# SEEING, FACILITATING, AND ASSESSING SYSTEMS CHANGE

## Learnings from the Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems Initiative

ROCKEFELLER Philanthropy Advisors

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# SCALING SOLUTIONS TOWARD SHIFTING SYSTEMS: SEEING, FACILITATING, AND ASSESSING SYSTEMS CHANGE

**This report was written by Heather Grady, Michael Brown, Joanne Schneider, Kelly Diggins, and Naamah Paley Rose of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.** **Many colleagues from Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and from the Steering Group contributed to the content and provided important editorial support, including Edwin Ou, Gurpreet Singh, Rachel Flynn, Kathy Reich, Federico Bellone, Olga Tarasov, Kalyah Ford, Renee Karibi-Whyte, and Patrick Briaud. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) also wishes to thank In-House International whose design work is invaluable to the Scaling Solutions team.**

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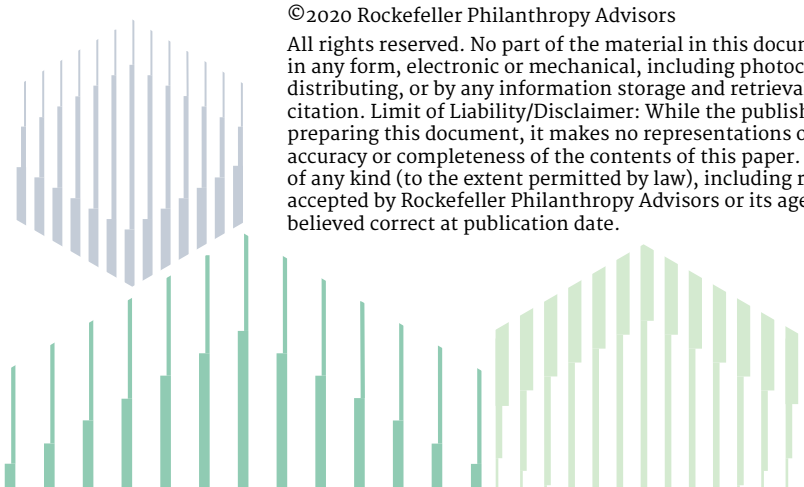

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# Executive Summary

As this report went to print, the world was in the grip of a historic pandemic, with roughly a third of the planet's inhabitants under orders to stay at home and livelihoods and education across the world jeopardized. And the U.S. was engulfed with protests and calls for action against historic racial inequities, injustices, and dehumanization of Black lives. Among the effects of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests is a heightened awareness of how interconnected different systems are. For example, the finding of significantly higher COVID-19 incidence among historically disadvantaged groups in the U.S. and elsewhere underscores how the biological systems through which a virus spreads overlap with the social systems of poverty and structural racism.[1] Meanwhile, the proliferation of mutual aid efforts via the internet demonstrates how modern-day technological systems can magnify and accentuate classic systems of charitable organizing during crisis.[2] The pandemic has shown starkly and unquestionably that both the problems we endure and the solutions we construct ultimately rely on complex and interlinked systems.

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) launched the *Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems* initiative in 2016 in order to encourage funders to collaborate and place longer-term, adaptive resources

to fund and accelerate scalable solutions targeting systemic changes around pressing global issues. Past research conducted for this initiative has established the value of flexible, long-term, collaborative, and learning-oriented funding models in scaling solutions and impact, and facilitating systems change. This report, the initiative's latest publication, builds on these past insights while exploring new territory to stimulate further learning and collaboration.

Drawing on secondary research, advisory experience, and observations and conversations from a series of convenings, this report illustrates how funders can design for and measure progress on systems change. In particular, the report marshals data from workshops in the U.S., Kenya, India, and Colombia, each of which focused on design and measurement in tackling systemic challenges. Attendees at these workshops brought unique and invaluable perspectives to the challenge and imperative of shifting systems. The report also incorporates insights from RPA's systems evaluation partners, discussions with a wide range of funders and program partners, other networks on similar themes, and the growing literature in this field.

Below is a summary of the most important findings and recommendations of this latest phase of the Scaling Solutions initiative.

## FINDINGS

1. A common challenge for funders trying to understand the systems they aim to change is striking a balance between two major priorities: 1) recognizing a system's complexity and dynamism, and 2) simplifying a system to facilitate program planning and to fit into grantmaking processes.

2. Funders and program partners aim for different types of systems change: incremental change (change within existing rules), reform (change to existing rules), and transformation (creation of entirely new rules).[3] Each type of change entails distinct tactics, priorities, and time horizons.

3. Funders and their program partners collect a vast amount of data every year. However, much of it is unused and tends to focus on resource inputs, activities, and short-term outcomes. Of all the data collected for projects supported by philanthropy, very little of it illuminates whether and how funding contributes to long-term and systemic change.

4. Funders interested in systems change face a variety of challenges, ranging from limited resources to disagreement over goals. However, the growing interest in systems change presents an opportunity to confront these challenges together in new ways.

5. Monitoring and evaluation attached to philanthropic funding tends to be tied to short-term, discrete projects and linear models of change. As such, the benefits of good evaluation practice cannot be tapped to explore systems change, which require more holistic and adaptive approaches.

Each of these findings inform the series of recommendations listed below and highlighted throughout the report.

1 https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html

2 https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/3/24/21188779/mutual-aid-coronavirus-covid-19-volunteering

3 This typology was introduced at a workshop by Glenn Page of SustainaMetrix.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engaging **stakeholders**, being r**igorous and collaborative in gathering and analyzing evidence**, and exchanging **lessons** with others is essential for promoting and scaling best practices in systems change.

2. By **mapping the systems they aim to change while developing robust theories of change**, funders and program partners will better see how systems function, where promising leverage points and opportunities for intervention may exist, and where unintended consequences may arise.

3. Recognizing that **funders become a part of the systems in which they intervene** means that both their entrance into, and departure from, these systems have consequences, intended and unintended. Funders should be sensitive to this influence, incorporate it into funding considerations, and manage it to the extent possible.

4. **Government is typically a crucial partner in systems change efforts**. With outsized resources and policymaking capacity, government can be indispensable to systems change. Although philanthropy can be instrumental in catalyzing significant change, funders and their partners will often need to engage government to recognize and ideally scale their work.

5. **The private sector, including enterprises and investors, is a significant part of most systems** that funders endeavor to change. By involving the private sector more fully in systems change efforts, funders and program partners can access another lever to shift systems.

6. Strategies emphasizing **streamlined giving, inter-organizational and cross-sector collaboration, active learning, and appropriate deference to the experience-based expertise of grantees** facilitate systems change. The takeaway for funders is clear: shifting systems to address climate change, racial inequities, mass incarceration, educational inequality, and other pressing, multi-layered issues begins with a systemic shift in the philanthropic sector's own funding models.

This report details how incorporating these recommendations into grantmaking and partnership strategies can lead to more effective, sustainable, and scalable efforts to shift systems.

# Background: The *Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems* Initiative

The social and environmental problems that philanthropic organizations tackle with their partners are complex and deeply entrenched. To make progress on challenging issues, strategic funders understand the need to contend with underlying causes and overarching power dynamics—in other words, to address the systems that maintain and exacerbate these problems. By shifting systems, funders can effectively scale their impact toward more long-term, sustainable solutions.

Recognizing the importance of a systems change approach in philanthropy, the Skoll Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) came together with the Ford Foundation, Porticus, and the Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation in 2016 to launch the *Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems initiative.* The initiative has focused on two major goals: 1) to study how funders can work more collaboratively to deploy longer-term, adaptive resources to accelerate systemic changes around pressing global issues; and 2) to identify and promote best practices in systems change funding. As part of a Steering Group that included the funders listed above, RPA has undertaken extensive research and organized over 35 convenings in 10 countries to document and disseminate insights on how funders help enable their grantees and investees to pursue systems-

level impact. Before reviewing these insights, however, it is helpful to clarify the concept of systems change.

## UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS CHANGE

In its most abstract sense, a system can be understood as "a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time."[4] To make this concept a bit more concrete, consider the example of a foundation that decides to fund the development of a new curriculum in order to improve elementary mathematics education in an economically disadvantaged community. This might be a very valuable undertaking, as research suggests that high-quality curricula can help advance academic achievement.[5] From a broader systems perspective, however, it is necessary to understand that academic underperformance stems not only from a substandard curriculum, but also from larger social, economic, and political factors.

A systems-oriented funder will probe all of the root causes of the targeted problem, not only possible deficits in existing curricula. These root causes include the financial or social circumstances of the students' families, and nutritional and environmental factors influencing students' attention and study habits. A systems-oriented funder will also note the importance of policy in fostering the conditions necessary for greater academic achievement. Education policy determines everything from the rigor of teacher training to the amount of funding for extra-curricular activities, making it a critical part of the achievement equation. Closely related to the consideration of policy is the always-thorny issue of power dynamics. Understanding where, how, and when resources are committed to solving problems requires understanding how different interest groups co-exist with one another.

Finally, a systems-savvy funder will understand that a key property of complex systems is emergence, which is the tendency for systems to have properties that are distinct from those of their individual parts. Emergence is what makes systems so hard

4 Donella H. Meadows. 2008. *Thinking in Systems: A Primer.* London: Sustainability Institute.

5 David Steiner. 2017. *Curriculum Research: What We Know and Where We Need to Go.* StandardsWork. Retrieved from https://standardswork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/sw-curriculum-research-report-fnl.pdf.

to predict, often leading to unintended consequences following an intervention. For instance, a frequently cited unintended consequence of past standards-based educational reform is the tendency to "teach to the test" rather than to implement more creative and interactive lesson plans. Funders and practitioners have observed that teaching to the test can result in teaching that neglects the range of content students need to develop their potential. Systems approaches can help avoid such blinders.

To summarize, the Scaling Solutions initiative encourages systems-oriented approaches that include the following actions:

- Addressing root causes
- Appreciating how problems and solutions have different levels and layers of complexity
- Accounting for relationships in causality of problems and solutions

Shifting mindsets and behaviors

- Understanding and addressing power dynamics and interdependence
- Supporting improved policies and implementation of those policies
- Acknowledging that change is rarely linear
- Paying attention to emergence and unintended consequences

A systems-oriented funder often eschews taking on an entire system alone. However, knowledge of how the system works as a whole still facilitates smarter strategy, programming, and grantmaking. Moreover, as explained in the rest of this report, collaboration with other funders (some of whom may target different parts of the same system) is integral to effective systems change. Before proceeding to the specifics of how to strengthen this approach, it is useful to take stock of past findings and guidance generated by the Scaling Solutions initiative.

