SYSTEMS CHANGE

INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

This paper explores systems thinking and systems change from the perspective of people actively working on addressing root-causes of problems in their specific fields. Following a brief overview of the basic tenets of the systems approach, the paper outlines the distilled insights drawn from interviews with 18 systems thinkers from diverse fields and countries. Their insights are supplemented by real-life stories of how they apply a systems approach to complex problems, and by recommendations of key resources that readers can adapt to their own work.

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SUMMARY

No issue or event happens in isolation. Societal problems are typically symptoms or results of structures of societal systems (e.g., economic, food, healthcare, development systems). Thus, there is a rising trend in prioritizing the use of systems thinking to try to achieve systems change in order to address root causes of issues and create alternative local, regional and global systems that support equality and prosperity for all.

Working towards systems change is not new. It connects with other transformative intentions of thinking and doing in the development sector, including decolonization, localization and feminist approaches. **Systems thinking** is the holistic, nonlinear process of understanding how various parts of our global system operate separately and relationally to produce societal outcomes. **Systems change** is an intentional transformation of the relationships, values, patterns and norms that shape society. Based on insights from changemakers from various sectors, to achieve systems change for equality, approaches must be human-centered (e.g., led by marginalized groups) and use mindful scaling (e.g., prioritizing quality over quantity), while simultaneously promoting shifts in mindset, power and policy.

Systems thinking starts at the individual level and has the potential to support development practitioners in reflecting on how their current position may unintentionally uphold systems of inequality. It may then equip them to more authentically challenge historical and contemporary norms by shifting mindsets, reshaping power dynamics and advocating for holistic policy change to contribute to the creation of an alternative system which has parts that (inter)dependently operate for the purpose of equality.

1 INTRODUCTION

Current global systems have fallen short in supporting a fair, sustainable and safe society in which prosperity is equally and broadly shared. While 'systems change' is sometimes used as a buzz word in programs and projects aimed at addressing complex development problems, it is also a pertinent concept as society recognizes that issues are not isolated occurrences but rather are deeply rooted in systemic factors which have been socially developed over time. As such, there is a demand for social transformation to get to the root cause of issues.

A systems change approach has already been adopted by numerous individuals, civil society organizations, and programs. At Oxfam Novib, which hosted this research project, systems change appears as one of the overarching commitments guiding its ambitions.[1] Programs affiliated with Oxfam Novib, such as FAIR for ALL[2] are also making strides towards this ambition by actively strengthening civil society to support the transformation of the economic system of trade and value chains to contribute to a world in which public and private sector actors prioritize (the wellbeing of) people and planet before profit.

Although many in the development sector strive to advance work in driving systemic change aligned with goals of realizing a more inclusive, secure, equitable and sustainable world, the concept of systems change remains broad, and theoretical. Thus, it is quite inaccessible, and many are left asking, 'What exactly does systems change mean, and how can we achieve it?'.

It is in this unsettled conversation that members of the Learning, Innovation and Knowledge (LINK) Unit at Oxfam Novib who work on the FAIR for ALL (F4A) program initiated a learning trajectory on the topic of systems change. The two-year trajectory was meant to facilitate mutual learning on system change among F4A partners and to gather insights from outside the program. The first objective was achieved through a series of roundtable discussions held in 2025, as well as learning events in Ghana and Cambodia in 2024. The second objective was addressed through a series of readings and interviews which formed the basis of this paper. As such, this paper aims to bridge theory and practice by drawing on both a literature review and the lived experiences of systems change practitioners worldwide. In doing so, it complements the learnings gathered from within F4A and helps establish a shared understanding of the topic. Following a brief theoretical overview of core systems change principles, the paper presents lessons distilled from interviews with key changemakers around the world, highlighting the varied ways in which they interpret and apply these principles in their own contexts.

2 METHODOLOGY

PROCEDURES

We used a combination of literature review and informant interviews to compile the theoretical and experiential content outlined in this paper. The literature review included a non-systematic search of key readings in systems change (see references in notes section and resources in Box 1). The interviews consisted of 1 to 2-hour online conversations with 18 key informants, such as development practitioners, activists, scholars, decision-makers and social entrepreneurs who apply systems thinking in their work. The respondents were purposefully selected through professional networks and snowball sampling to find individuals who have consistently embedded systemic change principles in their work. The interviewees' backgrounds spanned across private sector organizations (e.g., as organizational consultants), INGOs, public sector industries (e.g., Energy), social enterprises and community-level civil society organizations. They are based in 10 countries, and span across agricultural, health, education, labor market, international development and entrepreneurial industries to provide diverse perspectives and examples.

