

Convening the Capacity Builders

Reflections
on the Field of
Systems Change



*The Building Capacity for
Systems Change convening
was sparked by*

ILLUMINATE

Cultivating the
field and practice
of systems change

The Building Capacity for Systems Change convening was initiated within Illuminate, and made possible through funding from the Garfield Foundation and the McConnell Foundation. Illuminate is a network of systems change organizations born to cultivate the field and practice of systems change.

Systems change is emerging as a pathway of hopeful action across the world.

Governments, NGOs, and the private sector are buzzing about the need for it. But what does it take to really do it, what's needed to realize the promise of this field, and how might we best support emerging and practicing system leaders globally?

These are the questions that 30 capacity builders in the field of systems change explored together in the fall of 2019, culminating in a three-day convening in December 2019 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. What emerged from that unique collective inquiry is shared in this report, which we offer to others who wish to support systems leaders around the world—those who are working through unprecedented complexity to solve our most intractable, most critical, and most systemic challenges.

The richness of this convening is found not only in what emerged during the convening itself, but in the wealth of insights from the 30+ pre-convening interviews and the promising collaborations that have emerged since. In this report, we share our collective aspirations, professional evolutions, and our personal fears and frustrations in the hope that our experiences and learning might enrich yours.

We want to connect with others who are interested in building the capacity of this field that holds so much hope and potential for humanity. We are planning more convenings and, recognizing the limitations of our North American focus, intend to expand our loose circle and connect to other capacity-building efforts around the world.

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“What’s needed to realize the promise of systems change?”



The Background of this Convening

In July of 2018, a group of 24 systems leaders gathered in Wasan Island, Ontario to explore effective strategies for building the field of systems change. At this meeting, we gelled our diverse interests, insights, and intentions of into four concrete pathways of action:

- 1. Connect the Capacity-Building Landscape.** Build a comprehensive map of the trainings, tools, funding, and other resources currently available to system leaders. Coalesce a rich and connected resource base to fill gaps in the learning and support landscape.
- 2. Build a Learning & Support System.** Dive deep into the experiences and aspirations of system leaders to build a platform of support, inspiration, and learning.
- 3. Engage Diverse Field Builders.** Actively expand connections among diverse practitioners to de-center white/western cultural dominance in this field.
- 4. Mobilize Funding.** Engage funders to invest in systems change capacity and directly fund systems change initiatives.

See the Wasan Island gathering report at <https://cutt.ly/wasan>

“ The practice of Systems Change is central to solving humanity’s most difficult challenges. ”



The Catalyst for Connecting

Those of us who have seen the results of effective systems change initiatives, including many of us who joined this convening, have come to believe that it is not just a promising area of action but is central to solving humanity’s most difficult challenges, from climate change to social and economic inequity. Its promise and potential seem to have galvanized leaders from diverse communities and backgrounds to think, act, and be in fundamentally new ways.

Funders who are actively funding systems change approaches are reporting increasing demand from their philanthropic peers and from social change leaders for support, advising, and training in approaches to systems change. This is one of many signs that this field is drawing attention and, increasingly, greater demand for leadership and support.

Yet while language and ideas around systems change are spreading rapidly, an informed understanding of the realities and requirements of what it takes to effectively DO systems change lags significantly behind. That dynamic is hardly unusual in social change work, but it is concerning, especially in a field with such promise.

The rapid rise of interest in this field, including from philanthropic organizations, raised several concerns among our group, including that:

- **Demand for systems change work might quickly outstrip the field's capacity to deliver;**
- **In the rush to “do” systems change, leaders may seek strategies that seem familiar and accessible** to the neglect of more powerful and systemic approaches;
- **With many new and potentially under-supported systems change initiatives, the risk of unnecessary failures increases**, which threatens to turn interested proponents away from systems change approaches;
- **Both the concept and practice of systems change might quickly be watered down** in the rush to scale the approach; and
- **There are many ways of doing effective systems change work using varying approaches, and we risk an emerging definition of the field that neglects or marginalizes different ways of knowing** or approaching the work in favor of approaches that are more academic, technical, and Western-centric.