## TAKING STOCK OF PAST INSIGHTS

Over the past several years, the Scaling Solutions initiative has contributed substantially to the philanthropic sector's ongoing dialogue on improving approaches to systems change. The following is a cursory review of past insights and the convenings created through partnerships that generated this learning. Interested readers are encouraged to read the full reports, which are footnoted here and available on the Scaling Solutions webpage.

## ACHIEVING S.C.A.L.E.

The first Scaling Solutions report, published in September 2017, synthesizes a year's worth of secondary research, interviews, and workshops with nonprofit organizations, social entrepreneurs, foundations, and impact investors.[6] Focusing primarily on what funders can do to strengthen and support grantees and investees to scale efforts that achieve long-term impact, the report offers a series of recommendations summarized under the acronym SCALE:

**Streamlining** grantmaking/investment processes to allow for more unrestricted funding, less time-consuming applications, and longer funding periods.

**Collaborating** more effectively by sharing knowledge and due diligence with other funders, converging on common application standards, and participating in donor collaboratives.

**Accelerating** impact through needed non-monetary support, such as making introductions to other funders, boosting social media attention, and providing technical assistance.

**Learning** about the key levers for changing systems relevant to a particular problem, and then sharing that knowledge with grantees and investees so that they can strategize more effectively.

**Empowering** grantees and investees by maintaining mutual respect, offering guidance rather than directives, and shifting the power dynamics between the givers and receivers of funds.

6 Heather Grady, Kelly Diggins, Joanne Schneider, and Naamah Paley Rose. 2017. Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Retrieved from https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/05-18_RockPA-ScalingSolutions-WEB.pdf.

## CREATING AN "IMPACT ECONOMY"

A core aspect of adopting systemic thinking is to recognize one's own place in systems that perpetuate social and environmental problems. Accordingly, the Scaling Solutions initiative has encouraged funders to reflect critically on the financial and investment systems in which many of the problems they are trying to solve originate, and that fuel much of their giving. Philanthropic funders are increasingly paying attention to how financial capital can either perpetuate or challenge societies' systems of inequity and environmental degradation. For example, if foundation endowments and program-related investments (PRIs, a common charitable tool of U.S.-based foundations) are not supporting enterprises led by people of color, they may be reinforcing the persistent shortage of investment capital available to entrepreneurs of color. A systems-oriented perspective calls for actively engaging with investment decisions and their implications.

Following from this imperative, RPA organized a summit in 2018 to explore how to align investing practices and economic systems with impact commitments—in short, to work toward an "impact economy."[7] Participants left the two-day workshop with a Call to Action challenging philanthropy to use its grantmaking to build the infrastructure of a more impact-oriented economy, reorganize its investments so that they better serve social and environmental objectives, promote thought leadership and policymaking conducive to an impact-oriented economy, and advance organizational cultures that foster stakeholder responsibility and social innovation.[8] Coalitions and alliances represented at the convening have grown since, including the Wellbeing Economy Alliance and the SDG Transformations Forum.

7 "Philanthropy Transforming Finance: Building an Impact Economy." 2018. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Retrieved from https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Philanthropy-Transforming-Finance-Building-an-Impact-Economy-July-2018-Workshop-Report.pdf.

8 "Building an Impact Economy: A Call to Action for the Philanthropy Sector." 2019. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Retrieved from https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Race-Brook-Call-to-Action-for-Philanthropy.pdf. Further work on return-seeking capital in the service of systems change contributed to the more recent RPA publication Impact Investing Handbook: An Implementation Guide for Practitioners. https://www.rockpa.org/project/new-impact-investing-handbook/

## DIVING DEEPLY INTO COLLABORATION

Concurrent with its work on building an impact economy, RPA delved into the "C" of the SCALE framework, further investigating how funder collaboration can promote systems change. RPA compiled lessons from this research into the second Scaling Solutions report, published in September 2018.[9]

In addition to presenting examples of funders effectively implementing SCALE, this report focuses on funder collaboratives, identifying them as valuable instruments for shifting systems. Examining over twenty-five examples of collaboratives aimed at systems change, the report distills seven key findings:

**The Appeal of Collaboratives:** For funders seeking systems change, collaboration is often more effective and rewarding than working solo.

**Trust Enhances Trajectory:** Because collaboration works most smoothly when it is anchored in trust, collaboration built on sturdy relationships among members enjoys stronger growth.

**Navigating Complexity Requires Strong Leadership:** Collaboratives need leaders who are accountable to a collective purpose and can balance a range of competing institutional and individual interests.

**Proximity Facilitates Responsiveness:** Collaboratives united by a geography or population focus are often especially thoughtful and responsive, emphasizing community-based dialogue, listening to grantees, and encouraging consistent information exchange among funders.

**Shared Understanding Propels Alignment:** To coordinate their efforts, funders should first strive to align on underlying theories of change – their assumptions about how change happens and how funding can contribute to long-term impact.

**Assessment Is a Learning Priority:** Philanthropic funders want to deepen their understanding of designing for and measuring systems change.

**Addressing Obstacles Enhances Success:** Collaboratives maximize their chances for success by confronting, discussing, and resolving obstacles as they arise.

9 Heather Grady, Kelly Diggins, Joanne Schneider, and Naamah Paley Rose. 2018. *Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems: Approaches for Impact, Approaches for Learning.* Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Retrieved from https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/10-20-RockPA-Scaling-Solutions-02-WEB-1.pdf.

## EXPANDING INSIGHTS

To build on the findings above, particularly the need for stronger understanding of systems approaches in philanthropy, RPA and its partners have been exploring how funders design for and monitor progress on systems change. In July 2019, RPA organized a workshop on assessing systems change that drew on the deep expertise of the evaluation community, some of whom have logged decades of experience leading systems change initiatives.[10] The workshop brought together about thirty funder representatives with evaluation experts to create or deepen understanding of how to plan for and assess progress in shifting systems.

Additionally, RPA investigated how these efforts play out at the nexus of geography and specific social problems by organizing convenings focused on distinct issues in three different countries: promoting universal health coverage in Kenya, advancing gender equality in India, and narrowing the rural equity gap in Colombia.

This new line of research and dialogue has surfaced intriguing questions, incisive perspectives, and invaluable lessons. The remainder of this report shares these findings and recommendations on how funders can effectively shift systems toward substantial and lasting solutions. The self-diagnostic included in this publication is drawn from the rest of the report.[11]

10 "Assessing Systems Change: A Funders' Workshop Report." 2019. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Retrieved from https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Assessing-Systems-Change-A-Funders-Workshop-Report-Rockefeller-Philanthropy-Advisors-August-2019.pdf. Resource persons were Meg Hargreaves, Glenn Page and Zenda Ofir. More details are in the annexes.

11 Self-assessments, while needing validation from external sources, can help internal teams diagnose and address shortcomings. See also this tool from Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

# Toward Systems-Oriented Philanthropy

Once a niche idea, the notion that philanthropy has a unique role in propelling systems change has gained notable currency. The subject has garnered increasing attention from philanthropy-oriented conferences, philanthropic membership organizations, major philanthropy media outlets, and consulting firms that cater to philanthropists and philanthropic organizations. However, some experts caution that most funders fail to match words with actions when it comes to systems change. As Christian Seelos, Director of the Global Innovation for Impact Lab at Stanford University, warns, "The field of philanthropy may enthuse over systems thinking, but it betrays confusion about systems, system perspectives, and their claim to objectivity."[13]

Still, many are optimistic, arguing that the growing attention to systems marks important and tangible progress toward achieving real and lasting impact. As FSG consultants Srik Gopal and John Kania have noted, "Systems change in the social sector seems like an idea whose time has come. Several major foundations…have recently realigned their strategic visions and priorities, choosing systemic

13 Christian Seelos. "Changing Systems? Welcome to the Slow Movement." Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2020, pages 39-47.

change…as the pathway to achieve their goals and make positive social gains sustainable at scale, whether it's around increasing equity, improving health, or reducing poverty."[14]

And those working on systems over a longer period see this interest as wedge to a practice that is imperative. Glenn Page, founder of SustainaMetrix has noted, "For funders who think systems change is just a buzzword, just talk to folks in the Arctic or in Africa and ask them if systems are changing."

Professor Arja Rautio of the University of Oulu in Finland, for example, has noted that, "Rapid social and environmental change in the Arctic, including climate change, affect the health and well-being of millions of humans and animals that live in the Arctic. If we want to manage these risks effectively, we need to look at the ecosystem as a whole—for a healthy environment, healthy humans and healthy animals."[15]

The mounting interest in shifting systems highlights the need to implement more flexible, responsive, collaborative, and learning-oriented support strategies. As the Scaling Solutions initiative has demonstrated in prior work, adopting SCALE as a giving framework affords program partners needed room to experiment, innovate, and adapt as they take on complex and deep-rooted problems. With goals of long-term and transformational change, it is counterproductive for funders to provide only small amounts of short-term and heavily restricted funding.

The imperative of SCALE has become particularly clear with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has placed enormous stress on the operations, budgets, and staff of countless nonprofits, necessitating greater patience and flexibility from funders. There are encouraging examples of SCALE taking root in its wake. London Funders, a cross-sector membership network for funders and investors in London's civil society, quickly mobilized over 350 members to sign a statement on shifting funding practices.[16]

In the U.S., by June 2020 a pledge had been signed by over 700 U.S. organizations that have committed to loosening or eliminating grant restrictions, relaxing reporting requirements, boosting communication and transparency with grantees, and adopting lessons from the pandemic to inform future policy and practice changes within philanthropy. Spearheaded by Kathy Reich, BUILD Program Director at the Ford Foundation and a member of the Scaling Solutions Steering Group, this pledge signals the salience of SCALE particularly (but hopefully not exclusively) in times of extreme crisis.

Despite this encouraging sign of progress, funders interested in systems-level transformation undoubtedly face a variety of challenges. According to responses to a survey circulated among attendees of the Scaling Solutions July 2019 *Assessing Systems Change* workshop, there are many obstacles. They include insufficient resources, lack of understanding of how difficult rigorous evaluation can be, disagreement over goals and key variables to measure, a tendency

14 Srik Gopal and John Kania. "Fostering Systems Change." Stanford Social Innovation Review online. November 20, 2015.
15 https://arctic-council.org/en/news/biodiversity-and-human-health-whats-a-holistic-approach-to-good-health
16 https://londonfunders.org.uk/about

to avoid questions of systemic inequity, conflicting definitions of systems change and other key terms, and difficulty in interpreting academic evidence.