To generate the results and key insights (Section 5), we conducted a content analysis of the interviews using MaxQDA[3], grouping similar elements across data. We then distilled common themes and iteratively examined common denominators until we found the critical insights that encompass and explain most of the content gathered. A senior researcher further refined and validated this synthesis, and the draft version of the paper was discussed and validated with the interviewees over email. As such, the insights presented in Section 5 reflect our own critical interpretation and synthesis of the interview data, rather than a direct or linear representation of what was said.

Meet the Changemakers Interviewed[1]

1. **Alfonso Cornejo**, Strategy, Leadership and Transformation Consultant, Mexico.
2. **Arsene Ngombe**, Chief Enabler, RIAHSAH Co., South Africa.
3. **Boitu Nkonde**, Organizational Design Facilitator, South Africa.
4. **Deepak Nanda**, Impact Manager Communication and Technology, RISE Infinity Foundation and Idobro, India.
5. **Eva Valencia**, Founder Tricolor Coalition and Sustainability Transitions Researcher, Mexico.
6. **Hannah Härtwich**, Systems Mapper Consultant, Netherlands.
7. **Jairo da Costa**, Scholar Design for Sustainability, University of Twente, Netherlands.
8. **Jeroo Billimoria**, Social Entrepreneur, Catalyst2030, Netherlands.
9. **Joss Colchester**, Founder Systems Innovation Network, The UK.
10. **Linda Kuvheya**, Director of Innovation and Impact, RIAHSAH Co., South Africa.
11. **Luana Silveira de Faria**, Government Project Coordinator, Brazil.
12. **Maya Narayan**, Co-Founder Holon Perspectives LLP, India.
13. **Nicola Gryczka**, Social Entrepreneur, Social Gastronomy, Switzerland.
14. **Purvisha Sutaria**, Urban Futures Designer, The UK.
15. **Rodrigo Bautista**, Principal Change Designer, Forum for the Future, USA.
16. **Sharmi Surianarain**, Chief Impact Officer, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, Kenya.
17. **Simone Uriartt**, Innovation and Design Specialist UNDP Innovation Unit, Türkiye.
18. **Winne van Woerden**, Policy Lead on New Economy, Oxfam Novib, The Netherlands.

[1] Views expressed and quotes used in this paper are those of the people interviewed and not of the companies or countries they represent.

REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT AND LIMITATIONS

It is important to acknowledge our positions, privileges and biases as researchers from Oxfam Novib working on the FAIR for ALL program. While our aim was to be guided by the insights of the practitioners whom we interviewed, we acknowledge the potential bias of our own knowledge and ideas of what systems change is and how it should be implemented. We also acknowledge that our very ability to dedicate time and resources to learn and publish lessons from this trajectory is a possible manifestation of an unjust and unequal system. We reflected deeply on these issues and continuously adjusted our approach to maximize the extent to which this knowledge product was co-created and authentically represents the ideas of the interviewees. This reflection influenced our decision to emphasize the practical aspects of systems change as experienced, implemented and articulated by the interviewees, while relying less on established (often Western) theoretical notions of what systems change should be. This approach was carefully weighed against the potential limitations of representing a narrow set of perspectives since the insights and conclusions shared in this paper are limited to the experiences of the people interviewed. Nonetheless, this approach is aligned with the purpose of the paper – not to offer a comprehensive or universal account of systems change, but rather a focused snapshot of key principles as lived and expressed by a subsample of people who implement it to encourage reflective discussions amongst development practitioners.

3 TENETS OF A SYSTEMS APPROACH

This section provides a brief overview of the basic tenets of systems change and related concepts. In line with our bottom-up approach, the overview also weaves in the interviewees' comments, reflections and interpretations of the building blocks of systems change.

Broadly defined, a **system** is a group of interconnected, interdependent parts which form a complex whole with a common purpose.[4] It is organized by the relationships and dynamics between its different parts which influence its behavior and purpose, i.e., what happens to one part of the system may impact other parts. Such multi-leveled interconnections of diverse elements build complexity – a critical characteristic of a system – which presents as nonlinear, ever-evolving and often chaotic.[5][6] Maya Narayan, adds,

> '[...] when you look at the network of human civilization as a socio-technical ecological system, it's important to see how things are connected, what the different actors [and] rules are, and how their mindset or their mental models inform the actions that they are taking and some unintended consequences of that action [and] how that gets distributed across the globe.'

