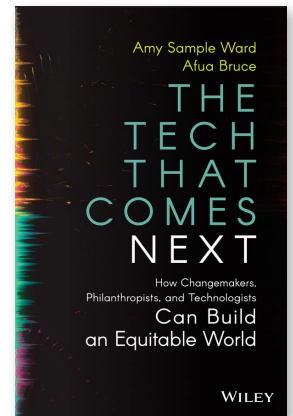


The Tech That Comes Next

How Changemakers, Philanthropists, and Technologists Can Build an Equitable World

by **Amy Sample Ward and Afua Bruce**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

There's no easy way to change the systems and practices that have created the imperfect technologies we have today. Truly creating an equitable world will most certainly require contributions from everyone in some way. This book is a practice in thinking about new options and priorities, looking for inspiration from a diversity of other efforts, and acknowledging the lessons that many different people may offer us.

In *The Tech that Comes Next: How Changemakers, Philanthropists, and Technologists Can Build an Equitable World*, authors Amy Sample Ward and Afua Bruce focus on five key groups identified as social impact organizations, technologists, funders, policymakers, and communities. Belief systems about where resources are accumulated and how they are distributed, who has access to training and decision making, and what work is worthy of investment are core to what will be changed so that we can organize and collaborate in new ways. This book is an exercise in imagining a world that does technology differently. It is intended to invite us to dream of the tech that comes next.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How technology supports social change.
- Why community accountability is crucial.
- Why funding and development of technology needs to change.
- The role laws and policy play in technology equity.

Technology to Support Social Change

Technology. Just the word itself evokes a range of emotions and images. Many people hold a number of these sometimes contradictory emotions and perspectives at the same time.

In fact, individuals often define “technology” differently. Although some people may think of technology as being exclusively digital programs or internet tools or personal computing devices, in this book technology is defined in the broadest sense: digital systems as well as everything from smart fridges to phones to light systems in a building to robots and more.

Regardless of how complicated feelings about tech may be, we all must embrace it: we live in the age of technology. Whether you consider how food travels from farm to table, how clothes are manufactured, or even how we communicate, tech has changed and continues to change how these processes happen. Certainly, we complete a number of services through technology systems and we expect the technology tools and applications we use to provide smooth and seamless experiences for us every time we use them. In many cases, technology works how we expect it to; it helps us get things done.

Unfortunately, not everyone has the same experiences with technology. The phrase “technology has unintended consequences” is something many people in technology companies say when referring to products that don’t work for a segment of the population, or to systems that leave people feeling exploited. However, these “unintended consequences” are often the same: they result in excluding or harming populations that have been historically ignored, historically marginalized, and historically underinvested. The biases and systems that routinely exclude and oppress have spread from the physical world into the technological world.

How can we have these uneven, unequal experiences with technology when one of the supposed attributes of technology is impartiality? There are so many examples of how technology, regardless of how quickly it moved or innovated, repeatedly did not deliver on the hopes and promises for *all* people. Why? Technology is put into use by humans, and accordingly, is good or bad depending on the use case and context. Technology is also built by humans and, as a result, technology reflects the biases of its human creators.

Technology exists within systems, within societies. The application of math and science, as well as the structure and collection of data, are all human inventions; they are

all therefore constructed to conform to the many rules, assumptions, and hierarchies that systems and societies have created. And, historically, the people who create the most ubiquitous technology are a small subset of the population who happen to hold a lot of power—whether or not they reflect the interests and feelings, opinion, and thoughts of the majority, let alone of the vulnerable.

All of these factors—feelings about technology, the benefit technology can provide, the reality that technology isn’t neutral—serve as a backdrop to conversations about tech created for and in the social impact sector.

Organizations that promote political or social change can vary in size and scope, but a common aspect of these mission-driven organizations is that they focus on the mission first—feeding hungry children, promoting sustainable farming, delivering health care equitably, and more.

Social impact sector organizations work hard every day to push back against the inequities and injustices in society. With limited budgets they manage to effect real, positive change on a number of social issues and improve the quality of life for many humans.

We often assume that oppressive systems will always continue to exist, but what if this weren’t the case? What if we could restructure how we think about developing systems and services to move beyond this picture and truly exist in a world where humans are centered and justice is pursued? We must consider how the different levers in society can work together; we must consider how we build the tech that comes next.