These findings suggest that driving systems change requires steadfast commitment and a willingness on the part of funders to transform their own mindsets, norms, and practices. Indeed, given sufficient dedication, each of the *challenges* noted in this report present simultaneously as *opportunities* for funders to evolve their philanthropic practices.

The following sections describe in more detail the efforts—including a number of convenings—from which we summarized the findings and recommendations at the beginning of the report. These represent some of the methods and tools for capitalizing on opportunities for deep change, and implementing a more systems-oriented approach to giving across three focus areas: 1) seeing systems change, 2) facilitating systems change, and 3) assessing systems change.

## CONNECTING TO OTHER SYSTEMS CHANGE NETWORKS AND INITIATIVES

While some initiatives and networks predate the Scaling Solutions initiative, many have grown over the last four years. Some of the efforts most relevant to this report are highlighted below.

International Futures Forum (IFF): A nonprofit dedicated to developing and spreading knowledge about complex systemic problems through forums and events.

SDG Transformations Forum: A community of systems change agents that develops and distributes the transformational infrastructure, resources, and practical knowledge for those interested in systems change.

Systemic Solutions Initiative of New Profit: A grantmaking initiative focused on backing "system entrepreneurs," innovative leaders working to disrupt and reshape systems to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Systems Change Observatory at the Skoll Centre of Social Entrepreneurship: A project designed to build a community of practice and research, focused on long-term observation and analysis of systems change efforts, including mechanisms, challenges, and solutions.

Forum for the Future's School of System Change: A learning platform designed to advance the field of systems change and to convene change agents in a spirit of collaboration and information sharing.

Social Innovation + Change Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School: An initiative to develop research, teaching material, and educational programs that help individuals and organizations navigate the challenges of effecting social change.

Academy for Systems Change: A network of individuals and organizations focused on cultivating systems change across multiple domains and ecosystems by promoting capacity building tools and frameworks.

Planetary Emergency Partnership: A project of The Club of Rome to convene leading actors from civil society, youth movements, scientific institutions, international organizations, and business in order to catalyze action on climate change and biodiversity loss.

Global Commons Alliance: An initiative supported by an investors collaborative to empower citizens, cities, companies and countries to become stewards of the global commons, the vital systems of climate, biodiversity, water and land that support humanity.

Catalyst 2030: A collaboration among leading social entrepreneurs and innovators from across the globe to accelerate progress on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Imperative 21: A business-led, cross-sector coalition working to align incentives and shift culture in order to foster stakeholder capitalism.

# *Seeing* Systems Change

Before working to shift systems, it is necessary to comprehend their interconnected parts and the full extent of their influence. Without this vantage point, it is very difficult to determine promising opportunities for intervention, to anticipate potential unintended consequences, and, ultimately, to gauge success and areas for improvement. In short, *changing systems begins with seeing systems.* As one considers the array of tools available to make systems more visible, it is important to keep in mind this overarching objective: creating a useful blueprint for supporting interventions by sizing up the system as a whole and spotlighting ways to commence lasting, meaningful, and responsive change—change that supports the agency of communities to themselves sustain and promote the changes they prioritize.

## SYSTEM COMPONENTS

The background section of this report introduced a system as a set of things interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time. As we move from understanding what a system is to seeing its specific components, it is useful to review four central system properties highlighted by Meg Hargreaves, an expert in systems change and one of the lead facilitators of RPA's July 2019 gathering: boundaries, perspectives, interrelationships, and human system dynamics.[17]

## BOUNDARIES

According to the American Evaluation Association's Systems in Evaluation Topical Interest Group, "Boundaries delineate what is and/or should be 'in' and 'out' [of] focus... Boundary choices delineate the physical, temporal, political, social, cultural, ideological, technical, and ethical spaces occupied by [the] situation."[18] Boundary-setting can be a tricky task, as placing a boundary too widely can overwhelm an intervention plan while placing one too narrowly may exclude important perspectives, partnerships, and points of entry.[19]

In addition, funders should be cognizant of their own place within a system when thinking about boundaries. Funders must recognize that once they intervene in a system through their funding, they become part of that system. As a result, they cannot withdraw without creating consequences, likely unintended. As one of the participants of the Colombia workshop noted, "Organizations tend to think of their job as going to a community, developing a project, and then leaving. As soon as an organization intervenes in a community, it becomes part of the social system. Organizations don't see [themselves] as part of the system—this hinders results and the solution will be ineffective."

**Recognizing that funders become a part of the systems in which they intervene means that both their entrance into and departure from these systems have consequences, intended and unintended, for system stakeholders. Funders should be sensitive to this influence, incorporate it into funding considerations, and manage it to the extent possible.**

## PERSPECTIVES

Systems appear different depending on the observer. Stakeholders bring different perspectives to any given issue and can have vastly different incentives, leading them to pursue distinct agendas. Seeing systems requires sensitivity to this diversity of stakeholder positions and perspectives, especially those of marginalized groups.

On this point, RPA's research uncovered a common frustration among workshop participants in different countries about funders who lack knowledge of the regions in which they intervene, leading to ignorance about the perspectives of the very stakeholders that these funders aim to help. This problem was especially apparent among funders supporting projects far beyond their own countries' borders. In the India workshop, for example, an NGO representative expressed a concern that power dynamics create imbalance between international organizations and local organizations. As the representative explained, "it is critical for us to work towards

17 For more on these system elements, see the following: Hargreaves, Margaret B. November 2018. *Leveraging Systemic Change: Evaluating What Works.* Chicago, IL: NORC at the University of Chicago.

18 Systems in Evaluation TIG. Principles for Effective Use of Systems Thinking in Evaluation. Page 19. https://www.systemsinevaluation.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/SETIG-Principles-FINAL-DRAFT-2018-9-9.pdf

19 Hargreaves has pointed to a work titled *Critical Systems Heuristics* as a useful tool for understanding and critiquing system boundaries. Developed by Werner Ulrich and based on work by C. West Churchman, the tool asks a series of questions relating to various system properties, which help to guide the boundary-setting process.

equal partnership." While not an indictment of cross-border giving in general, these observations suggest that international funders should invest more in learning about the cultures and regions they are trying to affect, and that these funders should express due respect for the knowledge and perspectives that local organizations have developed through years of direct experience.

## INTERRELATIONSHIPS

Interrelationships are the formal and informal links, exchanges, and interdependencies among system components. Webs of interrelationships are what make complex systems difficult to change. As such, they are important to understand in the early stages of planning an intervention.

In the Colombia workshop, there was a clear perception among attendees that government and aid agencies view rural development too narrowly, emphasizing economic criteria while sidelining matters of health, education, and basic needs. A more comprehensive view of this systemic issue would take greater account of the interrelationships among healthcare, education, and economic prospects for poor Colombians in rural regions.

**Engaging stakeholders, being rigorous and collaborative in gathering and analyzing evidence, and exchanging lessons with others is essential for promoting and scaling best practices in systems change.**

## HUMAN SYSTEM DYNAMICS

In addition to intricate interrelationships, a principal characteristic of complex systems is that they are adaptive. In other words, individuals and organizations in complex systems learn and adjust their behaviors continually. Seeing a system requires understanding how individuals and organizations have adapted over time and how they are likely to adapt in the future following the introduction of an intervention.

To illustrate, the nonprofit Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) has worked with the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company (NCWSC) to improve relations between the company and low-income residents in informal settlements surrounding Nairobi. Low levels of trust in city institutions, vandalism, illegal vendors and criminal gangs in these settlements have all added to the difficulties of implementing and managing utility services. To address these obstacles, WSUP has built strong and trusting relationships with local leaders and communities, which has made new water supply networks possible, particularly for the poorest, demonstrating the importance of how behavior adjustment is a critical part of systems change.

**A common challenge for funders trying to understand the systems they aim to change is striking a balance between two major priorities: 1) recognizing a system's complexity and dynamism; and 2) simplifying a system to facilitate program planning and fit into grantmaking processes.**

## MAPPING SYSTEMS

Having outlined the four system properties above, it is useful to review approaches for rendering these properties visible. Mapping systems is a helpful tool to see how systems function, where opportunities for intervention exist, and what kinds of unintended consequences may arise.

A common challenge in drawing up a system blueprint that incorporates each of the properties outlined in the previous section is striking a proper balance between taking account of the sheer complexity of systems and simplifying these system components in a way that facilitates strategic planning and execution. One method for accomplishing this balancing act is mapping a system visually. When mapping a system, it can be useful to start by asking the following questions:

