Unpacking Systems Change Philanthropy: Five Alternative Models

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Unpacking Systems Change Philanthropy:
Five Alternative Models

Funding systems change is now at the top of the agenda for philanthropic organizations, with foundations and other agencies supporting a wide variety of initiatives meant to shift and repair incomplete or broken systems. Yet the concept itself remains contested and implementation is highly varied, with differences in mechanisms, timeframes, and capacities required to support and deliver change. For example, Ashoka emphasizes the value of individual social entrepreneurs with "system-changing ideas", BRAC focuses on the central role of governments in scaling solutions to systemic problems, and the Skoll Foundation supports ventures that have the capacity for "disrupting unjust systems".

These varied understandings and approaches provide useful experiments regarding conception and intervention, while also raising critical questions for funders and the ventures they support: How can philanthropic organizations translate their commitment to systems change into improved funding strategies, policies, and practices? What implications do different approaches have for impact entrepreneurs and ventures, and for the agencies that fund them?

Recent reports and articles on systems change address these questions by offering prescriptive recommendations rooted in experiences and past trajectories in the social impact space. These contributions focus on distinguishing 'right' from 'wrong' interpretations of systems change and outlining best ways forward, for example by defining systems change and identifying an "ideal approach" for pursuing it[i] or offering practical tips for philanthropic funders and social ventures pursuing systems-wide impact[ii].

We extend these discussions by providing descriptive evidence of *how* philanthropic organizations in the social impact space have supported systems change across countries and regions. Our approach shifts the conversation away from questions of what systems change is or should be, to instead provide an empirical baseline of the varied ways in which funders have translated systems change goals into funding models. We offer a nuanced, context-rich view of five dominant models, each with different impact timelines, implicit assumptions, and modes of intervention. These models are archetypes capturing core features of different approaches, rather than highlighting the work of any one agency. Reflecting on their distinct advantages and limitations, we develop a comparative framework that highlights the value of diverse approaches and provides a guide to help funders identify which model best aligns with their impact aspirations and capabilities.

1. Five models of funding systems change
The incorporation of 'systems change' into the agendas of global funders signals a period of ferment, where both long-time incumbents and recent funders are grappling with changing impact priorities. They are experimenting with portfolios of investments and projects, exploring alternatives to 'scale', and raising questions about how social ventures 'get things done' as well as what constitutes a desirable and viable form of impact.

To understand these developments in strategic philanthropy, we leverage insights from an in-depth study of leading philanthropic organizations, drawing on both archival and interview data. First, we gathered archival data from a sample of 31 philanthropic funders, making an effort to diversify the sample in terms of size (i.e., total endowment or available funds), age of the agency, geographic location (i.e., organizations based in the Global North and Global South

and from different cultural and linguistic traditions), and the social and environmental challenges they address (e.g., racial inequality, poverty, healthcare, education, climate change). Second, we interviewed 41 leaders in the field from a wider set of agencies, who shared their in-depth knowledge of how funders allocate resources and how their priorities have changed over the past two decades.

Our research identifies five distinct models through which philanthropic organizations translate their systems change ambitions into investment models: *empowering changemakers*, *scaling up*, *coordinating actors*, *experimenting and exploring*, and *scaling deep*. We describe each model in detail below and summarize their key features in Table 1. Although many funders use one primary model as a guiding principle in their pursuits of systems change, they often combine aspects of multiple models in designing and implementing particular projects.

1.1. Empowering Changemakers

This model focuses on identifying and supporting individuals who have the potential to be changemakers. The Ford Foundation, for example, describes that it works primarily "with visionary leaders and organizations worldwide to change social structures and institutions"; the Lemann Foundation offers programs to "unleash the power of the current and rising generations of leaders … dedicated to social change and public sector participation in Brazil"; and Acumen says it aims to "cultivate a pipeline of social changemakers."