Those concerns, however, are solvable, and the risks manageable, if we work together to scale capacity and support systems leaders thoughtfully, intentionally, and effectively.

We believe that increasing demand for this approach is inevitable and that more and more funders and organizations will need help to do it well (or at least avoid common mistakes). Collectively we need to direct our collective resources and knowledge toward the work of building systemic capacity in ways that leverage our diverse knowledge and skills.





The Purpose of this Convening

Our intent for this convening was to connect a diverse set of capacity builders to identify how we might reinforce and complement one another's work, and more strategically and effectively build capacity for systems change at a larger scale.

Our specific intentions for the gathering was to:

- 1. Deepen connections among those providing capacity building to foster individual effectiveness, new learning partnerships to strengthen our work, and, potentially, field-level collaborations that could create capacity well beyond our individual efforts;**
- 2. Build an ongoing community for capacity builders to increase efficacy of our individual and collective work;**
- 3. Create diverse teams that could support larger-scale and more complex initiatives, networks, and projects;**
- 4. Actively share frameworks, methods, and expertise;**

5. **Increase knowledge and appreciation for systemic approaches rooted in indigenous traditions** and non-Western lineages;
6. **Deepen awareness about how to support individual and collective systems change journeys;** and
7. **Explore new ideas that we collectively might bring to the field.**

Those of us who participated found this a rich and meaningful gathering and in this report we're pleased to share what emerged with the broader field.

This report shares what we learned from over 40 interviews with convening participants and their partners, what emerged at the December convening, and some insights about ongoing and future efforts to make systems change a more connected, inclusive, and supported field.

Appreciations

Special thanks to...

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Richard Mermejo of the Picuris Pueblo for welcoming us to Santa Fe and leading the blessing for the convening

Melanie Goodchild of the Turtle Island Institute for leading both ceremony and healing throughout the convening

The many participants who contributed to shared facilitation and co-design of this convening (see a full list of participants on page 25).

Diverse Definitions of Systems Change

Some of us have textbook definitions of systems change, such as “you move from one basin of attraction to another so that the set point is different than before.” Others are more steeped in ecology, noting that natural systems will self-regulate scale in ways that our current systems don’t, and that we need to reinvigorate these self-regulatory functions.

Our definitions-in-use are still evolving. One participant noted, “I probably have a rote answer but luckily I can’t remember it...” Many participants shared an interest in breaking down the dominant and Western-centric language and concepts in systems change and finding more meaningful, accessible, and inclusive shared definitions.

We focus on diverse elements in systems change but see the need to shift power, with many of us pursuing strategies to “dismantle the conditions that have locked in a particular thing that we don’t like,” shifting power dynamics in the moment, and using our “agency to shift toward patterns that are inclusive.” “Systems change is the process of shifting narratives, relationships, structures, and power in order to solve today’s most complex problems and foster equity.” Put another way, “It’s not systems change if it’s non-relational or if things are just moving around and not shifting power and addressing equity.”

We see the effects of dominant culture on the field itself. One person noted that grassroots community members are doing innovative work but not calling it ‘systems change’ and they usually aren’t in these spaces. A chunk of the work to be done in ‘systems change’ is decolonizing the Euro-centric language, behaviors, practices, and belief structures. “There isn’t a systemic issue that doesn’t relate to colonization and associated mindsets.”