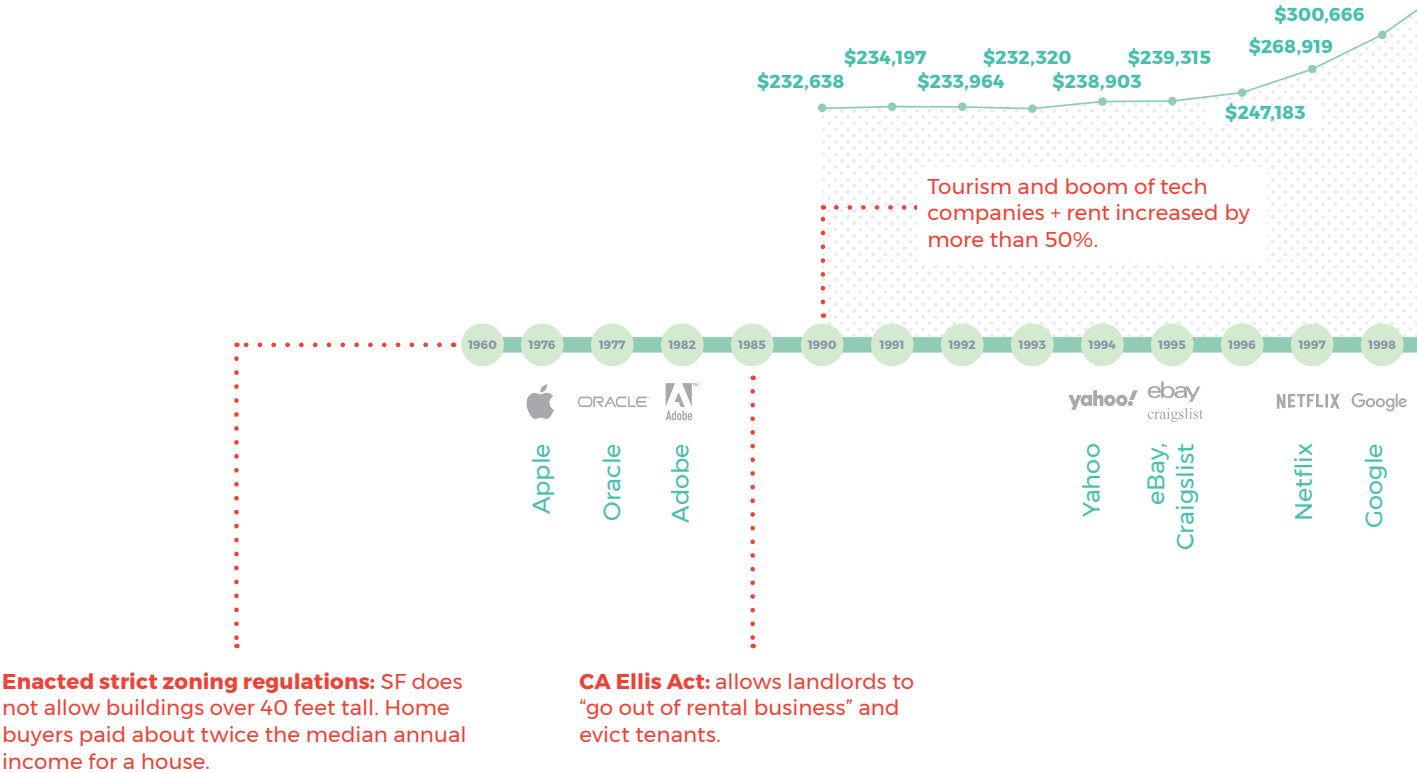
- What attributes have we identified that can be used to draw a map of the system?
- What led to the system that we have today?
- Who are the key actors and how do they influence each other?
- Are there any feedback loops among the system's components? If so, where do they occur?

With these questions in mind, it is possible to choose among an assortment of visualization options to map various system components. One tool is a **timeline** exercise, which displays the evolution of a system and helps program planners to understand what led to the system in which they are planning to intervene. By documenting legal, social, political, and economic influences over time, we can grasp the events and factors that shaped the system. Using this tool can also help to manage expectations for the time needed to achieve change.

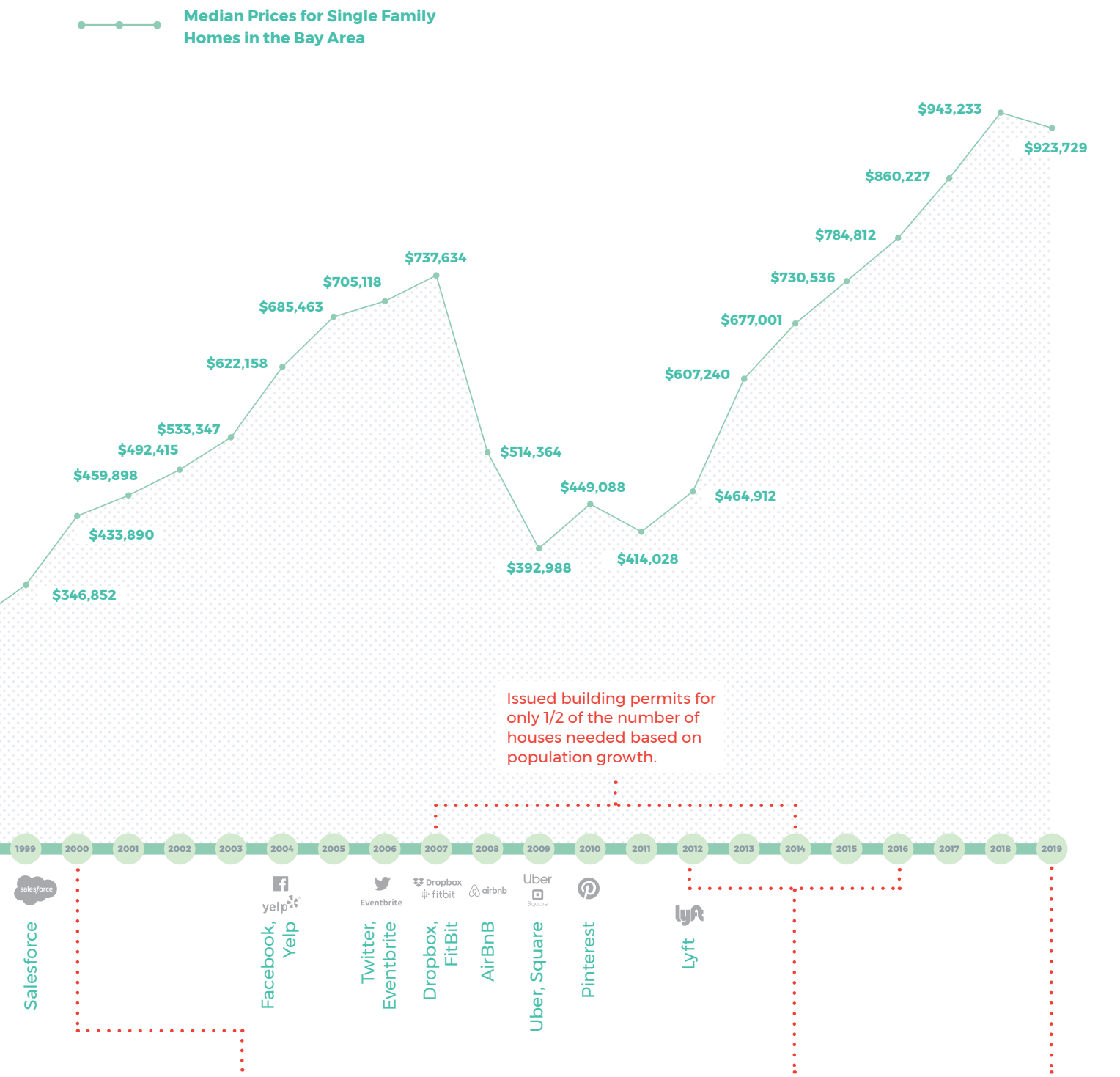
The *Assessing Systems Change* workshop surfaced examples of how this timeline process can make it possible to see systems change. In one case, a group created a timeline for the development of the modern philanthropy sector in China. This timeline illuminated a myriad of data points including the importance of the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 in helping the Chinese nonprofit sector to flourish, the crucial role of government policy and coalition-building in generating understanding of the sector's importance in a particular time period, and the relationship between the post-1980 emergence of wealth holders and the growth of private Chinese philanthropy.

A second example from the workshop explored the problem of homelessness and housing cost pressures in the San Francisco Bay Area. In this case, a timeline illuminated the expansion of tech and tech-serving businesses there since 1980, along with the enormous job growth during this time. A workshop participant and resident who was born and raised in the area employed the timeline tool to help understand how the housing crisis emerged.[20] The timeline framed

these developments against the scant supply of new housing units and the runaway cost of living in the same period. The tool also plotted the passage of housing and zoning laws against the rise of new tech companies in the area. Presenting this information visually drew attention to how the limitations of new housing, along with the influx of highly compensated tech talent, has contributed to the housing crisis in the Bay Area. The overlapping timelines promoted thoughtful discussion, which in turn generated new insights about these important issues.




20 Kelly Diggins, Program Coordinator, RPA.


Median Prices for Single Family Homes in the Bay Area
$346,852
$433,890
$459,898
$492,415
$533,347
$622,158
$685,463
$705,118
$737,634
$514,364
$392,988
$449,088
$414,028
$464,912
$607,240
$677,001
$730,536
$784,812
$860,227
$943,233
$923,729
Issued building permits for only 1/2 of the number of houses needed based on population growth.
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Salesforce
Facebook, Yelp
Twitter, Eventbrite
Dropbox, FitBit
AirBnB
Uber, Square
Pinterest
Lyft
**Gentrification:** residents facing eviction for the city to build more luxurious housing. Mission District change experienced 14.2% of evictions in 2000.
Bay Area added 373,000 new jobs but only permitted 58,0000 new housing units. Median housing price doubles.
**2019:** 9x median annual income needed to buy a house. Median house price for SF: $1.7 million.

**By mapping the systems they aim to change while developing robust theories of change, funders and program partners can better see how systems function, where promising leverage points and opportunities for intervention may exist, and where unintended consequences may arise.**

Another visual tool is the **iceberg model**, which typically describes four levels that constitute systems. At the top are observable events (e.g., a child who drops out of school because of low grades and poor standardized test scores). Below events are patterns and trends over time that lead to these events (e.g., the persistence of academic underperformance in that community and the growing prominence of standardized tests). Further below are system structures that give rise to patterns and trends (e.g., an underfunded school system and families in the same school who either have, or lack, the resources to hire tutors). Finally, at the base of the iceberg are mental models—values, attitudes, and beliefs—that define people's assumptions, thought processes, judgments and ultimately actions (e.g., a belief in objectivity in testing, or state officials who believe that the community is hopeless anyway).

Though an iceberg model is useful for illustrating system components, it is important to keep in mind that this tool offers only a snapshot of a system at a given point in time. Significant disruptions, such as a global pandemic, can dramatically reconfigure systems, and funders should respond by adjusting their visualizations accordingly. For example, the U.S. child welfare system has traditionally detected cases of child abuse and neglect by collecting reports from teachers, doctors, and other professionals who come into regular contact with children. This set of structures has enabled the system to track and address cases of abuse and neglect. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has cut off children from many of these interactions, making it more difficult to detect causes of abuse and neglect.[21]

The practice of rendering a system visible through mapping strategies is useful in the development of a theory of change (TOC), which captures current understanding of the causal links in a system and how planned interventions can lead to intended impacts. Through narrative language, a wireframe diagram, or a combination of both, a TOC defines an initiative's long-term goals and then maps backward to the activities and short-term outcomes required to attain those goals, showing how the planned intervention aligns with recognized best practices and highlighting the key variables to measure when assessing progress. Ideally, a TOC marshals preexisting evidence and provides an action plan for effecting real change, thus providing a guide for facilitating systems change, as discussed in more detail in the following section.[22]

21 https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-covid-19-means-for-americas-child-welfare-system/

22 A useful reference for work on theory of change is a guide from HIVOS: https://knowledge.hivos.org/sites/default/files/publications/hivos_toc_guidelines_final_nov_2015.pdf

## ICEBERG MODEL EXERCISE

In designing for systems change, groups can use discrete events to illuminate the deeper layers in societies that maintain the status quo. Identifying causes and effects at deeper levels often leads to funding different types of interventions.

# GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF FOOD

The Global Alliance for the Future of Food (Global Alliance) is a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations working together and with others to transform global food systems now and for future generations. Profound changes in the way food is grown, processed, distributed, consumed, and wasted over the last several decades have undermined prospects to establish and maintain sustainable, equitable, and secure food systems. Food system transformation requires new and better solutions at many points through a systems-level approach and deep collaboration among multiple actors, including philanthropists, researchers, grassroots movements, policymakers, corporations, farmers, and Indigenous peoples.

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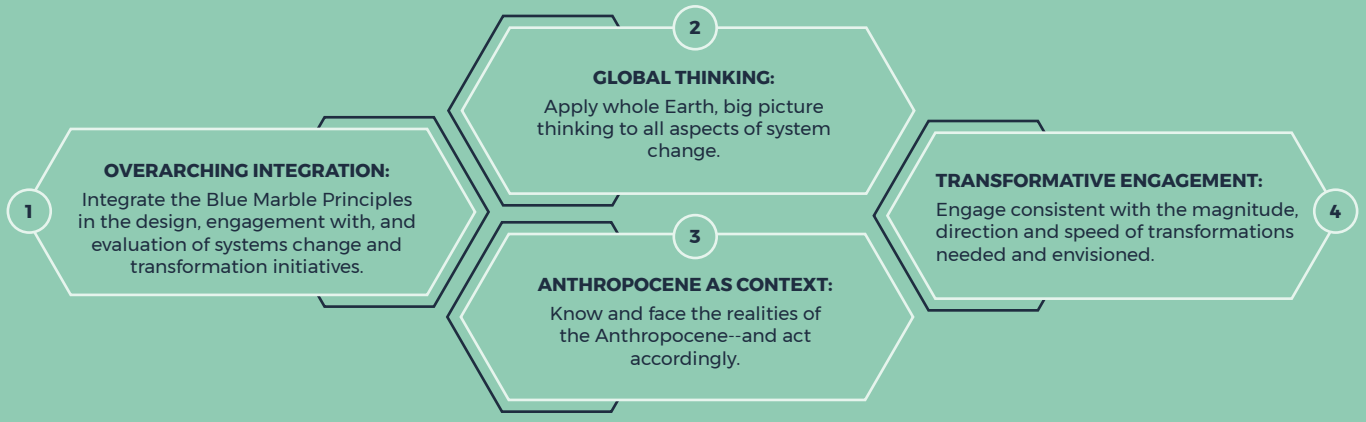
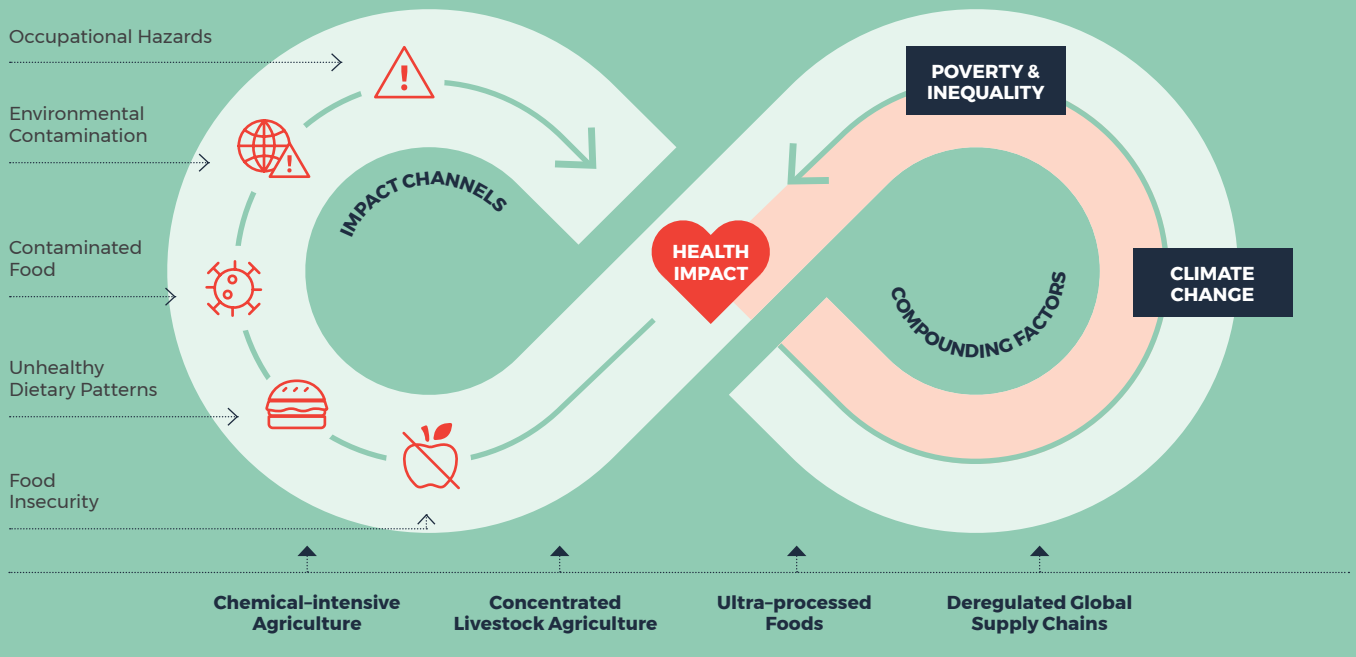
Seven core principles guide the Global Alliance's work: renewability, resilience, equity, diversity, healthfulness, inclusion, and interconnectedness. Together, these principles shape the Global Alliance's vision, express their values, and encompass the changes they want to make. The principles are dynamic in nature, making it clear that they are not aiming to create static outputs. This effort to reach beyond static outputs is a core component of a systems change approach.

The Global Alliance partners with Blue Marble Evaluation, an innovative, leading-edge evaluation approach for global systems transformation. Blue Marble Evaluation encourages users to embrace and act on a "whole-Earth" perspective, looking beyond nation-state lines and across sector and issue silos to connect the global and local, the human and ecological, the macro and the micro, through evaluative thinking and methods. In the image below are the four overarching principles that provide big picture and general guidance to the Blue Marble approach.



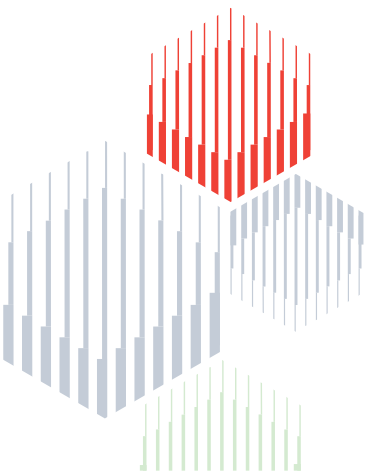
The Global Alliance also recognizes that food systems affect health through multiple, interconnected pathways, generating severe human and economic costs when these systems fail. However, the full picture is often lost from view, obscuring the root causes of poor health. The image below is designed to illustrate the multiple, interconnected ways in which food systems affect human health through five channels of impact and three compounding systemic factors.[23]

Systems change takes time, and this funder alliance has invested in the collaborative design and measurement frameworks that underpin meaningful, lasting and transformative change.




23 For more information see https://futureoffood.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/FoodHealthNexus_Full-Report_FINAL.pdf.

# *Facilitating* Systems Change



Mapping out a system is not just an academic exercise in illustrating and explaining complexity; it is a crucial step in identifying promising openings for intervention and then taking action. However, before drawing up program plans and committing resources, funders should determine the type of change they are targeting. This is an important strategic consideration, as it shapes the conditions, expectations, and timeframes associated with grant allocations, program monitoring, and stakeholder communications.

## TYPES OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Facilitators of the July 2019 workshop on assessing systems change outlined three major types of change, each with its own strategic implications: incremental change, reform, and transformation.[24]

1. **Incremental change** involves improving performance within existing rules and norms. A campaign to pick up litter in an urban area, for example, can be a significant boost to community cohesion and beautification efforts in that area while lying well within the parameters of existing regulations and norms.

2. **Reform** entails revising structures, rules, and norms so that new types of actions become increasingly prevalent. An example of this type of change strategy is the Ford Foundation's support for environmental advocacy organizations such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense Fund, both of which have been instrumental in authoring and promoting new environmental legislation, changing the rules governing how waste is disposed of in the first place.

3. **Transformation** involves creating previously unimagined possibilities and new ways of tackling problems. An illustration of this type of change is the origin of the recycling industry, launched by a collection of scrappy and idealistic nonprofits that introduced entirely new ideas about how to manage waste, ideas that established the foundation for a massive for-profit industry.[25]

**Funders and program partners aim for different types of systems change: incremental change, reform, and transformation.**

**Each type of change entails distinct tactics, priorities, and time horizons.**

While transformation is clearly the most ambitious category of change, it is also the most difficult to achieve and attribute to a specific intervention. Therefore, funders should recognize that each type of change described above is legitimate and worth pursuing in its own right, especially as part of a collaborative effort combining different change strategies and objectives. At the same time, funders who commit to reform and transformation must be prepared to adapt their grantmaking strategies to accommodate the challenges that come with ambitious goals.

Workshop participants emphasized a frequent asymmetry between the scale of funder ambitions and the scale of giving strategies. Participants noted the preponderance of short-term grants (two years or less) requiring short-term deliverables and reporting. This restricted timespan hampers grantees' ability to engage in the risk-taking, experimentation, and concerted long-term effort that systemic change necessitates. In the Kenya workshop, a funder suggested that "supporting data and research systems, and ensuring data is disseminated, are better than one-off investments." This point speaks to the value of maintaining a sustainable funding stream to support the infrastructure needed for meaningful change over time.

In addition to the limited duration of grants, the narrow strategic scope of grants is often incompatible with meaningful systems change. Workshop participants reported that funders frequently encourage their grantees to "go to scale" without providing the required capacity-building support. To illustrate the value of such support, a participant in the Colombia workshop mentioned that, in addition to money, basic healthcare training for nonprofits in rural areas would help to improve women's health outcomes, thereby improving women's graduation rates and stimulating economic development.