Even when funds and awards are formally given to a venture or project, this model tends to privilege a single individual (typically the founder), who is recognized and presented as an extraordinary and visionary leader. Boundaries between the leader and their venture are blurred, and the core premise of this model is that individual entrepreneurial drive can have multiplying effects in a system. As one of our interviewees explained: "Social entrepreneurs recognize a stable system … they come in with an innovation or an approach that cracks that open and proves that it doesn't have to be that way." Correspondingly, the selection of changemakers tends to be based on their entrepreneurialism – their passion and vision to shake things up, to disrupt an undesirable inertial situation – rather than on the problem they aim to address or the geographic region where they want to have a particular impact.

Organizations adopting this model typically work with a mid-term impact timeframe. This is because the impact of funds, recognition and fellowships for the activities of social entrepreneurs happen relatively quickly, but the impact that social entrepreneurs can create in a system is assumed to extend over a longer time frame.

This model has the advantage of being relatively straightforward to implement, building on the established tradition of offering fellowships and awards recognizing individual accomplishments and entrepreneurialism. Having identified extraordinary individuals, funders can focus on helping them to flourish – or, in the words of Ashoka, "enabling them to achieve their vision and have even greater impact." This model is also relatively easy to communicate to broader sets of stakeholders, as both social entrepreneurs' visions and the outputs of their activities lend themselves to powerful storytelling.

However, a core limitation of the *empowering changemakers* model is that it risks overvaluing the ability of individuals to promote change and undervaluing the social context within which individuals operate. With its emphasis on individual accomplishments, this model tends to neglect the role of dispersed, often fragmented individuals and organizations who may not be noticed as 'leaders' in a field but nonetheless have the potential to make critical contributions

toward systemic change. It has also been criticized for reproducing colonial assumptions and reinforcing Anglo-American individualism. For example, some funders adopting this approach have justified it by noting that low-income regions lack the kind of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders who are needed to address complex societal challenges. This model thus risks imposing an external view of success that overlooks local potentialities and activities.

While earlier versions of this model focused on finding innovative leaders with hero-like abilities, many agencies using this approach now emphasize that "everyone is a changemaker" and focus on empowering a diverse set of individuals who could not otherwise access institutional support, tapping into the lived experiences of people from marginalized communities, and promoting individuals whose voices have been left out of top-down decision-making processes. For example, the Laudes Foundation focuses "particularly on empowering women and girls" to improve the conditions of factory workers, primarily women, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation emphasizes the critical role of individuals and organizations "who have not historically seen themselves as part of the health arena—[from] sectors such as criminal justice, real estate development, finance, and technology; as well as organizations focused on civic engagement, equity, and economic prosperity."

1.2. Scaling Up
This model focuses on supporting social ventures with discrete interventions and excellent growth prospects, in order to provide a greater number of people with access to much-needed products and services. Consider the Narada Foundation, whose programs center on *scaling up* effective philanthropic products and solving social problems efficiently and accurately at scale." The emphasis here is not on nascent ventures or experiments; it's on what has proven to work and what can have an immediate impact. In the words of the Skoll Foundation, "by identifying the people and programs already bringing positive change around the world, we empower them to extend their reach, deepen their impact, and fundamentally improve society on a local to global scale." Similarly, Yunus Social Business focuses on organizations that are "too large for microfinance, but too small for more commercial capital," thus aiming to provide promising social ventures the support they need in specific stages of their development.

Funders that adopt this approach tend to have ambitious goals. As one interviewee explained, "if it doesn't impact 100 million people, it's not a big enough problem for us to work on". To reach these goals, organizations seek interventions that can be replicated across different contexts, with the core assumption that replication improves product and service efficiency. They also tend to adopt a relatively short time horizon for impact.

This model's focus on identifying social ventures that can have outsized social returns in a short timespan resembles the investment models of Silicon Valley. For instance, the Skoll Foundation has sought out organizations at an "inflection point," an approach that resonates with the "hockey stick" model used by venture capitalists to represent the potential for a company to grow exponentially if provided with the right investments at the right time.