Technology That is Accountable to Community

The philanthropic sector is full of pledges and commitment statements about everything from addressing racial inequity to making their grantmaking more accessible and less onerous. These pledges are important in many ways, but they are not enough to help many organizations and communities even to stay afloat—let alone build a better world.

If the technology-enabled systems, data collection, and even service models we employ toward a positive mission are themselves causing harm, because they are extractive, don’t acknowledge our identities, or are inaccessible, we must acknowledge that harm and make change—in both the technology tools themselves and in the way we create technology for our needs.

... those putting technology to work need to be in control of the technology we choose and how it works for us, not the other way around.

Keeping our community central in our process, through engaging many people in the goal setting, decision making, design, and implementation of our work allows us to be accountable for technology use that causes harm and to make appropriate adjustments. As we build toward a better world, those putting technology to work need to be in control of the technology we choose and how it works for us, not the other way around.

Equitable technology includes the networks, hardware, software, and services that support everyone's access to, participation in, and fulfillment in an equitable world. How we develop technology is as important as what technology we develop.

Many communities are supported through a diversity of valuable social impact organizations, from food pantries and book banks to concerts in the park and advocacy efforts to shift local policies to advocating for the rights of community groups.

These missions are all important pieces of the fabric of programs, services, and support that have direct impact on communities everywhere. The best way to further the value of these missions is to ensure that administration and delivery of the work is advancing the mission, too—and not inadvertently contributing to the issues the mission aims to address.

Technology is a big part of this unintended negative contribution—from extractive data collection to perpetuating digital exclusion. And those working in social impact organizations are in a critical position to catalyze change for the way technology is selected, implemented, budgeted, planned, and used toward the mission.

We need people who are experts in their missions and community's needs to collaborate with us on the many challenges we face. Our vision is for technology projects, funders, and policymakers to prioritize the participation and perspective of communities most affected by the many intersecting systems we are working to change.

In many of the existing funding dynamics for social impact

work and for technology development, the power and focus are on the funders, who can decide if or how a project moves forward.

The dynamic needs to be reversed so that the communities and people receiving the social impact work and technology can be the ones setting the priorities. We can't continue to perpetuate the belief that those with the most money know best.

Resources should be managed and prioritized by communities and organizations putting technology to use for positive impact, instead of on the priorities of those with the most financial assets.

Changing Technology Culture

Technology can accelerate the work of social change. Social impact organizations need a cultural understanding of tech that keeps the focus on the mission and community—not on the tools themselves. They also need to invest strategically to meet the mission.

Shifting both the culture and investments around technology in social impact work starts with acknowledging that both people and technology are necessary—but one is not a replacement for the other.

Technology should help with readily automated, routine tasks, allowing people to focus on the many things that require a human's focus. But before we consider how to select the best technology for an organization, we have to first focus on establishing a viable culture for that technology.

We've all heard the tropes foisted upon the social impact sector: this work is for charity; it is work of the heart, and not a place for sophisticated strategies and innovation. These assertions are absolutely untrue.

Unfortunately, staff, volunteers, board members, and program participants or service beneficiaries collectively buy into both sets of thinking, which just perpetuates starvation cycles for social impact funding and training.

Changing how social impact teams think about technology can also improve many other important aspects of the work, including staff roles and advancement, training and professionalization, program effectiveness and community impact, and values and trust in both the mission and the community.

Investing in technology really means investing in people, focusing on the community, and planning for processes that allow for participation and collaboration across teams.

Training for technology shouldn't involve only those who operate it. When technology is a critical element to how an organization operates—or indeed, is critical to whether an organization can operate at all—it is a leadership component.

Every executive director or CEO needs to be part of technology training with the rest of the organization—and needs to reinforce a culture that acknowledges technology as a strategic part of the mission. Central to technology leadership is the work to align tech to the organization's mission and community needs.

Creating a culture of technology leadership across an organization is just as important as embedding community-centered models in every technology project. Technology will continue to change. Social impact organizations need to continue investing in technology training for all staff, improving accessibility, and strengthening the opportunities for community voices and priorities to be central in the plans for the organization's work and systems.

Developing Technology for Social Impact Organizations

Technological development truly changes how people live and interact with the world. Many people expect technologists to quickly enter the social impact space and create innovations that “single-handedly” feed the hungry around the world, solve climate change, and improve access to and outcomes for education—and then spontaneously dream up the next invention.