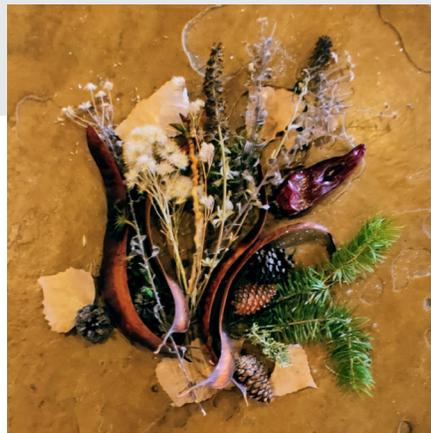
Some of us try to avoid the term ‘Systems Change’ or even the word ‘change’ altogether, preferring instead to talk about “collective transformation to create a new more healthy reality for everyone” or integrating (or reintegrating) the parts of a system that have been rejected, neglected, fragmented, or broken off. “It’s the co-evolution of individual and collective consciousness, culture, and structures.” Another person noted that “I don’t even think that it’s about solving the challenges; It may be more about us becoming resilient, adaptable and creative about how we live, more and more, in the future.”

Possibly the most accurate (and very full) working definition of systems change is one that emerged from the 2018 gathering on Wasan Island. This expanded definition, which conveys well some of the richness of field, can be found in that meeting report at <https://cutt.ly/wasan>

Diverse Definitions of Systems Change

There is an inherent tension in any attempt to define a field. While we benefit from using shared language and definitions so we're talking about the same thing, we also risk constraining the emerging possibilities of the field. Rather than debating definitions, we have chosen instead to share some of the richness of our diverse perspectives.

Shifting the ways a system works to dismantle the conditions that have locked in a particular thing that we don't like.



If you think in geeky systems parlance, you move from one basin of attraction to another so that the set point is different than before.



A natural system would self-regulate scale in ways that our current systems do not.



Looking at the bigger context – the social, political, economic, and power dynamics, while focused on making the world a better place.



I don't use the word 'Systems Change' because I don't use the word "change." I talk about collective transformations that creates a more healthy and integral reality for everyone.

“

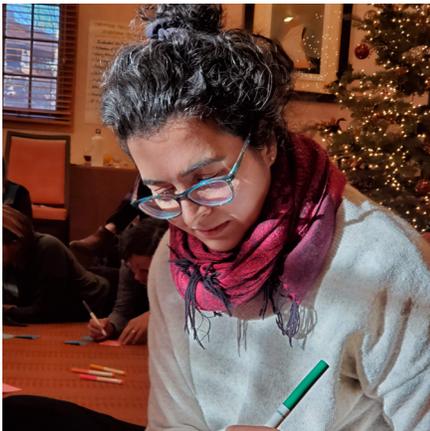
Creating webs that create faster, more equitable shifts in systems.



“

It's about relationships and creating the conditions to shift relations.

”



“

Having awareness of power dynamics and shift them in the moment, right now, in this interaction.

”



“

I think of systems change in the context of community resurgence.



“

It also means personal inner work and work in the world; my own life as a fractal of systems change.

”

“It's the co-evolution of individual and collective consciousness, culture, and structures.”

What Emerged: Gathering Insights

Healing Systems and Ourselves

In our work in communities, networks, and organizations we inevitably encounter trauma and grief. One participant offered that in systems change work “we need to proceed at the speed of healing.” Many felt that healing and processing grief is essential to any meaningful work to shift systems. We ourselves felt the need for personal and collective healing.



In a breakout group during the convening, we tried to experience healing and better understand what we are healing from. We felt that healing can take the form of embodiment (sensing our bodies and processing emotions through the body); connecting more deeply to personal purpose; transforming discomfort into voice; creating wholeness and integration within ourselves, among one another, between humanity and Earth; cultivating creative expression as a way to experience infinite possibility; doing personal work on awareness, intention, choice, and courage; and creating networks of care.

Centering Equity in Systems Change

We collectively came from different lineages and different ways of knowing. Some of us were trained within a scholarly tradition of systems thinking that over the years had given voice mostly to white male scholars. Some of us were trained within social justice and equity frames of reference and worked almost exclusively with communities of color. Regardless of our backgrounds, we agreed on the need to support each other in breaking out of dominant paradigms, decolonizing tools, frames, language and centering equity in the work we do. We shared the sense that advancing equity is systems change.