Also similar to Silicon Valley investment models, which tend to privilege venture founders as unique individuals and to provide support to scale these individuals' ventures, the *scaling up* and *empowering changemakers* models often blur together in practice. Organizations such as the Schwab Foundation, for example, aim to empower changemakers at the individual level in order to scale solutions at the organizational level.

Scaling up is a controversial intervention model in the social impact space, with strengths and weaknesses that tend to generate strong reactions. On the one hand, *scaling up* can yield a high impact per unit of investment. It is also a well-understood model and process that builds on the logic and legacy of market-based ventures, particularly in the high technology industry, from which much of the current philanthropic funds originated. Indeed, some of our interviewees viewed *scaling up* as fundamental to systems change, noting that "people are interested in systems because they're interested in scale".

On the other hand, and similarly to the *empowering changemakers* approach, *scaling up* is often decontextualized and tends to neglect local characteristics and potentialities in the quest for quickly replicable solutions. While supported interventions may reach significant scale, the risk is that they fail to truly transform and improve the underlying system. Reflecting on this problem, another interviewee emphasized that "scaling up a couple of innovations" is not the same as "reconfiguring the whole system."

1.3. Coordinating Actors

This model focuses on interdependencies within a system and seeks to forge new links and build infrastructure to support otherwise disconnected actors or projects. The premise is that individual changemakers have different capabilities, and connecting them can unlock new forms of value and amplify impact.

Funders adopting this model emphasize that many co-existing efforts and resources exist, yet these are often scattered and poorly aligned. Unlike funders that adopt a *scaling up* model and emphasize the magnitude of problems, those that focus on *coordinating actors* justify their approach based on the complexity of the issues they seek to address. As the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has written: "The issues we engage in are wildly disparate, but they share the characteristics of being deeply rooted, dynamic, and complex. None will be solved easily and quickly, and none will be solved through our efforts alone."

Interventions based on this model tend to involve efforts to coalesce tangible and intangible resources around specific projects or problem areas. For example, the Vancouver Foundation says it "brings multiple stakeholders to work on a specific problem: we also engage citizens, organizations, and governments, and invite them to work together and contribute their time, ideas, expertise and energy to an issue." Some interventions focus in particular on fostering more open engagement through online platforms, communities of practice, and other forms of convening. Fundación Avina, for example, describes their work to "build a South-South cooperation platform" by "nurturing collaborative processes and multi-sector relationship-building in Latin America". Regardless of whether they promote open or more targeted engagement, organizations adopting this model work with a medium-term impact timeline, often organizing their initiatives through discrete projects with defined start and end lines.

We see two variants of this model: In the first one, organizations work in the background to create enabling environments that foster engagement among others, while in the second variant organizations serve as a hub, playing a visible and central mediating role in a growing network. The Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) is an example of the former, "facilitating and catalyzing an ecosystem of diverse stakeholders" that collaborate independently of PIND to "create and sustain peaceful livelihoods." In contrast, the Bertha Foundation exemplifies the latter as it actively "supports field-building and collaboration between activists, storytellers and lawyers," promoting coordination across a field of actors to work together to address a common social issue.

A key strength of this model is that it allows actors to assemble existing resources in new ways, aligning disparate efforts and exploring untapped synergies. As it is centered around engagement, this model also supports the emergence of a shared vision as well as common metrics for strategizing and monitoring progress. However, it often fails to fully account for political dynamics and resistance from organizations with divergent agendas, institutional commitments, and resources. It also risks prioritizing issues relevant only to participants, potentially overlooking the interests and needs of other key stakeholders who are not part of the collaborative arrangements.

1.4. Experimenting and Exploring

This model focuses on facilitating the creation of new technologies, business models, products, or practices to address systemic social problems. The premise is that big and long-lasting change requires novelty; thus, flexibility and patient capital are needed to fund a variety of initiatives and experiments to develop alternatives to an undesirable status quo. Organizations that adopt this model tend to recognize the value of diversity: the underlying premise is that no single solution or organization is sufficient to address complex challenges; rather, experimentation on multiple fronts produces an array of possibilities that together contribute to systemic change. In the words of Lankelly Chase, "change emerges from the way the whole system behaves not from the actions of any one project or organization."