This, of course, is not how things work. The social impact sector tackles challenges based on systemic inequity and injustice, problems that can't be solved with a simple invention. There must be a recognition that the big technological solution is in fact a combination of many small solutions.

Also, the expertise technologists bring can help create a new and better world, but only if the technology is appropriately

designed in the context of local communities and with deep understanding of the multifaceted elements in play, such as the root causes of the problem, interventions that can make progress possible, and the network needed to realize sustained change. This understanding must derive from how these problems are actually experienced, not from how they are interpreted from outside.

Technologists in future social impact organizations must strike the balance between:

- (a) building basic technology systems, such as a simple database to store information on clients, for the social impact sector, and
- (b) identifying ways in which new, never-before-used technology can be created and applied to social change.

These complex challenges present a high bar for technologists to meet, beyond “just” deploying complex tech. They must understand the power and potential of technology, as well as its limits and constraints; they must also be able to determine when technical proposals are documented pipe dreams and not possible within the constraints of reality, as well as when not to pursue a technical solution at all.

Technologists must intentionally extend the mission and impact of social impact organizations by:

- expanding access to themselves
- continually checking for consistency between code and values
- consciously deciding when to exercise technological caution versus when to push organizations into something new

Good things can happen when technologists are intentional about learning from their social impact partners, thorough in considering various technical approaches, and deliberate about selecting and implementing the ideal model. Detailed understanding of the technology deployed is necessary to responsibly execute a technology solution.

Appropriately designed technology means responsibly using advanced technology in the right situations. By applying the complexity and limits of technology, including a diverse group of people throughout the design and development process, and consistently checking for ethical decision making enshrined in code, social impact technologists can play a critical role in sustaining a transformed organization.

Small amounts of funding spread out thinly misses the needs and reality that technology projects and social change require long-term support. . .

Changing Technology and Social Impact Funding

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people across sectors and industries transitioned to working virtually and remotely almost overnight. This nearly spontaneous phenomenon was enabled by technology.

But for many social impact organizations, moving to a virtual model simply wasn't possible in one night or one week, because the technology tools and organization's skills and strategies with them weren't positioned effectively for staff to pick up working from wherever they may be.

The community challenges and the prevalence of technology didn't start with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many social impact organizations had always relied on ill-suited tech; the pandemic merely forced some long-delayed, long-necessary decision making.

Similarly, opportunities for funders to accelerate social good also preceded the pandemic. The problem is that many funders value the visibility of funding new things and partnering with prominent technology companies, which leads to funding for projects that build technology outside the community.

But if financial resources were prioritized and invested in those deploying and affected by technology so that they could build what they need, then everything from research and development, piloting, adopting, and scaling technology would move more effectively.

Small amounts of funding spread out thinly misses the needs and reality that technology projects and social change require long-term support, space for learning and testing, and a systemically inclusive approach.

We can accelerate the impact by changing how and who we fund as well as by developing technology for social impact. This calls for rethinking and reworking the models, expectations, and values that organize our systems of investment, from grantmaking to seed funding. Foundations and corporate philanthropy efforts, venture capitalists, and individual

donors can all play a role in shifting what funding means and can do in the service of the social good.

Funding technology for social impact work is tantamount to funding social impact work. Social impact work cannot happen in a sustained, shared, or scaled manner without technology supporting either operations or delivery, or both. Funding technology in social impact work needs to cover more than just technology tools and systems.

An efficient, effective operation requires the selection, customization, implementation, and maintenance of software, hardware, and other applications. And so, technology funding must include the resources to adequately train staff, support necessary upgrades and maintenance, and engage community members in research, design, implementation, and evaluation.

If we value those who benefit from social impact efforts, we need to learn how to fund the technology that will get us close to a better world. Funding should be comprehensive, with a technology budget reflective of all the costs associated with making and keeping technology working for the mission.

Further, product donations should not be conflated with funding. Product donations can be undeniably helpful—in an organization that already has the right infrastructure and staff training. But if the free or discounted products have a term limit, the benefit can turn costly, and the “charity” model reveals itself as the sales pipeline it actually is.

Providing free products that have real costs for the corresponding implementation, maintenance, and training is an inequitable and unethical revenue pipeline. Funding models for technology in social impact organizations should reinforce impact over financial return.