What Emerged: **Gathering Insights**



The implications of centered equity in systems change work are numerous, and include everything from showing up differently as consultants and trainers to rethinking philanthropy, to learning to release or transfer power. It also means expressing the stance of an anti-oppression practitioner, drawing on learning from adrienne maree brown:

- “Trust the people”
- “Never a failure, always a lesson”
- “Release your way to find the way”
- “Acknowledge historical context and lineage, and de-colonize”
- “Practice radical imagination”

When talking about the latter quality, practicing radical imagination, it was clear that the systems we are trying to change were not imagined with communities of color and non-binary people in positions of power. How might these systems look with a radically different distribution of power?

Learning about Learning

A group of us specifically focused on how we can more effectively foster learning that provides diverse pathways based on the varied needs of individual leaders, but also do this meaningfully at scale. Specifically, we centered on a question for ourselves and the larger field: *How might we pull up the best learning about learning around how to effectively lead systems change?* Rather than conceptualizing possibilities, we dug into the work and the following themes emerged:

What Emerged: **Gathering Insights**

- **You can't learn it in one go.** We strongly agreed that learning about systems change is a life-long endeavor and that no single program or framework, no matter how intensive or thoughtfully designed, can prepare one for this work.
- **System leaders are diverse, as are their learning needs.** At the point that any person initiates a system change initiative, they may already have experience in community organizing, systems dynamics, entrepreneurship, design thinking, or any number of analytical or social change lineages. They likely also have diverse personal biases and blind spots based on their own backgrounds and values. This means that what any individual most needs to learn (or unlearn) next may vary substantially.
- **Yet there are core competencies and, potentially, identifiable developmental pathways.** While we didn't dive deep into specific competencies for system leadership during this convening, we agreed in concept that certain core competencies, including working with complexity, facilitating across difference, and supporting collective sensemaking, are key to success in this work.
- **System leaders need the learning they need, when they need it, in language that resonates.** We also recognized as a group that much of the learning in systems change work needs to happen in relationship with others and through application and experimentation. While participants offer a range of formal courses on aspects of systems change, we saw the need to help both aspiring and practicing system leaders move their learning closer to their day-to-day work through coaching, apprenticeships, peer learning circles, and action learning methods.
- **The language we use to talk about learning in the systems change community implies some basic assumptions and mental models about the learning relationship.** What does it mean when we talk about training system leaders versus building capacity versus, for example, creating collaborative learning spaces? And in terms of our roles, are we teachers, navigators, hosts, or learning facilitators? Our emerging consensus is that system leaders are self-directed learners with the motivation and ability to learn on their own and so creating spaces and resources to support their own learning journeys might be the most helpful support we can offer.



What Emerged: **Gathering Insights**

As we reflected on ways to move forward with our question of how we might pull up the best learning about learning around how to effectively lead systems change, we considered ways to share our various learning approaches, starting with sharing training materials and doing cross-training sessions but extending to explorations of fostering more learning facilitators in the field and developing collaborative, open-source training programs and platforms.

Responding to Abrupt Change

The catastrophic fires in California were still very much a part of some of the participants' lives at the time we gathered.

Even as we met together, the fires in Australia were burning out of control and causing unprecedented disruption in many communities and forests across that continent.



As we were grieving these crises and losses, we were determined not to end up sitting in fear and we felt that these events are a wakeup call for the whole field to clarify our collective responsibility as systems practitioners. How could our practice help respond to the critical systems failure we are living through?

Below are ideas that emerged:

- Help grow pods of interdependence and a trust network that would allow communities to take risks together
- Leverage global networks advancing climate resilience, such as the Global Commons Alliance, Regenerative Communities Network, and u.lab-S (Presencing Institute)
- Support communities with mapping actors, curating tools for learning and intervening, providing access to knowledge networks and peer to peer learning, and to rapid response process tools
- Offer learning journeys, dialogues at a human scale and with an equity lens
- Curate media and storytelling
- Develop climate-specific learning opportunities
- We also recognized the need for ways to collectively hold grief and mourn climate chaos.