There is a strong commitment among organizations that adopt this model to learning, testing, and sharing with others. DG Murray Trust, for example, says it is "committed to fostering a culture of curiosity and learning, where ideas are tested, lessons are learned, practices are improved, and knowledge is generated to serve as an open, global resource." Likewise, the McConnell Foundation says it "has a commitment to shared learning—asking questions, sharing ideas, and engaging in focused experimentation—to help create the conditions necessary for systems change." Organizations adopting this model also highlight the value of adaptation and flexibility. The Green Climate Fund (GCF), for instance, emphasizes the need to "learn by doing and thereby benefit from the iterative nature of adaptation." Due to its emphasis on early-stage novelty, this approach tends to adopt a medium-term time horizon for nurturing and developing alternatives, and it has the potential for long-term impact if these alternatives gain traction.

Organizations that adopt this model sometimes lay out a pathway to promote experimentation and exploration that involves identifying promising niche solutions, supporting their development through funding, networking, and supportive infrastructure, and, finally, working toward sharing insights, knowledge, and technologies for wider diffusion. This is the case of the Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions, which works with grassroots innovators to address biodiversity loss problems.

In addition, some organizations adopting this approach use the language of "leverage points," coined by Donella Meadows.[iii] The idea is that there are places in a system where a small change can transform the entire system, due to emergent features such as self-organization, hierarchies, and feedback loops. When organizations refer to Meadows' concept, they signal the possibility of using small-scale experiments to create cascading effects in ways that may not be predictable from the outset.

While most philanthropic funders adopting this approach support innovators who experiment with sustainable solutions that are not yet ripe to be widely diffused, some also take an active

role in engaging with universities and research centers to support scientific and technological developments that address priority problems more actively and directly. SEKEM, for example, works with the Heliopolis University "on research programs and implementation of innovative concepts like desalination of salt and brackish water and water recovery through humidity condensation," which they understand as key to the Egyptian context, where the organization operates.

Although some organizations that build on this model emphasize the need to scale up after piloting, prototyping, or experimenting, this approach is distinct from the *scaling up* model in that it focuses on crossing the chasm from promising concept to small-scale implementation, not on replicating across contexts. As one interviewee explained: "[With scaling up,] you test it, and it works, and then you build it up and up and up. And then, at some point, it's so big that it changes the system. Whereas we start at the other end and say, this is a really interconnected system, [let's identify] multiple leverage points and try doing small-scale experimentation [across them]."

The strength of this model is that it creates opportunities for small-scale initiatives that allow for learning with others and for variation and customization to local contexts – and, in doing so, it can be attentive to contextual differences. Its shortcoming is that it requires time, patience, and discipline to iterate multiple times, as well as tolerance for failure and willingness to take risks, as many novelties will not yield the intended impact.

1.5. Scaling Deep

This model focuses on changing institutions and power dynamics. The premise is that funders can gradually steer change in incumbent systems through deep engagement with local actors. By building local ties, influencing policies, and modifying formal and informal rules of the game (whether law, regulatory policy, or other arrangements), this approach fosters gradual change from within the existing system. The organizations that adopt this model tend to use public-private partnerships and other forms of multi-sector collaboration that aim for community-led development, improved governance, and policy changes. An example comes from the Aga Khan Foundation, which nurtures niche initiatives and works to embed them into the incumbent institutional setting. Central to its efforts "have been inclusive, community-based development approaches, whereby local organisations identify, prioritise and implement projects with AKF's assistance... AKF then brings them into federated structures and links them with local governments through collaboration on development issues." Unlike the organizations that adopt the *coordinating actors* model, the emphasis here is on institutional change, governance, and infrastructure, rather than on connecting actors whose projects can benefit from one another.