24 This typology was introduced at a workshop by Glenn Page of SustainaMetrix.

25 Michael Lounsbury, Marc Ventresca, and Paul M. Hirsch. 2003. "Social Movements, Field Frames and Industry Emergence: A Cultural-Political Perspective on US Recycling." *Socio-Economic Review* 1(1): 71-104.

In sum, funders should be sensitive to how different types of systems change call for different modes of philanthropy. Achieving ambitious systemic change often calls for longer time horizons, more generous capacity-building assistance, and more flexible grants than conventional program funding does. To accelerate grantees in their efforts to shift systems, funders should align their giving strategies to the degree of difficulty that their grantees are likely to face in their campaigns to tackle complex and entrenched problems.

## LEVERAGE POINTS AND ADAPTIVE ACTION PLANNING

The iceberg model, mentioned above, which describes levels of analysis to describe systems, also uncovers distinct parts of a system in which to intervene. Donella Meadows, a pioneering environmental scientist who wrote extensively on systems change, describes these intervention opportunities as "leverage points."[26] Leverage points refer to any system component that can be changed and, as a result, that can potentially lead to a cascade of additional changes throughout the system, such as in laws, standards, information flows, and beliefs.

Regardless of the leverage point targeted in an intervention, it is necessary to keep in mind that complex initiatives require flexible leadership capable of adapting to fluctuating circumstances. One method to facilitate this is Adaptive Action Planning, a process developed by Glenda Eoyang and Royce Holladay that emphasizes three overarching priorities:

### SYSTEMS APPROACHES BUILD CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO CRISES

The British foundation Wellcome intentionally engages with system leverage points. As an organization dedicated to preparing for and responding to epidemics, Wellcome has become integral to the U.K.'s campaign against COVID-19, but the foundation's anti-pandemic strategy is not simply a reaction to a sudden emergency. In fact, Wellcome has cultivated a comprehensive and proactive strategy for combating multiple infectious diseases over the years. This strategy includes the following:

- Funding the development of a new Ebola vaccine
- Sponsoring research on the ethics of medical trials involving pregnant women (which was critically important during the Zika virus crisis)
- Underwriting studies on public attitudes toward vaccines across the world
- Investing in researchers in regions most affected by infectious disease
- Fostering conversation on how to prepare effectively for future epidemics

In short, Wellcome has taken full advantage of the multiple leverage points available to "outsmart epidemics," from hard science to advocacy.[27]

26 Donella H. Meadows. 2008. *Thinking in Systems: A Primer.* London: Sustainability Institute.
27 To learn more, please visit https://wellcome.ac.uk/about-us.

1. Developing a picture of the situation's underlying dynamics (the "**What?**");

2. Analyzing the impact of the current patterns on the issue of interest (the "**So What?**"); and

3. Taking action and then checking the action's impact on the issue (the "**Now What?**") disposed of in the first place.[28]

Taken together, these strategic considerations function as guardrails for ambitious change strategies, ensuring that the intervention remains informed by careful analysis and is ready to change course as necessary.

**Strategies emphasizing streamlined giving, inter-organizational and cross-sector collaboration, active learning, and appropriate deference to the experience-based expertise of grantees facilitate systems change.**

**The takeaway for funders is clear: Shifting systems to address climate change, mass incarceration, educational inequality, and other pressing issues begins with a systemic shift in the philanthropic sector's own funding models.**

Testimony from country workshop participants reinforced the importance of thoughtful and strategic adaptive action planning. Two points in particular stood out in this regard. First, attendees called for broader collaboration across government, civil society, business, and academia. To be sure, there are certainly benefits to specialization. As one participant in India put it, each sector "should know its role and not step on each other's toes." At the same time, however, attendees made clear that operating in silos can prevent an integrated, systems-oriented approach, which is often necessary to identifying and activating leverage points in a system. While some specialization is welcome, it can also be important to collaborate and coordinate across sectoral boundaries.

The private sector, for example, can be an important ally, not just a target, in driving systems change efforts; as corporations have begun to subscribe to stakeholder capitalism, businesses have become significant partners in systems change. To illustrate, JUST Capital's COVID-19 Corporate Response Tracker demonstrates how some of the largest corporations in the U.S. have restructured their employment systems in light of the coronavirus pandemic and in the interest of their stakeholders.[29]

**The private sector, including enterprises and investors, is a significant part of most systems that funders endeavor to change. By involving the private sector more fully in systems change efforts, funders and program partners are able to access another lever to shift systems.**

28 Glenda H. Eoyang and Royce J. Holladay. 2013. *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

29 https://justcapital.com/reports/the-covid-19-corporate-response-tracker-how-americas-largest-employers-are-treating-stakeholders-amid-the-coronavirus-crisis/

Equally important, more cooperation is needed within the philanthropic sector specifically. The power and importance of donor collaboration was clear in conversations at each of these workshops. Consistent with past findings of the Scaling Solutions initiative on the importance of donor collaboratives, participants agreed that funders should strive to combine efforts and avoid duplicative work; to "create a better organized ecosystem of funders working toward common goals" as summarized in the Colombia-based workshop. At the same time, workshop participants cautioned that funders should take care not to tip the power balance too far out of the hands of grantees and investees. When done well, donor collaboration enhances the voice and agency of organizations serving community members, rather than just those funding the work.

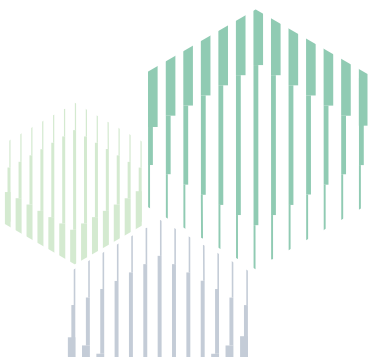
Finally, discussions of scaling solutions and impact often touched on the pivotal role of government. Government resources for promoting well-being and public goods far exceed those of the nonprofit sector. As one participant in the Kenya workshop explained, "we recognize government as the ultimate duty bearer of traditional health services." Furthermore, governments establish the regulatory environment in which systems materialize, thus determining the leverage points available to funders interested in systems change. Given the public sector's indispensable role in securing and sustaining basic human services, shifting systems is extremely difficult without involving them.

**Government is typically a crucial partner in systems change efforts. With outsized resources and policymaking capacity, government can be indispensable to systems change. Although philanthropy can be instrumental in catalyzing significant change, funders and their partners will often need to engage government to legitimize and scale their work.**

Clearly, there are many points to consider as a funder draws up an adaptive action plan – the type of change targeted, potential leverage points, and strategic partners, to name a few. In addition to these considerations, it is necessary to build in systems and processes for gleaning lessons from systems change efforts. The following section of the report shifts attention to the essential, though unfortunately often neglected, task of assessing systems change.

# *Assessing* Systems Change

Taking stock of success and failure in system change efforts is critical to spreading knowledge of what works and, as a result, building and scaling effective social change strategies. Recognizing the importance of learning and evaluation, scholars and consultants have written extensively on social impact assessment, and the philanthropic sector has developed a full toolkit of frameworks and methods to utilize when evaluating performance. Common techniques include drafting logic models, setting SMART goals, and calculating social return on investment. Though sometimes useful, these tools are not always well suited to a systems change approach, as elaborated below.



## A NEW APPROACH TO EVALUATION

Driven partly by the growing influence of business-minded thinking in the nonprofit sector, the methods mentioned above have helped to instill a welcome sense of accountability, but they have also led to a sometimes-dogmatic demand for measurement and a deluge of data, most of it required of funded program partners. Much of this data is unused and tends to focus on resource inputs, activities, and short-term outcomes. In essence, of all the data collected for philanthropically supported projects, very little of it says anything about whether and how the funding contributes

to long-term and systemic change. For example, when a funder provides resources for a project or program spanning two years, they often request a report at the end of that period to understand what grantees produced (outputs) and what they helped to change (outcomes). In some of these cases, there may be information about incremental change, but it takes much longer to gather evidence of reform or transformation in systems.

**Funders and their program partners collect a vast amount of data every year. However, much of it is unused and tends to focus on resource inputs, activities, and short-term outcomes. Of all the data collected for projects supported by philanthropy, very little of it illuminates whether and how funding contributes to long-term and systemic change.**

Traditionally, evaluators have deployed these tools to assess the value of particular projects and programs that may not be designed to influence how an entire system functions. This traditional template for evaluation applies most directly to relatively unambiguous and stable situations, where root causes, intervention designs, and targeted outcomes are reasonably well-defined and understood.

Systems change generally demands a different approach to evaluation. While popular notions of social impact evaluation tend to assume discrete projects and relatively straightforward theories of change, systems change assessment requires a more holistic view of how different types of programs complement each other, and a more adaptive understanding of program implementation. As discussed previously, funders cannot approach the assessment of a system change effort as if it were a drug trial, where the systems and outcomes under study can be neatly separated from the observer. When it comes to complex social, economic, and political dynamics, funders themselves are integral to the systems they aim to influence. Consequently, a more reflexive approach is necessary.

Furthermore, as also mentioned before, local communities often possess indispensable knowledge about how to shift the irreducibly complex systems in which they live. As a result, funders need to scale back the air of detached scientific authority that is often associated with evaluation, instead embracing a more humble and open-minded approach to evaluation that recognizes the importance of community knowledge and grantee experience.

As evaluation expert Zenda Ofir has noted, "Measuring systems change is about detecting patterns in the connections between the parts. It is about qualitative changes in the structure of the system, about its adaptiveness and resilience, about synergies emerging from collective efforts—and more. Therefore, focusing only on quantitative data limits insight. Qualitative data add the texture, nuance, and understanding on which good decisions depend."[30]

30 For more information on the work of Zenda Ofir, see https://zendaofir.com/

# THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION'S FIRST NATIONS WORK IN CANADA

Established in 1937, the McConnell Foundation is a private Canadian foundation committed to building a more sustainable, inclusive, resilient, and innovative Canada. In 2013, the Foundation established the McConnell Reconciliation Initiative to develop dialogue and cooperation between Indigenous communities and the philanthropic sector. With an initial three-year, $3 million funding commitment, the McConnell Reconciliation Initiative has grown to approximately $23 million and has made notable contributions to on-reserve housing, education, food security, self-governance, child welfare, and economic development, thus fostering a culture of reconciliation.

