Understanding Systems Change

An Approach to Impact Outcomes in Arizona

August 2024 This report introduces key concepts for understanding systems, systems change, and how to get started in improving health inequities.

Vitalyst HEALTH FOUNDATION

FSG REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Introduction

Community health challenges in Arizona are complex, involving issues such as healthcare access, community conditions, and disparities among communities throughout the state. When we begin to examine the root causes of these challenges, we begin to see the role that factors like policy and social norms play in perpetuating them. When taken together, these root cause factors form intricate systems that produce the health inequities we see daily.

Systems change is an approach that influences these factors to create large-scale, long-term impacts on how these systems function and the outcomes they generate. As part of our mission to connect, support, and inform efforts to improve health in Arizona, Vitalyst Health Foundation is committed to supporting systems change approaches across the state. We are working to raise awareness and build capacity for systems change among Arizona's leaders.

THIS REPORT INTRODUCES
KEY SYSTEMS CHANGE CONCEPTS,
INCLUDING:

- What is a System?
- What is Systems Change?
- How Do I Get Started?

ELEMENTS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

HEALTH EQUITY RESILIENCY

TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS · ACCESS TO CARE · AFFORDABLE QUALITY HOUSING · COMMUNITY SAFETY · ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY · EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY · ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY · QUALITY AFFORDABLE FOOD · COMMUNITY DESIGN · PARKS AND RECREATION · SOCIAL/CULTURAL COHESION · SOCIAL JUSTICE

SYSTEMS CHANGE CAN BE APPLIED TO SYSTEMS IMPACTING EVERY ELEMENT OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY.

What is a System?

Donella Meadows, a renowned systems thinker, defined a system as "an inter-connected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something." In simpler terms, **a system is a set of parts working together to form a more complex whole.** This complex whole produces results beyond what can be accomplished by any of the component parts working alone. Systems can vary in size and complexity, from neighborhood interactions that create a sense of community to ecosystems like watersheds or deserts, and even further to large technologies like the internet.

Common characteristics of systems include:

- A unified whole whose goals and results emerge from the interaction of its components (which could be people, organizations, ideas, resources, policies, etc.)
- Nonlinear and often counterintuitive behavior
- Dynamic and constantly evolving
- Decentralized control with results emerging from the bottom-up as well as the top down

Applying a systems "lens" helps leaders and organizations step back and see the bigger picture of what influences the issues they seek to address.

Numerous interconnected systems profoundly shape the disparities and injustices experienced by different communities. Taking a systems perspective can be a helpful tool and approach for organizations seeking to create larger-scale and more durable change. For example, Vitalyst's *Elements of a Healthy Community* wheel[1] illustrates how multiple systems, including housing, education, environmental quality, criminal justice, transportation, and others, all come together to influence a community's health outcomes.

"**CONSIDER A BIRDCAGE.** IF YOU LOOK VERY CLOSELY AT JUST ONE WIRE IN THE CAGE, YOU CANNOT SEE THE OTHER WIRES… AND BE UNABLE TO SEE WHY A BIRD WOULD NOT JUST FLY AROUND THE WIRE ANY TIME IT WANTED TO GO SOMEWHERE… IT IS ONLY WHEN YOU STEP BACK AND TAKE A MACROSCOPIC VIEW OF THE WHOLE CAGE, THAT YOU CAN SEE WHY THE BIRD DOES NOT GO ANYWHERE… IT IS PERFECTLY OBVIOUS THAT THE BIRD IS SURROUNDED BY A NETWORK OF SYSTEMATICALLY RELATED BARRIERS BY THEIR RELATIONS TO EACH OTHER, THAT ARE AS CONFINING AS THE SOLID WALLS OF A DUNGEON."