Organizations that adopt this model are particularly attentive to political regimes and, therefore, tend to work with a long-term impact timeline. For example, Co-Impact highlights its efforts to understand "the ways that power is manifested within a system ("political economy")… to assess risks and opportunities, make responsible decisions about our grant making, and support our program partners to navigate effectively the pathways to results." Organizations that adopt this model tend to work fluidly and adaptively to respond to complex and context-specific power dynamics. Whereas most *scaling deep* approaches are deeply rooted in a specific geopolitical environment, some are more distributed. For example, the Open Society Foundations establish multiple ties worldwide to engage "in direct advocacy to promote inclusive and just public policy at national, regional, and international levels."

The *scaling deep* model is more common among organizations with strong ties to grassroots organizations in the Global South – such as Aga Khan, BRAC, and Co-Impact – even when funds come from individuals or organizations from the Global North. In addition, while some have a strong focus on a problem, others are more "problem agnostic." For example, Co-Impact is largely funded by individuals such as Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates, MacKenzie Scott, Jeff Skoll, and others in the Global North, and it works with grassroots initiatives across Asia, Latin America, and Africa, promoting gender equality. BRAC, deeply rooted in Bangladesh, supports many actors and also implements projects itself, gradually expanding the range of social problems it addresses.

Although the *scaling deep* approach was not very common or well understood in strategic philanthropy in past decades, it now seems to be gaining traction. In the words of one interviewee, "Twenty years back… when I tried to explain what I was doing – working in partnerships with government, collaborating, getting policy shifts – [there was] zero understanding. Now, there has been a big change… donors are talking about it."

The strength of *scaling deep* is that it allows for experimentation, learning, and integration of local actors, focusing on amplifying existing local capacities. It also attends not just to available resources and relationships but also to formal and informal rules that shape what kinds of interventions are viable in particular contexts. But this approach requires time, patience, and discipline to engage with a broad set of actors with different capacities, commitments, and interests, as well as political skills to navigate through and across local institutions.

2. Implications for funding agencies

A key lesson from our research is that there is no one 'right' way to pursue systems change, nor does systems change result from a single intervention. Each model has trade-offs, and not every approach will be suitable for every funding organization. For example, the *empowering changemakers* and *scaling up* models productively build on well-developed prior approaches to support social change and offer relatively shorter time horizons for impact, yet they often neglect the local context in which individuals and organizations operate. The *coordinating actors*, *experimenting and exploring*, and *scaling deep* models bring a valuable new focus on a variety of efforts and interdependencies, as well as power dynamics and institutional inertia, yet they require longer time horizons for impact as well as the capacity to build relationships with multiple, varied stakeholders and to tolerate and learn from failures.

The challenge for foundations and other funding agencies is therefore to identify your dominant funding model and assess how well it aligns with your intended form of impact. If there are misalignments, consider what capacities will be needed to change your funding practices so that they better fit your desired impact strategy. We provide a guide below to help funding organizations identify and assess the fit of their dominant model and to support their ambitions to either build on or shift models.

2.1. Identifying and assessing the fit of your dominant model

- Do you invest in individuals, organizations, standalone projects, or regions and ecosystems?

This question helps organizations to identify and reflect on the key agents of change that they support. The *empowering changemakers* model often involves a portfolio of individual fellows; *scaling up* invests in organizations; *coordinating actors* and *exploring and experimenting* focus on projects; and *scaling deep* is attentive to entire regions or ecosystems. By looking closely at core assumptions of who takes a leading role in change-making processes, a funding

organization can pay more attention to the context and capacities of different actors and make more informed decisions on whom to prioritize. *Empowering changemakers* and *scaling up* emphasize the power of individual actors in changing systems; *coordinating actors* and *exploring and experimentation* focus on groups of actors working together; and *scaling deep* implies a more distributed view of systems change, valuing the work of multiple stakeholders in a region or ecosystem who do not necessarily engage through projects.

- Do you aim to develop and support radical interventions that disrupt or shock a system, or to understand existing arrangements and work from within to change them?