Changing Laws and Policies

Policymaking is ultimately about affecting change for large groups of people; centering the communities most affected by potential policies in the policymaking processes is the

only way we will create a more equitable world.

Technology can support the flow of information throughout communities and between communities and policymakers. But what happens if the communities don't have access to the technology? Or, what happens if the technology to which communities do have access causes confusion, disenfranchises people, or fails to protect them?

The policymaker that comes next must consider all these aspects in their role. They must insist on involving community members and social impact organizations in the policymaking process.

- They must make sure communities can access technology.
- They must understand how technology intersects with the issues they govern.
- They must require that the technology that touches society is secure, trustworthy, and not exploitative.

It's a lot to manage, but by listening to their constituents, getting advice from experts, and effectively using technology themselves, policymakers can create rules and regulations that enable a thriving society.

Individuals who make policies and plans for local, state, and federal governments—that is, policymakers—who have often spent their careers in the policymaking world, traditionally come from nontechnical backgrounds.

This would not be a significant problem if society still operated as it did a century ago—before modern technology was so intertwined in how people live their lives and how policy is implemented.

This is not to say that all policymakers should also be technology experts; that would be unreasonable. Policymaking itself is a specialized skill that takes time and experience to refine. But policymakers must consider how technology can extend the impact of policy.

The conversation about policymaking for what comes next must come from two angles: policy about technology, and technology in policymaking. The common factor in improving policymaking in both cases is strengthening the connection between policymakers and community members. To this end, it is important that policymakers proactively seek out technical expertise—and not just in corporate America, but also within grassroots advocacy organizations and other social impact organizations.

Just as technology can be used to advance the missions of social impact organizations, technology can also be used to structure policymaking conversations in new ways. Technologists can inject new-to-policy design processes that consider how policies may be successfully technically implemented, as well as how to repeatedly learn and adjust based on testing and piloting designs.

To effect widespread systems change, policies, regulations, and laws must also change. Policymakers are uniquely positioned to adjust these levers, and they too can actively participate in building what comes next.

Changing Conditions for Communities

In all of our discussions about social impact organizations, technology development, funding, and policymaking, we've stressed focusing on community connection, participation, and leadership. That focus must be reinforced by supporting community members in their efforts to engage and lead; they need resources to help them build skills, design solutions, direct funding, and decide on policies.

And an essential aspect of that support calls for removing barriers to community access and participation in social impact work, technology development, resource allocation, and policymaking.

Communities are made up of a widely diverse range of individuals who possess a widely diverse spread of experience, training, and confidence with technology. This complicates the need to upskill a community, and illustrates the importance of supporting parallel initiatives rather than relying on simplified solutions.

Directly central to a discussion of community is the power we have when we build our vision of what comes next together, with everyone's skills and expertise and brilliance brought to the table. There are a multitude of questions that can guide us in building what comes next:

- What might community ownership look like?
- Who is making social change?
- How do we invest resources into the emergent and collaborative spaces where solutions could emerge?

The best way communities can pursue creating a better world will be to eliminate barriers that prevent community leaders, community members, and communities from designing solutions that meet their needs—as well as to elimi-

nate the barriers to being supported and funded in the ways social impact organizations and technology developers are privileged to be.

Ultimately, only so much time can be spent studying the challenges in and of the social impact space. Whether you are:

- a funder who can make capital available more quickly,
- a technologist who can expand the capabilities of mission-driven organizations,
- a social impact leader who knows which levers to pull to make change,
- a policymaker who can create systems and laws that protect and encourage,
- or a community member who can actively participate in solution development,

YOU have the knowledge and power to make an impact.

There's no single place to begin. This book, like the work ahead of us, doesn't include a road map, a checklist, or a well-worn path.

Instead, all of these ideas are invitations for you to begin wherever you are with whatever resources you have—and to bring those resources near you along, too.

There's no permission to be granted before each of us pushes these conversations into our organizations or our coalitions or our technology projects. There's no application process to be the one that commits to doing things in new ways.

The opportunity to build what is next is an opportunity for us *all*. Inherent in the value of collective power and wisdom is the reminder that real change will be possible when building what is next includes us all.

The work ahead of us is massive. The world we have today is filled with challenges. There are real hardships and injustices everywhere we look. It's because of this that we know that, together, we must commit to something else.

Today, this moment, right now is the right time for us to take the next step toward a more equitable world, a world that works for all of us.



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