Within systems, exist so-called **systemic problems**. These are not caused by an isolated incident, but rather by the structure of the system itself. For example, the issue of poverty is rooted in inequities in the economic system, which has been structured to prioritize economic growth, profit and commercial interests over equal access, fairness and sustainability. These systemic features of our economy are in turn interconnected to food systems, climate collapse, gender inequalities, racism, access to healthcare and education and other issues.

Such systemic problems are often difficult to solve in manner of linear causality, but instead require an approach of 'systems thinking' to create 'systems change'. Because the problem is not from one source, change needs to tackle the patterns, relationships, values, norms and structures (e.g., cultural, political or economic) that have together constructed and normalized an unequal society. According to Linda Kuvheya, '**Systems change** basically refers to the intentional and transformative shift in the underlying structures in the processes and patterns that shape the society or any complex system.'

To enable systems change, practitioners use the lens or tool of **systems thinking**. This is a holistic, nonlinear way of viewing and thinking about the world to make sense of how relationships between its complex, interconnected layers produce societal outcomes. Boitu Nkonde adds that systems thinking is a process that 'ensure[s] that people are able to understand the whole system and not just the pockets that they work in.' This enables people to move away from approaches which simply apply temporary fixes to symptoms at the surface level, towards developing sustainable solutions which address root causes of issues at local, national and global levels. The complexity and variance in achieving systems change is well captured in the analogy from Sharmi Surianarain, paraphrasing the thoughts of Brenda Zimmerman and Sholom Glouberman,[7] below.

> 'Systems change is like raising a child. So, it is not making a cake, it's not sending a rocket to the moon, it's raising a child, and the thing itself changes. There is no formula. You unfortunately have to adapt as the child evolves in this context. But it is a very powerful sort of analogy for framing how complex systems change is: it's not about a recipe, it's not about a complicated series of sequence steps, but it is about really understanding the system itself and how that itself can evolve beyond [...] the sort of series of steps that you undertake.'

Finally, a related concept that one may hear in conversations on systems change and solutions for complex problems is that of **design thinking**. This often refers to 'a non-linear, iterative process that teams use to understand users, challenge assumptions, redefine problems and create innovative solutions to prototype and test.'[8] While systems thinking is holistic - zooming out to

understand abstract relationships between various parts of the system, design thinking is people-centered - zooming in to identify needs and concrete solutions. There is discussion in the field to combine these two types of thinking as lenses to view the needs/perspectives of individual stakeholders, while also viewing the bigger picture.[9][10] There are both complements and tensions between these lenses, which readers might identify while reading the principles and examples shared in this paper. Through the stories shared, we have identified design thinking as a key practical tenet that should be integrated with abstract systems thinking to holistically address complex problems.

While this brief overview was necessary to provide common vocabulary in our discussion of systems change, we do not view these definitions as comprehensive or prescriptive. Systems thinking is an evolving approach, and its definitions are likely to remain as versatile as the approach itself. Interested readers can refer to the resources below for further reading.

Box 1. Additional Resources Recommended by Interviewees and Authors

1. The Donella Meadows Project. https://donellameadows.org/
2. Cynthia Rayner and Francois Bonnici. (2021). The Systems work of Social Change. Oxford University Press. Available at https://www.thesystemswork.org/
3. Kimberly Bowman, John Chettleborough, Helen Jeans, James Whitehead, & Jo Rowlands. (2015). Systems Thinking: An introduction from Oxfam programme staff. Available at https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/
4. Anneloes Smitsman. (2019). Into the Heart of Systems Change. Ph.D. Dissertation, Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Available at https://www.academia.edu/44295679/Into_the_Heart_of_Systems_Change_PhD_Dissertation_by_Anneloes_Smitsman_PhD_
5. Tatiana Fraser. (2023). The Art of Scaling Deep. The Systems Sanctuary. Available at https://systemsanctuary.com/scale-deep
6. Systems Change Innovation Network: https://www.systemsinnovation.network/spaces/13504261/page
7. Doughnut Economics Lab: https://doughnuteconomics.org/
8. Alfonso Cornejo Alvarez. (2023). Liderazgo para la Solidez Organizacional: Facilitando Conductas para la Rentabilidad. Available at https://www.scribd.com/document/621117771/Liderazgo-para-La-Solidez-Organizacional
9. John Kania, Mark Kramer, & Peter Seng. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. Available at https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