The Participants:

Who Attended

As interesting as the insights that emerged from this convening are the participants themselves. All support capacity-building in communities, networks, organizations in the practice of systems change.

We work from richly diverse traditions and employ a range of approaches from building peer support networks for system leaders to connecting indigenous knowledge to systems change practice to building learning ecosystems.

In common, however, we each shared a deep commitment to supporting people to realize their power to change seemingly intractable and impossibly complex systems that aren't working for people or the planet.

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Andres Marquez-Lara, UFacilitate

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Institute for Strategic Clarity

Brooking Gatewood, The Emergence
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Mary Tangelder, Mastercard Foundation

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Rebecca Petzel, The Emergence Collective

Rob Ricigliano, The Omidyar Group

Russ Gaskin, CoCreative

Ruth Rominger, Garfield Foundation

Seema Patel, Global Knowledge Initiative

Tatiana Fraser, Systems Sanctuary

The Experience:

How We Were Impacted



“How a healing focused approach might shift the practice is a big take-away curiosity for me I plan to really dive into this year, along with questions of what does it look like to decolonize our own practice.”

“We came together with excitement and some trepidation. Being in a field-defining moment felt like most people didn’t know if they belonged, but still came.”

Once together, some were struck by our collective “openness and authenticity, the blurred or even non-existent lines between work and humanity.”

We had a “chance to explore vulnerability, ritual and creating sacred spaces together in non-culturally appropriative ways that are needed, but so rare in multi-stakeholder spaces”. As a result, many of us felt spiritually connected in this gathering in a way we have not experienced before.

Someone noted that we were able to “move from “thinking” about equity, to “enacting” equity in our relationships in the group.”

As we experienced spiritual connections, we emerged with heightened awareness around the importance of healing and equity in our ‘systems’ work.

“For me, as a strategist in donor and philanthropic-funded international development, the conversations around justice, equity, and decolonization very much hit home and leave a lot of deep questions to be answered. Most of us in the space are funded by organizations, institutions or taxpayers that are not the representation of or directly accountable to the communities we serve. How do we de-colonize, or create structural equity with an aid systems when the resource flows of aid still mostly go from west-south, rich-poor, white-brown and we are embedded in that chain? I think that will be harder for us to solve for but let’s start a dialogue about this.”

“This engagement was one of the most authentic and deeply personal conversations I have had in the systems change space. The fearlessness to have difficult conversations and move each other out of the usual conversations about complexity into something so much more human-driven was refreshing and invigorating.”



Moving Forward: Ways to Engage

As we concluded the convening, many of us wanted to continue to explore some of the core questions that emerged while together, around healing and equity in particular. While that is in motion, we are also looking into ways to engage more capacity builders who might feel inspired by what's emerging here. Here are a few avenues for getting involved:

1. **Feel free to share this report** with others in your organization or networks.
2. **Join an upcoming learning event** to discuss what emerged and explore new possibilities with some of the convening participants. See illuminatesystems.org.
3. **Learn about Illuminate, the field-building initiative launched at Wasan Island**, and how you might engage in work being done to cultivate the field and practice of systems change.



Have questions about the gathering or this report?

Contact Russ Gaskin, CoCreative, russ@wearecocreative.com

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What Emerged: Themes from Pre-Convening Interviews

This supplementary section summarizes in more depth what we heard from convening participants about their experiences doing systems change capacity building, their own learning journeys, the challenges they see right now, and their hopes for the field.

Interview Insights: Systems Change Capacity Builders

Emergence of System Leadership

We came to the work of systems change through diverse but related experiences...

