Creating social impact is hard. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent over the past 50 years, with very little to show: poverty, conflict and devastating diseases continue to ravage large parts of the world, even as generations of hard-working, well-meaning individuals dedicate their careers to stopping them.

It would be an understatement to say that the underlying problems are extremely difficult to solve. Still, the social sector’s work on these issues has been undermined by a distinct lack of strategic thinking. This lack of results has forced a rapid evolution of the sector over the past decade. There is, now, an unprecedented emphasis on strategy, demonstration of impact and use of innovative business models.

The course will examine a range of the world’s most pressing issues: poverty, health, conflict, human rights and education, and discuss what it takes to develop strategic approaches to those problems. For each of these issues, we will analyze the underlying challenges, study case examples of successful work done by NGOs (or other types of organizations), unpack the core strategic questions, and explore what it takes to build effective solutions: what makes a solution scalable, sustainable, replicable and catalytic? Finally, we will examine what the various types of institutions can contribute to each issue: government agencies, international institutions (e.g., the UN), philanthropic foundations, NGOs, large private sector companies, small/mid-sized businesses, and startup social entrepreneurs.

The mainstay of the class will be an intensive team project in which each team will develop a solution to one of the issues discussed in class. The class will also feature 3-4 accomplished speakers from foundations, NGOs and other institutions working in the field.

In summary, this course aims to help students become effective practitioners in the global social sector, by arming them with practical skills to help solve these important problems.