In 2019, an evaluation of the McConnell Reconciliation Initiative was conducted to capture key stories and lessons, to learn more about emerging patters of practice for individuals and organizations engaged in reconciliation, and to highlight implications for the field and the foundation's strategy moving forward. As part of this evaluation, a series of convenings took place with Indigenous innovators, Indigenous youth and Indigenous elders. This enabled the foundation to celebrate what had been accomplished, identify areas where the initiative could improve, and clarify what is needed in the future to support the reconciliation ecosystem and Indigenous innovators in general.

While the foundation covered the costs of these gatherings, the community members determined the agenda items and the format. Thus, the McConnell Foundation has helped to build the field of Indigenous philanthropy in Canada, modeling how to engage with Indigenous communities as partners by ceding a measure of authority and control.

## ELEMENTS OF SYSTEMS-ORIENTED ASSESSMENT

Assessing systems change can seem overwhelming, so it is useful to break the task down into the following elements. Done well, systems change assessment will focus on each of the following priorities.[31]

**Engaging Stakeholders:** As discussed before, system stakeholders bring myriad perspectives to any issue, and diversity of perspective may entail conflicting views on the nature and value of an intervention's goals and results. Accordingly, a well-planned systems change assessment will engage stakeholders from the beginning to incorporate their views. Critical thinking is at the center of thoughtful systems change, and program planners are well advised to question their own assumptions, engage members of populations that an intervention is designed to serve, and incorporate beneficiary input throughout planning, execution, and evaluation processes.

**Describing the Program:** Systems change initiatives can have many moving parts. Individuals steering these initiatives should be able to articulate the intervention's purpose, size, scope, diversity of activities, operating locations, and underlying assumptions. As indicated previously, a well-rounded theory of change can help to clarify many of these attributes, thus making it easier to highlight the aspects of the program to be tracked for evaluative purposes.

**Focusing the Evaluation Design:** There are numerous evaluation tools at one's disposal. A critical step in laying the groundwork for an evaluation plan is to determine which combination of methods can address relevant complexity challenges, and which techniques will help to answer the question of how the intervention has contributed to the observed changes. At the same time, the evaluation plan should be adaptable so that program leaders can incorporate new data as the intervention evolves.

**Gathering Credible Evidence:** Evidence is the raw material for evaluations. As such, evidence should be directly relevant to the questions at the center of the evaluation and should be collected with as much

31 For more information on this framework, see https://www.cdc.gov/eval/guide/index.htm.

rigor as possible. It is helpful to remember that not all data count as evidence. Data is information; evidence is information that has been curated and contextualized in a way that makes it responsive to the puzzle an evaluation aims to solve. Therefore, evaluators should be able to explain why the information they collect meets the standard of credible evidence.

**Justifying Conclusions:** Gathering credible evidence is essential to presenting valid, reliable conclusions. However, quality evidence is only part of the equation. Equally important is the analysis that converts evidence into findings and conclusions. Evaluators should base their conclusions on a well-reasoned analytical plan and a careful vetting of data sources.

**Sharing Lessons and Ensuring Use:** An evaluation is useful not only for internal monitoring purposes but also for external field-building efforts. A funder that happens upon novel and actionable insights through the evaluation process can provide a valuable service to likeminded organizations by sharing lessons on successes, missteps and failures, and explaining how to scale promising practices.

Of course, these elements should not be regarded as mere boxes to be checked as part of a strategic plan. Each demands special and concerted attention from funders who are serious about shifting systems toward positive social and environmental change.

# SELF-DIAGNOSTIC TOOL

## IS YOUR ORGANIZATION SUPPORTING PROGRAM PARTNERS THROUGH SYSTEMS APPROACHES TO PHILANTHROPY?

***Diagnosing a Funding Organization***

Whether a funder aims for incremental change, reform, or full-fledged transformation rests on a variety of factors, including the preferences of the board and senior leadership, the time horizon on which the organization operates, and the resources available for different types of grantmaking.[32] Regardless of the particular strategic approach adopted, however, the following set of diagnostic considerations should help to clarify the degree to which a funder is systems-oriented in its giving and program planning. For each of these dozen statements, consider whether a given organization's staff and partners would agree, and how strongly. If the response tends to be "strongly agree," then the organization has likely embraced a systemic approach. Ambivalence in responses should not be discouraging, however, as seeing opportunities for change is the first step in implementing change.

---

**1** A significant portion of our portfolio consist of multi-year grants that provide program partners with enough time to design for and create systems-level change.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**2** Once we agree with program partners on overall aims and activities, we allow them to use their funding flexibly so that they can adapt as needed without undertaking time-consuming revisions to individual line items in grant agreements and budgets.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**3** We adjust the length of our financial commitments to grantees to the timeframe needed to achieve meaningful impact.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**4** We understand that promising solutions and innovations take time to scale and commit to supporting these solutions and innovations beyond the "proof of concept" phase.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**5** We provide funding to monitoring/evaluation/learning in every grant we make.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

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32 For more on these aspects of foundations see RPA's Theory of the Foundation initiative and Philanthropy Framework.

**6** We use feedback processes so that program implementers and other partners can anonymously share both positive and critical perspectives on how we operate.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**7** We support the research and data collection costs necessary to understand and map the systems program partners aim to change.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**8** We consider funding proposals to build partnerships, coalitions, and movements across sectors.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**9** We make an effort to coordinate and collaborate with other funders, including philanthropic, business, and government organizations.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**10** We recognize the importance of government partners in scaling systems change, whether through policymaking or direct service provision.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**11** We rely on local expertise in program design, monitoring and evaluation.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**12** We take the time to understand a local funding ecosystem, and we acknowledge that once we are a part of it, we have a responsibility to understand how our actions (including our departure) affect it and to take those effects into consideration.

| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

- If you scored between 70 and 84, consider ways to actively share your practices, and what you've learned along the way, with other funders.
- If you scored between 35 and 70, you may want to spend time delving into resources included at the end of this report, and work with colleagues to create at least one organizational goal—to embrace a systems change funding best practice—that can accelerate your organization's impact.
- If you scored less than 35 and would like to incorporate more systems approaches in your work, you may want to begin conversations with colleagues, your board, and program partners on how to begin to shift your internal practices to foster this direction of travel.

# Conclusion



Especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing movement for racial justice, the scope and interconnectedness of issues—under-resourced health systems, unequal access to medical care, structural racism, and environmental and social determinants of mortality—have become all too apparent. Deeper changes are possible, because change that moves at a glacial pace can shift to warp speed when a crisis hits, and people and organizations shift into action mode. Long-standing rationales for maintaining the status quo, once suspended, can be very difficult to bring back into play. A growing number of philanthropic organizations are recalibrating their giving strategies to address the systems driving these problems. In doing so, these organizations have set their sights beyond discrete and short-term program deliverables, looking instead to broader systemic outcomes.

Recognizing that this strategic shift can be daunting, the Scaling Solutions team has endeavored to break down the process of moving toward systems change into a series of helpful frameworks. Beginning with the foundational ideas of SCALE, the goal of these frameworks has been to guide funders on their journey to more ambitious, collaborative, and responsive funding strategies.

Continuing this important work, this report has laid out some of the steps and examples in identifying system components, mapping out how these components relate to one another, planning intentional change strategies through key leverage points, and taking stock of progress with evaluative methods needed to regularly learn from and adapt change strategies.

By drawing on case studies and lessons from the *Assessing Systems Change* workshop and three country workshops introduced previously, the report has highlighted how thinking in terms of systems is not just an academic exercise; it is an eminently actionable and often-rewarding approach to philanthropy. Even if specific systems change activities do not bear fruit, sharing lessons from failure can set new strategies in motion, leading to more encouraging results in the future. For this reason, the Scaling Solutions team has continually stressed the necessity of pursuing systems change collaboratively, both with other philanthropic actors and across sectors.

RPA and the Scaling Solutions Steering Group hope that the findings and recommendations shared in this report will inspire and motivate funders to reflect on philanthropy both as a means to shift systems and as a system that needs a degree of intervention itself.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:**

**Heather Grady,**
Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors
at hgrady@rockpa.org

**Edwin Ou,**
Skoll Foundation at eou@skoll.org

**Kathy Reich,**
Ford Foundation at
k.reich@fordfoundation.org

# Annex 1: Country Workshops

To explore the applicability of the approaches discussed in this report, RPA hosted three country-specific workshops. Each workshop offered ideas on bold and ambitious systems change efforts situated within particular cultural contexts, thus illuminating the full extent of complexity funders can expect to encounter.

The conversations at these workshops centered on achieving specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 broad goals and 169 targets adopted as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. Given the scope of the SDGs, they are excellent examples of systems-level approaches to achieve positive impact on people and planet that require intensive collaboration and sustained investment.

RPA and its partners designed these workshops to be highly interactive in order to encourage open dialogue and collaboration. Countries were selected in which RPA already had a depth of partnerships based to a large extent on the SDG Philanthropy Platform, launched in 2014. Themes were chosen based on priorities of country partners. Each workshop included a mix of representatives from private funding organizations, government agencies, international NGOs, the private sector, and local

community organizations. In addition to discussion, the workshops involved exercises such as iceberg models and systems maps for the specific social issue under discussion.

The first workshop took place in Nairobi, Kenya in July 2019. RPA organized the workshop in collaboration with the SDG Partnership Platform. The workshop focused on implementing SDG 3: *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.* Prior to the workshop, representatives from RPA interviewed about twenty stakeholders—funders, NGOs, government representatives, bilateral funders, and UN agencies—to learn their perspectives on scaling solutions and impact related to determinants of health in Kenya. A highlight of the workshop was an intensive session led by Martha Paren of Spring Impact on the relationship between scaling solutions and systems change.[33]

The second workshop was held in New Delhi, India in November 2019. The theme for this workshop was achieving gender equality, as reflected in SDG 5: *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.* For this workshop, RPA collaborated with Ashoka University's Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, India's first academic hub focused on enabling strategic and robust philanthropy.

The third workshop took place in Bogota, Colombia in February 2020. It focused on narrowing the equity gap in rural areas. For this workshop, RPA collaborated with Asociación de Fundaciones Familiares y Empresariales (AFE), an affinity group of foundations in Colombia that promotes cooperation, social innovation, and knowledge exchange among its members. Conversations focused on two SDGs. The first was SDG 8: *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.* The second was SDG 16: *Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.*

More information on each of these workshops is shared on the following pages.