Exposure to Marginalization and Privilege. Many of us wanted to help others in some way from an early age, sometimes influenced by our parents. Some of us worked closely with marginalized and/or racialized people or experienced marginalization and intersectionality ourselves. Others of us grew up with privilege and/or worked in contexts that were very white and very exclusive, and at some point noticed that while we thought we were doing real change, we were really just reinforcing or replicating the same systems.

Diverse Professional Backgrounds. We have among us a missionary, a city planner, a therapist, architect, and a journalist. Others of us entered systems change work directly and a few did formal education in systems or complexity. Some of us stepped into this work “accidentally.” With the notable exception of the therapist, many of us seem to be in recovery from our past professions.

A Point of Noticing. We each seem to have had a powerful experience at some point of standing “outside” the dominant system we were a part of and observing its dysfunction. We may have noticed that some groups worked well together while others didn’t, that certain people have been systematically oppressed over time, or that people we worked with often responded to problems in reactive rather than systemic ways. We began “connecting the dots and moments of frustration, realizing we were not moving forward effectively.”

A Pivotal Experience. At some point, some of us were exposed to a worldview very different from the one we knew, or we may have discovered our shadow sides, experienced a truly participatory process, or had some powerful experience of liberation or emancipation from our past ways of knowing. We all seem to have had some moment of realization that systems are socially constructed and more malleable than we may have realized.

“ We’re all doing capacity building and applied work and it’s powerful to keep those together. It gets you both applied impact and capacity. ”

A Lifelong Journey

...and we’ve each experienced fundamental evolutions in our thinking and approach.

We’re working at many/all levels of systems. We all tend to work intentionally or even instinctively at multiple levels of systems. Some of us embrace individual work as key to changing systems while others are firmly focused on changing systems because they so profoundly influence individual choice and behaviors.

We’re integrating diagnostic/analytical and dialogic/relational approaches. Many of us who started from a more technical systems or sustainability perspective on the work have since realized the importance of working with “the human side,” from connecting to the deeper aspirations of a group to embracing personal development, healing and trust, and employing more somatic or body-based ways of knowing and learning. Some of us have noticed a shift from scarcity to abundance mindsets in our work and a deepening sense of unknowing.

We’re iterating between applied work and capacity building. One of us framed it up this way: “We’re all doing capacity building and applied work and it’s powerful to keep those together because it gets you both applied impact and capacity at the same time. And there’s greater accountability there because you have to show that what you’re teaching actually works.”

We are more systemic in our funding approach. We’re moving from investing in interesting solutions to strategically identifying where to invest within a system and creating the collaborative infrastructure for these investments to stick and scale.

We’re taking a more ‘developmental’ approach to capacity building. Many of us have noticed that our work is now much more about building capacity for systems change and that this requires effective use of self as an instrument of change, identification of bias, self-mastery, strong facilitation skills, and working across diverse worldviews. We seem to be moving away from just focusing on teaching tools, where we “load people down like a donkey with a pack

Interview Insights: Systems Change Capacity Builders

full of tools,” and it is clear that experiences people have while engaging in deep collaboration can effectively shift mindsets and worldviews.

We have a much stronger collective stance on racial justice and equity. As a group, we are talking more specifically and proactively about white supremacy and fragility, oppression, authoritarianism, and patriarchy and how pervasive these are in our lives, relationships, and systems. We’re also embracing far greater diversity in our networks and collaborations, not as a nice thing but as an imperative for success.

Developing greater awareness of myself in the system and the system in me. One person noted the need to “build critical consciousness and awareness around bigness I have in my smallness.” We see ourselves and our lives as fractals of the larger systems we work to change. One of us also noted the need to develop our capacity to be in very deep relationships with different stakeholders and still show up how we are. “Systems change is a way of thinking, doing, and being.”

Focusing on people, not tools or tech. Many of us noted that systems change happens through actual human beings and involves empowering, activating, mobilizing, and supporting change leaders. We heard that “tech solutions are not needed” and we need to “engage our soft powers” to drive change, but others noted that the tools, when used effectively, are “effective ways of stimulating a focused conversation and to change how people think and work together.”



