. Generating cooperative behavior among the member organizations as indicated by the sharing of resources, the building of political alliances, and joint planning of interventions within the same geographic areas, including encouraging the formation of subnetworks that can make a larger interorganizational network more effective.

Evaluation-Driven Impact: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in the SCION Framework

The monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) processes were especially important in both supporting adaptation and documenting the results of what unfolded and was accomplished. Ten factors help explain how evaluation played a critical role in the effectiveness of the SCION.

1. MEL was embedded into the SCION from the beginning, building on the urgency to work together that came from the humanitarian disaster of Hurricane Mitch while generating and nurturing the commitment to data-based decision-making among network leaders
2. Strengthening shared and collective evaluation capacity was a central element of the SCION, including extensive, high-quality training and engagement of technical and

support staff in how to implement MEL

3. The MEL design was clear, appropriate, and useful, incorporating mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative); the focus was on outcome indicators of maternal and child health through systematic and rigorous data collection; collective analysis and ongoing feedback contributed to organizational learning
4. Credible and useful results were generated through *Lot Quality Assurance Sampling*, an approach designed to identify areas of “high” or “low” performance. For each indicator, the number of successes is counted and compared with a predetermined cutoff target. If there are fewer than targeted successes, the area is classified as low performance; if there are more successes, the area is classified as high performance. The determination of the cutoff target is a function of the sample size and targets for program coverage and related practical considerations
5. Rigorous baseline on key health knowledge and behavior indicators made the evaluation data useful internally and credible externally. Baseline data and periodic updates informed intervention priorities and implementation progress
6. The MEL approach was participatory and collaborative. An important part of the training of data collectors, who were usually area supervisors, involved teaching them how to analyze and interpret their findings
7. The MEL process systematically tracked strategic versus tactical actions by the network members and distinguished innovations from adaptations. These distinctions allowed in-depth discussion and documentation of the kinds of learning that took place and how that learning became operationalized in changed practices
8. The researchers undertook direct field observation which gave them in-the-trenches insights and deepened their empathy and understanding, both of which are well-documented in the book
9. The MEL approach was utilization-focused throughout. The book documents the importance of a well-designed, implemented, and actually used evaluation system to support network communications and decision-making. The concreteness and validity of the behavioral indicators used for measuring safe motherhood and child survival provided credible evidence to network leaders about where they were effective and where they were ineffective
10. Systematic evidence is critical to the effective functioning of a Systemic Coordinated Inter-Organizational Network. Indeed, evidence is so important that the designation of this organizational mode might well be renamed: Systemic Coordinated *Evidence-Driven* Inter-Organizational Network.

As well as guiding evaluation, these ten features are also the key to the translational mission of SCION theory and enable the model to structure learning, drive coordination, and institutionalize innovation. Action theory in the SCIONs literature is the link to translational medical science and public health, to which the journal hosting this theme issue is devoted.

Action Theory and Translational Health

Action theory, as described in the SCION literature, conceptualizes how goal-directed behavior is structured across organizations, emphasizing how shared objectives, feedback loops, and structural supports enable systems to produce change. This framework aligns with the goals of translational public health, which seeks to move research-based innovations into practice across complex real-world settings. SCIONs, in this view, are not just a sociological innovation – they are an applied blueprint for translational action. The collective agency, coordination mechanisms, and mutual learning processes described throughout the book mirror the organizational capacities required to deliver effective, sustainable health interventions at scale.

Translational medical science depends on more than just innovation. Through action theory, the features of SCIONs translate theory into specific organizational activities. It provides pragmatic programmatic instruction for translational public health. These features help us think concretely about translational science and ensure that interventions are not only evidence-based but also equitably distributed and sustainably enacted. In this way, SCIONs serve as both a descriptive theory of how networks innovate and as a guide for building the collaborative infrastructure necessary for public health transformation.

Challenges and Limitations

While the book^[1] makes a compelling case for SCIONs, significant challenges may remain. Chief among them is scalability. Building and sustaining cooperative networks are inherently difficult in politically fragmented or resource-constrained environments. Coordinating entities require ongoing investment, institutional legitimacy, and trust among diverse stakeholders, all of which can be hard to achieve. Moreover, efforts aimed at systemic change often encounter resistance from entrenched interests, creating barriers to adoption and raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of such models outside of crisis-driven contexts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION

Saving societies contributes more than a sociological theory of innovation. It offers a roadmap for embedding action

theory into the operational core of healthcare systems. For scholars and practitioners working at the intersection of systems science and public health, the SCION model provides a rich and actionable framework for designing networks that not only respond to crises but also actively build capacity to save and sustain societies over time.

Key Messages:

1) SCIONs provide a new coordination model that enables diverse organizations to work together systematically to address sustainability and equity challenges. 2) By embedding action theory and evidence-based learning, SCIONs translate innovation into sustainable, equitable public health outcomes. 3) SCIONs strengthen civic and health infrastructure by fostering cooperation, adaptability, and long-term capacity building.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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REFERENCE

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