33 https://www.springimpact.org

# KENYA WORKSHOP

**Event Title:**

Scaling Solutions and Impact toward Shifting Systems

**Dates:**

July 9-10, 2019

**SDG Focus:**

SDG Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

**Co-Host:**

SDG Partnership Platform, a high-level collaboration between the Government of Kenya and the UN system in Kenya in pursuit of accelerating the attainment of the SDGs in Kenya by enhancing multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral partnerships. The Platform is designed to catalyze private-public collaborations and investments in carefully selected transformative initiatives aligned with the Government of Kenya's Big Four agenda. One of the agenda's four themes is universal health coverage. RPA also invited Spring Impact to lead sections of the workshop to bring in their experience of building capacity in organizations to create sustained impact at scale.[34]

**Format & Goal:**

Over forty representatives from private funders, nonprofits, businesses, multilateral agencies, and local government agencies came together for panel discussions, presentations from participants, and interactive exercises to explore challenges and opportunities in advancing universal health coverage in Kenya. Pre-workshop interviews were conducted with selected participants to learn their perspectives on scaling solutions and impact as it relates to health and determinants of health. RPA invited Spring Impact, an organization that focuses on scaling social impact, to co-facilitate this workshop and help provide a framework for achieving sustained long-term impact at scale. This workshop provided a unique opportunity for representatives of different sectors to discuss viewpoints and lessons from the field.

**Key Themes:**

- We need to look at funders as more than ATM machines and to look at beneficiaries as more than just recipients of funds. Funders and grantees should actively co-create plans and solutions.

- Investing in coordination is essential to providing consistent, high quality

34 Spring Impact helps organizations and stakeholder to think about the specific change they are trying to create at scale and then the 'end game' for how the impact of that solution will be sustained in the long-term. For more information visit https://www.springimpact.org/.

health care. Government needs to facilitate coordination by 1) building capacity for preventive health care and 2) creating better data systems (e.g., for better case monitoring).

- Philanthropy can play a strategic role in de-risking and testing scalable opportunities across public-private collaborations.

- It is hard to keep track of the proliferation of healthcare programs and who is responsible for which one. Multiple NGOs are "falling over each other" as they work on fragmented and often duplicative initiatives.

- It is important to invest in local community service organizations who know the context and will remain in the community.

- Donors often focus on their own goals rather than on strengthening systems by boosting coordination and capacity.

- Development partners pull government and local actors in different directions, reducing opportunities for synergy. They should provide strategy and coordination support for government in a clear, coordinated manner.

- Funders should invest more in empowering communities.

- The philanthropic community should work according to the public budgeting cycle instead of adding a new cycle, which exacerbates paperwork and administrative burden.

- Funders often want to see and fund scale in the short term, but shifting systems takes time.

**Ideas & Commitments:**

- Provide flexible, long-term funding to enable organizations to adapt and refine their programs and models as they scale up.

- Help other actors understand what is needed for government to adopt and scale programs (e.g., evidence, buy-in, community acceptance, cost-effectiveness).

- Help other funders understand which program components can be realistically sustained without their continued support, and how long it could take to achieve independence from their funding.

- Consider funding solutions/ strengthening systems instead of isolated programs.

Full Report Location: https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Kenya-Post-Workshop-Report-Final.pdf

# INDIA WORKSHOP

**Event Title:**

Scaling Solutions and Impact toward Shifting Systems

**Dates:**

November 6-7, 2019

**SDG Focus:**

SDG Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

**Co-Host:**

Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy at Ashoka University, a private research university located in Haryana with a focus on liberal arts. The Centre is India's first academic hub focused on enabling strategic and robust philanthropy.

**Format & Goal:**

Thirty representatives from international funders, local Indian funders, nonprofits, businesses, multilateral agencies, and local government came together to discuss and explore ways to advance systems-level change empowering girls and women in India. There was a particular focus on funder collaboration and engagement with civil society.

Pre-workshop interviews were conducted with selected participants to gather insights on gender issues and systems from a variety of perspectives and sectors.

**Key Themes:**

- Religion may be the most important, and most challenging, system to address.
- Gender equity laws offer some hope for empowering women and girls in India, but these are often unimplemented or only partially implemented.
- Progress on advancing gender equity requires research and data in order to scope the issues and systems in question.
- Power dynamics create imbalance between international organizations and local NGOs, sometimes crowding out the voice and agency of the latter.

- Changing a culture takes a long time and requires long-term investments and strategies.

- In collaborations, it is important to balance the contributions of different sectors: each should know its role and try to avoid unnecessary duplication.

- A great way to create scale is to fund networks of small NGOs, rather than assuming scale means on organization's growth – it can be about level of change overall, not organizational silos.

**Ideas & Commitments:**

- Implement gender audits of grantees (e.g., asking for the number of women in leadership roles).

- Develop an indicator to measure how much philanthropic capital is going to gender-related causes in India.

- Create and promote norms for transparency in gender-related philanthropy.

- Create a peer review mechanism for organizations.

- Determine how specifically to influence donor culture and engage more effectively with the Indian donor community in order to change mindsets about gender-related issues.

- The international funder community is pivotal in shaping the conversation around technocrat-driven CSR funding in India, which can be myopic rather than systems-oriented.

- Educate funders on viewing their grantmaking with a gender equity lens.

Full Report Location: https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Scaling-Solutions-India-Workshop-Final-Report.pdf

# COLOMBIA WORKSHOP

**Event Title:**

Narrowing the Equity Gap
in Rural Colombia

**Dates:**

February 13-14, 2020

**SDG Focus:**

SDG Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

SDG Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

**Co-Host:**

Asociación de Fundaciones Familiares y Empresariales (AFE) – The Association of Family and Corporate Foundations.

**Format & Goal:**

A group of fifty representatives from private funders, government agencies, multilateral agencies, and Indigenous and rural communities (including the organizations that serve them) took part in this workshop. Pre-workshop interviews set the pace for the main event by gathering different perspectives on how to address the rural equity gap in Colombia. Participants engaged in group exercises, panel discussions, and interactive dialogue to brainstorm how to 1) work more collaboratively, 2) deploy longer-term, more adaptive resources to grantees; and 3) apply a systems change lens to funding strategies. Exercises focused on identifying root causes, strengths, and areas for improvement related to the Colombian rural equity gap. These activities provided attendees a new set of tools to support communities as they work to mitigate the equity gap.

**Key Themes:**

- Traditional gender norms obfuscate women's contributions to development and downplay their ability to change the status quo.

- Highly unequal land distribution remains a major challenge for rural development.

- Entrenched negative perceptions about poor, rural populations undermine development policies.

- Outdated national rural development policies focused solely on agriculture in some locations ignore the health, education, and economic needs of rural populations.

- Local populations frequently struggle with armed, illegal groups, who still control large tracts of land and regional crop production. This power struggle remains a significant challenge to rural development.

- Local government agencies often lack skills specific to enabling rural development.

- High turnover in government at all levels impedes long-term development initiatives.

- The Colombian business sector has not fully embraced a sense of corporate responsibility and does not know how to intervene constructively in social and economic issues.

- Corruption in political decision-making impedes development.

- The lack of networks among smallholder farmers prevents these farmers from building their collective strength.

Participants utilized the Iceberg Model to analyze social problems from a multilayered perspective.

Full Report Location: https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/final-Colombia-Report-revised-6.12.20.pdf

# Annex 2: Additional Resources

Alliance Magazine, March 2019 special feature on Systems Change

Ashoka "Embracing Complexity: Towards a Shared Understanding of Funding Systems Change" (in partnership with McKinsey and others) and "Seven Steps for Funding Systems Change" (in partnership with Community Fund)

Australian Centre for Social Innovation "Philanthropy, Systems and Change: perspectives, tools, and stories to help funders find their best-fit contribution to change" and "Conversation Tools"

Co-Creative Tools

EDGE Funders Alliance's Global Engagement Lab and publications, e.g., "Systemic Change Philanthropy—Where do we go from here?"

Elson, Peter and Sara Hall, "Systems Change Agents: A Profile of Grantmaking Foundations Focused on Public Policy"

FSG "The Water of Systems Change" report, Action Learning Exercise, and Systems Thinking Toolkit

Garfield Foundation resources on advancing systems change practices

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations "Systems Grantmaking Resource Guide" and accompanying lists of Tools and Resources, Further Reading, and Acknowledgement Section (in partnership with Management Assistance Group [now Change Elemental] and Packard Foundation)

Indie Philanthropy Initiative Methods, Resources, and Interactive Tool

New Profit Systemic Solutions Initiative

NPC and Lankelly Chase publications including "Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it" and "Thinking Big: How to use theory of change for systems change"

Putnam Consulting Group, "The Role of Philanthropy in Systems Change"

Seelos, Christian, Changing Systems? Welcome to the Slow Movement. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 18(1), 2020, 40-47.

Social Innovation Exchange and partners "Funding Systems Change: Challenges and Opportunities"

# WEBSITES

## SCALING SOLUTIONS STEERING GROUP ORGANIZATIONS

Ford Foundation
https://www.fordfoundation.org

Porticus
https://www.porticus.com/en/home

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors
http://www.rockpa.org

Skoll Foundation
http://skoll.org

## PARTNERS AND ORGANIZATIONS FEATURED

Asociación de Fundaciones Familiares y Empresariales
https://afecolombia.org

Blue Marble Evaluation
https://bluemarbleeval.org

Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy
at Ashoka University
https://csip.ashoka.edu.in

Global Alliance for the Future of Food
https://futureoffood.org

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
https://mcconnellfoundation.ca

NORC at the University of Chicago
https://www.norc.org/Pages/default.aspx

SDG Partnership Platform
https://www.sdgphilanthropy.org/Kenya

Spring Impact
https://www.springimpact.org

SustainaMetrix
http://www.sustainametrix.com

Wellcome
https://wellcome.ac.uk

Zenda Ofir
https://zendaofir.com

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## ABOUT ROCKEFELLER PHILANTHROPY ADVISORS

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) is a nonprofit organization that currently advises on and manages more than $200 million in annual giving by individuals, families, corporations and foundations. Continuing the Rockefeller family's legacy of thoughtful, effective philanthropy, RPA remains at the forefront of philanthropic growth and innovation, with a diverse team led by experienced grant makers with significant depth of knowledge across the spectrum of issue areas. Founded in 2002, RPA has grown into one of the world's largest philanthropic service organizations and has facilitated more than $3 billion in grantmaking to nearly 70 countries. RPA also serves as a fiscal sponsor for more than 40 projects, providing governance, management and operational infrastructure to support their charitable purposes.

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