“ We need to move from systems analysis to systems change; it’s not about the maps and tools; systems change happens through people. ”

Advancing the Field

We’re challenged to fulfill the promise of our roles as capacity builders...

There is widespread uncertainty about what systems change is and how to approach it.

One place we need to scale this work is to “scale the understanding of this type of work.”

The field is fragmented. We lack collective clarity about why we need systems change, why we do systems and network mapping. We have basic language, tools, and methodologies that aren’t shared, and we work in silos.

The field lacks resources, capacity, and skills. While there is more demand for this type of work, it’s hard to get enough resources to actually do it, and those of us who have experience doing it are swamped. We’re left with the question of how we can really scale the capacity of others. Some of the essential skills, like facilitation, aren’t actually that easy to develop in a short time. As one of us noted, “In my job I manage fundraising, program development, the team, move the chairs, do all levels; I am struggling with capacity and support.”

Funders are still catching up, ill-informed, or constrained in funding this work. It’s “hard for funders of networks to go beyond the short time horizon and maintain excitement through the lifespan of a network.” Many funders don’t want to co-develop strategy with others and have a hard time recognizing and addressing their power and privilege. It’s also challenging for funders to incorporate and understand “multiple ways of knowing in the context of a strong academic bias and how that determines who gets funding,” and to see how to measure impact in systems change. As one of us observed, “The work is often resourced by foundations who are steeped in business as usual ways of working.”

People seem obsessed with theories and analytical tools. “We need to move from systems analysis to systems change; it’s not about the maps and tools; systems change happens through people.” People need good tools to advance the work, but our mindsets and way of

Interview Insights: Systems Change Capacity Builders

showing up in the work may be more powerful determinants of success. As one of us noted, we “can get lost in a theoretical minefield in this work and forget the human aspects.”

Collectively, we lack deep knowledge of the diverse array of tools we already have. Some of us noted that people don't have enough clarity on the range of tools and approaches available, and when it makes sense to use which tool. And those of us who have a favored tool or model will “hug that method to the neglect of others.” Someone also noted that, “We're lazily just allowing complexity and causal loop diagrams to define the field,” when there are other rich and diverse approaches available.

Need support for your own systems change practice? Here's what we heard helps:

1. Get support in relationships that nourish you.
2. Embrace a spiritual practice that provides renewal, reconnects you to your purpose, and reminds you of what it means to manifest your purpose in the world.
3. Adopt and stay with a mindfulness practice that grounds and centers you.
4. Connect your individual work to a community you care deeply about. As one of us noted, “It's my community; I was born out here, these are all my relations, aunties, uncles...Individuality within the collective gives me responsibility. I need the tie between housing, food, and language.”
5. Reconnect to your core values and commitments, whether those are around social justice, equity, ecology, or something else that gives your life and work real meaning.
6. Try to imagine doing some other kind of work. (You can't, can you?)

“ There’s this overall white supremacy culture of moving fast and getting ‘results,’ where everything feels urgent and important. ”

We share concerns about the work of systems change itself...

We’re obsessed with speed and scale. Someone noted that “There’s this overall white supremacy culture of moving fast and getting ‘results,’” where “everything feels urgent and important...and we need to do a lot now.” Several people noted that it takes time to create something lasting and meaningful around a vision, and to build shared language and understanding with others.

It’s hard to scale. Others noted that we need to be able to scale from prototyping to ecosystems where our solutions can have the desired transformative effect. It’s also tough to see how all the work and strategies are adding up, and to know with confidence that we’re really contributing to systems change.

We risk not working on the most critical leverage points. A few of us noted that even our “systemic” work might not be systemic enough. If we’re not working on artificial intelligence and who controls the algorithms that guide much decision making today, for example, or addressing the fundamental design of our economic system, we might still be putting lipstick on a pig. As one person noted, “We need to address the neoliberal bias of the systems change movement.”