Some models focus on working from within a system, such as *scaling deep* (which values local ties and recognizes power dynamics) and *coordinating actors* (which forges new connections between existing actors with different capabilities and resources). Other models prioritize interventions to disrupt or shock a system, such as *experimentation and exploration* (which aims for novelty that defies an undesirable status quo). *Empowering changemakers* and *scaling up* often come from outside but aren't necessarily radical or disruptive of a local context due to the emphasis of the former on individuals and the latter on replicability. These core assumptions on how change happens (or how change *should* happen) shape how a funding organization designs its portfolio of investments.

- Do you prioritize short- or long-term results?

Funding models have different impact time horizons, and this has implications for when and how funding agencies assess results from the ventures, projects, or individuals they support. For example, *scaling up* yields more immediate results that tend to be easier to measure and communicate than other models. If investing in *experimentation and exploration*, funding agencies may consider a phased approach to analyze progress and allocate funds ranging from early ideas to proof of concept and ultimately to implementation. *Coordinating actors* is often implemented through a time-bounded project, with the evaluation of the project's baseline and end-line. Because *scaling deep* generates results only over the long-term, it is best suited for organizations with a culture of patience and learning from failure. The nature of social problems is different: some may be too complex to be tackled in the short term, while others require immediate action because the stakes are too high to wait for a longer-term solution. By identifying the timeline of their investments, funding organizations can reflect on whether their impact priorities are aligned with the nature of the problems they aim to address and with their existing capabilities.

2.2. Building on or shifting models
- What new practices and capabilities will you need to develop?

This question can help philanthropic funders to build and improve on their dominant model or to pivot toward a new model that is more aligned with their desired form of impact. The latter involves considerable changes in the organization's pool of capabilities because the five models involve different practices and draw on different knowledge bases and relationships. For example, *scaling deep* requires the capacity to engage with local policies and a good understanding of socio-cultural contexts, whereas *scaling up* is not very attentive to political regimes but requires capabilities in venture capital and impact investing, such as running complex financial simulations and designing business models. In addition, each model involves different kinds of stakeholder relationships. For example, funders that adopt the *coordinating actors* model typically have strong ties with a selected number of key partners; *scaling deep* engages actively with multiple local partners (social ventures, governments, and other

investors); and *empowering changemakers* establishes weak and distributed relationships with actors working in various contexts.

- Do you have the resources and capacity to invest in change?

Whether you are building on an existing model or pivoting to a new one, our framework can help you to target key opportunities for improvement. But note that it is much more difficult to shift funding models abruptly because early organizational practices tend to become imprinted and resistant to change. A pivot often requires adopting new practices for allocating funds, measuring performance, and working with key stakeholders. It also challenges the deep-rooted assumptions associated with each model, about the role and capabilities of individuals and organizations in driving change. If your organization's current practices and capabilities are not well-aligned with your desired impact priorities, consider what resources you have available – both internally and externally – to support the shift toward a new model, whether you have buy-in to push for change, and what you will need to prioritize in this shift. And remember that changing models involves trial and error and, therefore, tolerance for mistakes. Seek out opportunities to learn from investors who share your impact priorities and have experienced similar challenges.

3. Implications for the social impact field
In addition to helping philanthropic organizations select and refine a particular funding model, our framework offers three key implications for the wider field of changemakers.

First, systems change is most commonly an outcome of distributed and varied contributions from multiple actors and initiatives. For this reason, there is substantial value in recognizing diverse models for funding systems change, as each achieves a different and complementary form of impact. For example, in urgent situations, where access to products or services is critical, *scaling up* may be a promising alternative; however, this model is unlikely to provide a long-term, more durable institutional fix, such as that offered by *scaling deep*. *Coordinating actors* may yield impact through the convergence of disparate resources and competencies to address a particular problem, yet it is unlikely to disrupt a system through new technologies, such as those supported by *experimentation and exploration.*

It is not a matter of "either-or": all models offer different forms of impact, and the world needs diverse approaches to address multifaceted problems from different angles. Each intervention model requires distinct capacities that are difficult to develop and combine within the boundaries of a single organization. However, systems change funders can and should cooperate to identify, promote, and compare these diverse approaches and their impact. In these early, sustained years of funding systems change, there may well be convergence across them, or we may have to appreciate differences for a decade or more.