4 SYSTEMS CHANGE IN PRACTICE: INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

In this section, we delve into the underlying principles of system change as critically distilled by the authors through the interviews. While our analysis revealed subthemes, included but not limited to, multistakeholder engagement, long-term vision, localization, collaboration, adaptive management and alternative funding mechanisms, we identified three critical higher-level themes that tie all these elements together: human-centered approaches, mindful scaling, and shifts in mind, power and policy. These three themes encompass most of the insights gathered, while the examples provided are often illustrations of a smaller scale systemic change. In the below sections, we describe how these themes are critical elements required to apply systems thinking as a guiding tool toward systems change, expand on their scope, and highlight how they are interrelated and interdependent for sustainability and impact. We also exemplify the principles through illustrative stories presented in boxes (See Boxes 2-9).

HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACHES

Systems thinking, like many paradigms or thinking processes, is driven by a set of principles. While a discourse into all the principles that underpin a systems approach is beyond the scope of the paper, we identified core interrelated principles that our informants repeatedly seem to adhere to. Almost all the interviewees noted that their approaches are and must be human-centered – whether community led or collaborative, or other forms of human-centered approaches.

One of the assumptions of a human-centered approach posits that those impacted by the system are the ones who truly understand its processes and evolution, and thus have the insight into what needs to be changed. Jeroo Billimoria emphasizes, 'I am not an expert because the minute I say I'm [an] expert, I'm going against the very dictates of systems change. The only experts in any change you're trying to [create] are those impacted by the system.' Eva Valencia's thinking aligns with this, as she says, 'it is very important to see the already existing processes, [because] in reality, the system itself is already very rich, so seeing what these actors are already doing, what ideas they have, what ideas are missing, what capacities are there, is important.' As such, according to the experts we spoke with, systems thinking best works as an organic process coming from those with lived experience.

A human-centered approach to systems thinking and change can also mean that the community is placed at the center of decision-making power – making the approach community-led. Nicola Gryczka elaborates that to address the possible mistrust that might exist between the development sector and local communities, a community-led approach is key. In her own words, she explains,

> 'NGOs often enter communities with the goal of implementing programs or introducing solutions to address local insecurities or systemic inequities. However, before any meaningful change can take place, it is essential to first create space for open dialogue and trust-building. Communities may have reasons for skepticism, and various agendas can be at play. The key is to cultivate an environment where possibilities emerge organically—where those with lived

experience are not just consulted but actively engaged in co-creating the solutions they need. It's not about simply offering a program; it's about fostering true collaboration and shared ownership of the process.'

This human-centered approach is also critical for catalyzing systems change within organizations. Deepak Nanda explains that their organization views systems change as starting from the individual level rather than from the higher organizational policy level. They've identified three critical individual actors: partners, entrepreneurs and citizens,[11] and when 'brought together in a more synergistic format, [individuals] can lead to a total transformation of how a problem has been approached and then solved systematically thereafter.' At Simone Uriartt's organization, the way this translates into practice is that their innovation unit expands collaboration and capacity building with other internal departments and external partners to design multiple interconnected interventions that are meant to keep evolving over time, rather than a single solution. This brings a more 'designer way of doing' approach to development.

Systems mapping, briefly explained through a conversation with Hannah Härtwich summarized in Box 2, offers an approach for bringing people together to form a shared understanding of how the system they focus on operates and identify points of intervention.

Box 2: Systems Mapping for Collective Understanding and Action

Shared by Hannah Härtwich

Hannah Härtwich is a Systems Mapper consultant who helps teams navigate complexity, communicate effectively and develop strategic action by working with them to draw a visualization of their specific challenge – an approach called systems mapping. Building on a background of geo-ecology and a fascination with the interconnectedness of living ecosystems, she now specializes in business mapping, supporting projects ranging from internal organizational dynamics to broader societal challenges. At the time of the interview, she was working on a project focusing on how to make the engineering sector more diverse and inclusive.