We risk reinforcing colonization. Who decides what systems change is or is not? Who determines what gets funded? How can I communicate what I do in non-colonial, elitist language? One person noted that they see “all forms of intersectional organizing as systems change” but several of us raised flags of concern about advancing a “modern, technical definition of systems change,” while “the practices around social movements may have more evidence and real impact to support them.”

It’s not always what’s needed. It’s hard to imagine, but sometimes a big systems change initiative or network play just isn’t the approach that’s needed. As one person noted, “I think there’s a lot of learning to happen around where it’s wise to leverage a big network approach and where it’s just not needed and ends up being shallow.”

Interview Insights: Systems Change Capacity Builders

It risks becoming professionalized and/or outsourced. Several people noted that we risk working under a “savior mentality” or taking on roles and work that should be done by people in the system. We need to make these approaches more accessible and inclusive, and more available to marginalized communities.

It requires real work inside us to identify and continue to work from our personal purpose, decolonizing ourselves, and really examine our interactions and relationships.

It’s hard to get started and develop a business doing this work. “Young people are wanting to move into this work; where is the pipeline, where do we send people who want to learn/ training opportunities?” And some of us experience similar challenges around framing what we do, connecting to opportunities, really understanding where our services might be most helpful, and building business models to do this work over time.

It can be exhausting and lonely. “I’m personally a little burnt out on network strategy work...I want to find a way to do it in a way that feels nourishing and sustainably or I’ll have to stop doing it.” Others reported being continually busy, without much time to digest or even think, and having trouble letting go of a need for control or certainty and really staying with the messiness. And one of us shared that, “This work is lonely and exhausting; we need to figure out ways to better support each other and provide more coherence across different offers.”

But we’re finding powerful sources of inspiration and support.

We’re inspired by both current and future impact. One of us is driven by “a commitment to free all beings and end suffering,” while another noted that, “I’m getting closer to working at larger scales with large organizations that affect millions of people.” One of us quoted Elissa Sloan Perry, who said that “all our work is faith-based because we’re trying to create a world that no one’s ever lived in before.”

People who participate in the work are transformed by it. People are inspired by the diversity of those they work with, by the deep relationships they’ve built, and how people show up for

“The way I hold the work that I do, even when it seems very technical, is that I’m contributing to the evolution of humanity.”

each other, dancing during network meetings or staying up late to talk, connect and play until 2am. “There is something about this container, it’s a nourishing space; it feels good.” Others of us find that how participants are transformed by the work is the most inspiring aspect of the work (“the network participants have a sense of meaning, purpose, self-efficacy, and impact that they’ve never experienced before; for some of them, it’s literally life-changing.”)

Relationships are transformed by the work. Many of us observed a “sense of flow and trust” and noted that when we help create spaces that allow people to be vulnerable and to bring all of who they are to the work, magic happens.

People’ faith in the possibilities seems to be growing. We noted greater awareness of and interest in this work, with more and more organizational leaders who understand why collaboration for systems change is important to their missions. We’re seeing organizations supporting and providing capacity. One person noted that “the way I hold the work that I do, even when it seems very technical, is that I’m contributing to the evolution of humanity and each specific group to evolve in a way that contributes to that bigger evolution.”

People are trying to put themselves out of business. When asked about her source of inspiration, one of us replied frankly: “Huh. Oh, I hope I don’t have to be doing this work anymore.” Another noted that “I think we’re doing pretty much the opposite of what a ‘good’ consulting firm is supposed to do, like helping launch and grow other firms who do what we do and giving away all of our ‘intellectual property.’ Stuff that only makes sense if you understand what we’re trying to do.” Another hopes that we reach the point where we’re doing stuff that’s “kind of antithetical to ‘systems change,’ like moving slow and taking a long time.”