Marilyn Frye, "The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory"
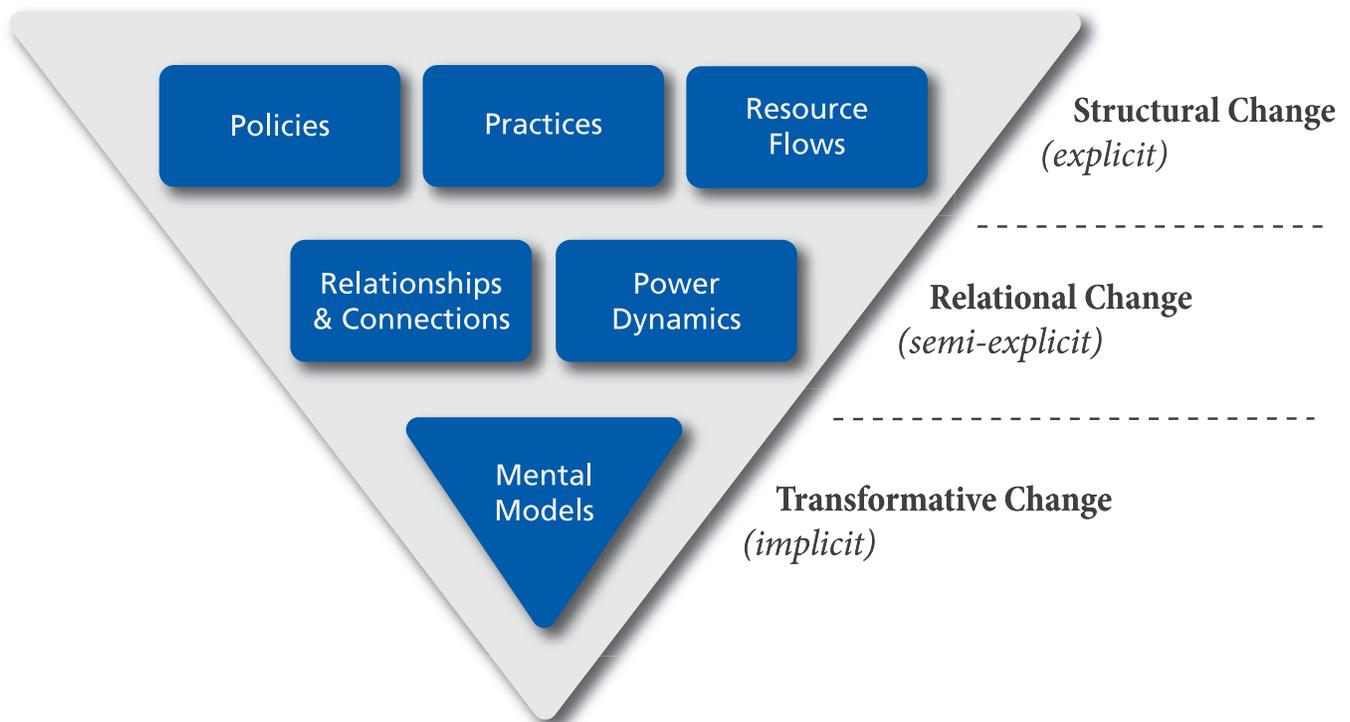
What is Systems Change?

If a system is "a set of parts that work together to form a more complicated whole that accomplishes something," then **systems change involves influencing how these parts interact to alter the system's outcomes.** As the Social Innovation Group in Canada puts it, systems change aims to "shift the conditions that are holding the problem in place." In this way, systems change is both the "how" we influence system components, as well as the resulting shift in the system's overall function and results.

One of the most common systems change frameworks is the "inverted pyramid" in *The Water of Systems Change*[2] by the nonprofit FSG. This framework identifies six conditions that can create transformative systems change.

The six conditions are grouped into three levels, with the top level being the most visible. As you move to the second and third levels, the conditions become more subtle yet potentially more powerful in shaping the system's behavior.

Six Conditions of Systems Change

Policies Practices Resource Flows

Structural Change
(explicit)

Relationships & Connections Power Dynamics

Relational Change
(semi-explicit)

Mental Models

Transformative Change
(implicit)

Source: Kania, J., Kramer, M., Senge, P. (2018). *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG.

Additional descriptions of each condition are provided below:

STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS
Explicit, visible aspects of a system that can be shifted
to change the formal rules and processes of a system

POLICIES
Government rules,
regulations, and priorities
that guide its and
others' actions

PRACTICES
Organizational and
practitioner activities
that reflect their values
and priorities

RESOURCE FLOWS
How money, people,
knowledge and information
are allocated and distributed
across a system

RELATIONAL CONDITIONS
Explicit, visible aspects of a system that can be shifted
to change the formal rules and processes of a system.

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS
Quality of connections and communication
occurring between system players

POWER DYNAMICS
Which individuals and organizations hold
decision-making power, authority, and influence

TRANSFORMATIVE CONDITIONS
The narratives, beliefs, and assumptions that underpin the behaviors of system
participants, which can be influenced to change the goals of the system

MENTAL MODELS
Deeply held beliefs and assumptions
that influence one's actions

While these conditions are listed individually, they are all interdependent. Successfully changing a system often requires shifting several of these conditions in service of a single strategy. For example, if a coalition wishes to create a public policy advocacy plan (structural change), it will engage partners and community members in identifying and agreeing on shared priorities (relational change), and then shift the mindsets of policymakers or voters to gain support for new policies (transformative change).