First, she conducted interviews with individual stakeholders within the system of the engineering sector. She then drew a first draft of a map of the key variables of the system mentioned by informants without drawing out how they are connected. She then hosted a workshop with multiple stakeholders, divided into small groups, to discuss their positions within the system, draw connections between key variables and identify opportunities for impactful intervention. Based on the collectively-created map, she was able to identify what skills, mindsets and capabilities of leaders would need to be strengthened through training in order to authentically increase diversity and inclusion. Insights from the map were later shared in simple, accessible format to stakeholders throughout the engineering system to spread awareness and catalyze action across various levels and contexts.

Hannah says that systems mapping is a valuable approach since it starts by bringing diverse people together, which, to her, is where systems change begins:

'For me, it always starts with bringing together all the different perspectives from the stakeholders, because each individual can only see certain parts [...] of the system and are influenced by their biases [...] So it helps to bring people together, helps people better understand each other's perspectives and fill in missing pieces of the puzzle [...] to better understand the flow of influence [...] and you can actually observe once you make change, how does the system react?'

So, systems mapping supports individuals to collaborate and develop meaningful action, based on system dynamics, to achieve effective impact beyond their direct sphere of influence.

Although individuals, communities and horizontal mobilization are at the core of systems thinking and change, the changemakers also note the value of top-down influence. Luana Silveira de Faria argues that, at least at the level of organizations, the leadership must be willing to allow the changes to happen and encourage the people to commit. Alfonso Cornejo makes a similar claim when he notes,

> '[…] the key is the top of an [organization]. You [must] have a lot of contact with them because unfortunately, if you focus on the lower parts of the organization, then the change initiatives are not successful. There must be, as they say, the project managers, the sponsors, the champions, the leaders, the ones who are pushing the initiatives. In other words, you really have to sell to them, you have to involve them, you have to convince them. They are the people you have to convince so that change can definitely happen.'

Once organization leaders are on board, they can encourage and initiate collaborations across institutions. Harmonizing energy among diverse multi-disciplinary collectives towards a common goal is vital for creating a new system. Joss Colchester emphasizes 'the only way you shift the system is getting a higher-level capacity that no one organization can get. […] It is the connection, the synergies, the alignment across those [organizations] and we really need to be assessing for that.'

Besides organizational leaders, donors also offer vertical influence and thus must be engaged. Funding for systems change-driven activities can be difficult since it is a long-term, nonlinear process with intangible outcomes, not captured by a conventional theory of change or aligned with traditional funding practices that prioritize end results. Thus, collaborative relationships and multistakeholder engagements between funders, organizations and individuals working for societal transformation are critical and may help major donors adopt systems thinking. Rodrigo Bautista has observed that some donors are already starting to recognize that they must get closer to and more active with the people they are trying to help so that they can better align with what is truly needed. And Simone Uriartt says her innovation unit works closely with donors to bring them onboard and show the benefits of a different development practice. Thus, international organizations and NGOs who strive to have social impact must create the necessary space for diverse people to come together and take power in co-creating programs which genuinely align with the values, lived experiences and visions of those who live in the community or region.[12] While doing this, (I)NGOs must practice humility and be conscious to not let their branding overshadow the efforts of their partners. Jeroo Billimoria warns that prioritization of branding hinders the trust of the social sector and in turn may harm the system that they are attempting to transform – emphasizing that shifts in power dynamics are foundational for systems change.

While acknowledging that the journey to systemic change is easier when there is political and leadership will, the interviewed changemakers leaned on the power of the collective and the human-centered approach to enable change, even if it takes longer. In Box 3, Nicola Gryczka presents a powerful story of a community-led approach and community mobilization that was able to link the local and the global for lasting impact.

Box 3: Mobilizing Crowds – A Story from Social Gastronomy

Shared by Nicola Gryczka

Nicola Gryczka is a social entrepreneur from Switzerland. She is one of the co-creators and co-founders of the Social Gastronomy Movement (SGM) – a global impact network that works towards a more equitable food system through the collective power of that network.

In 2020, SGM started a successful campaign called Universal Plate aimed at advocating for the right to food for everyone. It mobilized chefs, academics, farmers, corporations, municipalities

and individuals in over 99 communities worldwide to cook and share local, nutritionally balanced meals with those in need in their local communities. Since then, people have shared over 72 million meals in more than 30 countries worldwide.