Second, the social impact field is in motion: organizations are challenging and revisiting their existing approaches, and new models may emerge. For example, Ashoka and Acumen have deemphasized individual accomplishments and gradually pivoted toward recognizing "fields of changemakers," signalling more recognition and stronger emphasis on large-scale fields of activity by diverse actors. Moreover, the five models we described capture the current state of the field, rather than the universe of viable approaches. We welcome critical reflection on these five as well as exploration and documentation of alternatives not yet fully envisioned or pursued.

Third, the models we identified tend to focus on social ventures and market-based strategies rather than political interventions or institutional change, potentially reflecting a legacy focus of the social impact field on using market-based mechanisms. One notable exception is the *scaling deep* model, which engages more actively with rules, governments, and multi-stakeholder collective action. This raises fundamental questions for practice, policy, and research on systems change: What are limitations to systems change that might arise from a prevailing focus on market-based solutions? And further, how could these five existing models – or others still to be developed – give more recognition to the role of state actors and collective action in shaping markets? Broadening the focus in this way can enhance both toolkits and analysis for meaningful systems change and lasting impact.

Table 1. Assessing the five intervention models

	Empowering change-makers	*Scaling up*	*Coordinating actors*	*Exploring and experimenting*	*Scaling deep*
Mode of intervention	Support recognizable individuals	Support replication of discrete interventions	Create network ties across individuals	Support multiple, varied small-scale initiatives	Change institutional norms through sustained community engagement
Implicit assumptions (Theory of change)	There are individuals who have extraordinary change-making potential	Replication and scale improve product and service efficiency	Connecting individuals and organizations around projects generates collective impact	Diversity of initiatives allows for experimentation and learning which translate into alternatives to the status quo	Deep, sustained engagement surfaces diversity of expertise and creates multiple touchpoints to amplify impact
Impact timeline	Medium-term	Short-term	Medium-term	Medium-term, with potential for long-term	Long-term
Strengths	• Straightforward implementation, with clear actions to take • Easy to communicate impact (in terms of outputs)	• Well-understood model and process, based on market logic • High impact per unit of investment	• Reconfigures existing resources and efforts in new ways • Fosters shared views, common metrics	• Creates opportunities for learning with others • Allows for variation, customization - and can potentially foster greater attention to context	• Allows for experimentation, learning, integration of local actors; amplifies existing local capacity • Attends to context-specific politics, norms; not only resources and relationships
Weaknesses	• Decontextualized (focuses on individuals, neglects context around them)	• Decontextualized (focuses on isolated interventions, neglects context around them)	• Does not account for politics and resistance; may yield on superficial compliance • Risks fostering collaboration on some issues at expense of others	• Requires time, patience, and discipline (to yield enough iterations for learning) • Requires tolerance for failure and a willingness to take risks	• Requires time, patience, discipline (to engage a broad set of actors in particular contexts) • Requires significant political skill to engage across local institutions

[i] E.g., Walker, J.C. (2017) Solving the World's Biggest Problems: Better Philanthropy Through Systems Change, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*; Farley, S., Rose, A. L., & Seelos, C. (2021). The 'Thou Shalt Nots' of Systems Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.; Milligan, K., Zerda, J., & Kania, J. (2022). The Relational Work of Systems Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

[ii] E.g., Gopal, S., & Kania, J. (2015). Fostering Systems Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.; Rutsch, F. (2019) *Seven Steps for Funding Systems Change: A Comprehensive Guide for Funders, By Social Entrepreneurs.* Ashoka. Grady, H., Diggins, K., Schneider, J. and Rose, N.P. (2017) *Scaling Solutions Toward Shifting Systems*. Philanthropy Advisors, 2017.

[iii] Meadows, D. 2008. Thinking in Systems: A Primer. (Earthscan, Ed.) *Sustainability Institute*, vol. 1.