There is no single correct approach to systems change, but successful efforts often share common characteristics:

Systems Change Efforts Often Include:

- A collaborative, unified effort whose bold goals and strategies are achieved by each partner playing its specific role

- A focus on addressing the root causes of social challenges, not just symptoms

- Inclusion of impacted communities and understanding of how current systems create unjust outcomes

- Shared leadership with community engagement and solutions at the core of the work

- Continuous improvement and learning in an ever-changing environment

Systems Change Efforts Do Not Include:

- Only addressing the "symptoms" of social challenges (e.g., subsidizing healthcare costs, distributing food boxes)

- Delivering programs through a single organization without coordinating with or influencing others in the system

- Only pursuing "outputs" and incremental progress

While this report focuses on the importance of systems change, this approach does not diminish in any way the critical role of programs addressing immediate needs. While a food box program may not address the underlying causes of food insecurity, the resources offered by them are a crucial lifeline to families experiencing food insecurity now. Ultimately, we need to meet the immediate needs of communities while also addressing their root causes.

How Do I Get Started?

Starting to take a systems change approach can feel daunting, but there are some simple steps you can take to get started.

1 **Step back and reflect on the identified issues from a systems perspective.**
- Why do you think a certain challenge is occurring?
- What might be some of the underlying conditions or issues that are contributing?
- Who else holds a piece of the puzzle?

2 **Engage others in the system, particularly those experiencing its unjust results first-hand, to create strategies together.**
- What do others see as some of the root causes?
- Where might there be opportunities to collaborate or do things differently?

3 **Start small and continue learning and refining as you work on changing some of the conditions in your system.**

FSG's *Systems Change Action Learning Exercise*[3] and *Systems Thinking Toolkit*[4] can be helpful resources for thinking through these steps.

In practice, systems change efforts might look like these Vitalyst grant partnerships:

STRENGTHENING **NETWORKS, COALITIONS, AND MOVEMENTS**	WORKING TO SHIFT **POLICY AND PRACTICE**	ADDRESSING UNDERLYING **MINDSETS AND CULTURAL ATTITUDES** ABOUT AN ISSUE

The **Coconino Coalition for Children & Youth** is working to build an inclusive movement of people committed to supporting youth, with a particular focus on embedding trauma informed practices in City and County departments impacting youth.

Activate Food Arizona (AFA) is working to foster collaboration between national and local partners to expand a pilot of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Online program, with a goal of supporting small retailers and expanding access to high quality food for SNAP recipients, particularly those with time constraints and living in rural and tribal communities for whom online food shopping is a valuable resource.

The **Pima County District Attorney's Office** is creating a public private partnership to institute a restorative justice program that will change the paradigm for how young people arrested for low-level crimes are treated by the justice system.

Conclusion

Systems change approaches are needed to make progress on some of the most pressing challenges facing our communities. Vitalyst is committed to supporting systems change as a core part of our mission to connect, support, and inform efforts that improve the health of individuals and communities in Arizona.

Through our Systems Change Grant Program, we provide multiyear support to coalitions that seek to shift policies or practices to sustainably improve conditions around a problem. Additional examples of some of the inspiring systems change work we have supported include:

- **Boys to Men Tucson** is changing mental models around toxic masculinity by creating intentional spaces for boys, men, and masculine-identified folks to practice honest and mindful relationships.

- **Feeding Matters** successfully convened partners to create a medically recognized name for Pediatric Feeding Disorder and supporting guidelines for identification, intervention, and reimbursement, thereby changing mental models, policies, and practices around a common but underrecognized pediatric condition.

- The **Arizona Community Health Workers Association** has built and strengthened a movement for community health workers and has successfully advocated for licensure and reimbursement coverage for their crucial work.

We are committed to continuing to raise awareness and capacity for systems change across the state and invite you to experiment with bringing a systems perspective to your own work. Together we can imagine and build a healthier future for all Arizonans.

Additional Resources

Here are some additional resources if you are interested in learning more about systems change:

Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System, Donella Meadows: A landmark article on systems change that goes deeper on the different conditions in systems and how they are related.

https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system

Habits of a Systems Thinker, Waters Center for Systems Thinking: An illustrated guide of important systems thinking practices.

https://ttsfilestore.blob.core.windows.net/ttsfiles/habits-single-page-2020.pdf

The Groundwater Approach, Racial Equity Institute: A tool that illustrates how structural racism shows up across systems.

https://racialequityinstitute.org/groundwater-approach

The Relational Work of Systems Change, Katherine Milligan, Juanita Zerda & John Kania: A recent article by one of the authors of the *Water of Systems Change* article emphasizing the role of relationships in systems change.

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_relational_work_of_systems_change

References

1   http://vitalysthealth.org/the-wheel
2   https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change
3   https://www.fsg.org/resource/water-systems-change-action-learning-exercise
4   https://www.fsg.org/resource/systems-thinking-toolkit-0

Author: Chris Carlson, *Managing Director, FSG*

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