Nicola shares how this campaign mobilized crowds and brought people together for action even after the campaign.

'We have more than 400 members and each member represents a local community. [...] It's a network of networks. We give orchestration support where we coordinate these change makers and local communities and accelerate the capacity that they have on a local, individual or on a collective level. So, it is bringing a space for knowledge exchange on a global level, but also on a local level.

Our global vision is engaging people to collaborate for social change. It is not just organizations or groups, but it's the people behind those. That is where we saw mobilization, where people first could be part of something bigger, secondly, could change their mindsets and thirdly, they could then act upon what they identified together and would be important in their local community. So, in a few instances that was policy and others, it was just continued local collaborations.

Now there are groups and local communities [that participated in Universal Plate] that say: we need more now. They started trusting each other and collaborating on this one little action they have got mobilized towards. Then they sat down and said, "this year we will bring out the manifesto to the policymakers on how to make the right of food actionable in our city."

But meaningful change takes time. It took three years of participation in Universal Plate before this group of local actors felt ready to take the next step. This reflects the power of global mobilization—not only was it an engaging and enjoyable process, but it also fostered local trust among stakeholders, ultimately paving the way for concrete collaboration and a collective leap forward.

I believe that this way you create fertile ground for things to emerge afterwards. There is so much you can orchestrate and coordinate at the global level, but the change needs to happen locally, so the actual action is going to be locally, and I think that's important to see.'

When asked, "What challenges do you see with a systems change approach?', Nicola responded:

'Systems change takes time, yet as a society, we are increasingly focused on short-term outcomes and immediate results. This mindset creates a challenge because while we seek concrete, measurable impact, true systems change is a long-term process—often complex, gradual and difficult to quantify.'

MINDFUL SCALING

A concept that one may often hear in conversations on systems change and in the development sector, is that of 'scaling'. This often refers to the use, uptake and adaptation of innovations and interventions across broader communities of actors and/or geographies, as a way to achieve sustainable development.[13] Scaling is often associated with 'positive change.' [14] That is, through scaling a program, project, or other type of intervention, an organization can reach high target numbers, which in turn are seen as an indicator of success for those funding, implementing and evaluating the initiative[15]. However, this common referral is only one type of scaling (scaling wide). Our informants differentiated three dimensions of scaling[16]: wide, up and deep. They explained these distinctions and provided examples of how they relate to systems change.

One way of scaling is Scaling Wide (also called horizontal scaling). This involves replicating an innovation or model many times to advance it in the market, and/or reach more individuals. Luana

Silveira de Faria mindfully uses a form of horizontal scaling to steadily introduce innovative practices to organizations that are still developing their systemic thinking, and who might be resistant to change. As a consultant who aids in introducing new practices and solutions into organizations, she starts with small groups, facilitates discussions, and then scales the next iteration of the initiative to a larger group. In her own words, 'People look for guidance on not only what to do but also how to do it. We base all the [new] practices on research, on data, on evidence, on people's stories. And then we experiment them in small scales and in small groups to qualify these practices - to see what is not working, what is working. Then after we qualify these practices, we want to scale these practices to other levels. '

Scaling wide is often important for program developers and social entrepreneurs who often want to reach more individuals. However, our interviewees argue that scaling wide may have its downfalls. For example, by chasing the wrong metrics, one might expand an intervention that only addresses surface level symptoms rather than structural causes. That is why scaling wide is only one step towards driving systems change. One must be mindful of the whole picture and scale deep to ensure the root cause is addressed and recognize the potential for unintended consequences.

Scaling Deep[17][18] involves changes in habits, behavior, norms and/or ways of being. Reflecting on the definition of systems change, one might be able to grasp how critical this dimension of scaling is. For instance, Sharmi Surianarain cautions not to confuse scaled interventions that reach many people with those addressing systemic root causes of the problem. That is, one must be willing to slow down to prioritize quality and relevance over quantity and reach. She notes '*changing your path and changing the product that you are scaling is really important to address some of the systems changes that you need.*' In Box 4, she illustrates how having a systems lens 'forces you to look at the impact in different ways' and go beyond the desirable metrics that one typically wants to see when they scale. Perhaps once one has mindfully scaled deep, then they can consider how to contextually scale wide.

Box 4: Scaling Deep – From Precarity to Sustainability in the Labor Market

Shared by Sharmi Surianarain

'We believe that we need to fall in love with the problem, not with our solution. And systems change is about falling in love with the problem. So simply scaling solutions [wide] is not enough. [For example,] you can have a really great product [...] but scaling your product alone is not going to solve the actual problem [...] Scale is great and scale is important because scale also allows and has allowed us to get a seat at the table to be taken seriously, to be both an operator and sort of systems change player. But scale is insufficient to address systems issues. And I think that is the unfortunate tradeoff. So scale is a piece of the puzzle, but it isn't the only piece...

We are working in the informal economy. We are looking at pathways [to get] young people work in South Africa for ride hailing[19]. It is a growing sector for jobs, but it is also a precarious sector. Having a systems lens allows us to say, OK, the sector is precarious, it is plagued by all these issues, if we did this, how does it impact the sector? [A systems approach] forces you to have a different lens. So instead of just saying that we got 200 young people into ride hailing jobs, [we say] No, we need to [also] look at the income, we need to look if they have been able to access licenses for the delivery, and for the actual vehicles.

[With a systems lens] you are primed to be much more attuned to all of the kinds of consequences versus we just pathway the young people into jobs [...]. Thinking of all of the systems and all of the consequences is a natural part of systems change in general.'

The third type of scaling is to advance an innovation or model directly into public policy. This is referred to as Scaling Up or vertical scaling. Maya Narayan has noticed that this form of scaling is not given enough attention by young activists or entrepreneurs. She notes,

> 'What we have seen is that social entrepreneurs find themselves thinking about [...] reaching more individuals, but they do not [yet] think about how their

interventions would inform the change of laws, institutions or policies.' This aspect of scaling is key to achieving sustainable change and should be pursued as policy changes can inform cultural and mental changes in various multileveled stakeholders – and in turn lead to more deep scaling and changes in the status quo.'

Aligned with the idea of mindful scaling as well as the human-centered approach, Rodrigo Bautista also asserts that scaling does not have to be grand. Small and slow changes, when applied with a systemic lens, also contribute to scaling. He argues that a change or solution does not need to involve the whole organization, or the whole value chain to be systemic. In contrast, when we apply systemic thinking and we understand what is needed from all the different perspectives, then we are already creating the necessary change. See Box 5 on how he views systems change as a process that starts from changes within an individual.

Box 5: Systems Change Starts with Everyday Practices

Shared by Rodrigo Bautista

'A guiding principle to remember: Change begins within. To create change around you, start by changing yourself. When you embrace this idea, you will discover that learning is the only constant on the journey to transformation...

Many people see systems change as a massive undertaking—a multi-year collaboration among twenty different organizations. But I like to think beyond that. I believe in making your work more systemic by weaving in frameworks and practices from everyday routines, like my breakfast rituals, into planning a work meeting or designing a prototyping template. It's like doing small, consistent exercises at the gym -- these small moments of integration build a reminder and make it less daunting.'

Ultimately, scaling in its various forms is a desired process and outcome within systems change and systems thinking. However, lessons from the field emphasize that scaling need not be large, nor rushed, nor unidirectional. Instead, mindful scaling applied with a systemic lens in combination with community-centered multistakeholder engagements is much more likely to address root cases and lead to systems change.

At the foundation of these elements, important shifts in mind, power and policy exist, which are explained in the following section.

SHIFTS IN MIND, POWER AND POLICY

According to the practitioners, to be able to transform a system and address root causes of issues, individuals and organizations must be open to - and promote - shifts in mindset and behavior, power dynamics and policy (See Graphic 1).

MINDSET

Changing mindsets and behaviors involves not only changing others' minds but also our own. As mentioned by many of our interviewees, we must change the way we perceive problems and solutions from linear and reductionist, to a wholistic perception. Being able to consider multiple perspectives, root causes and consequences (intended and otherwise) is at the heart of a systems mindset. Purvisha Sutaria, Boitu Nkonde and others emphasize that people often benefit from a safe and facilitated process such as coaching or workshop, to help them change their frame of reference and behaviors. For example, see Box 6 on how Boitu Nkonde harnesses design and systems thinking to enable people to think differently about problems.

Box 6: Navigating Levels of Change by Collectively Reframing Ways of Thinking

Shared by Boitu Nkonde

Boitu was working with an executive board for a private school in South Africa. They wanted to work towards better programming for their students and transform their organizational culture. There were many different opinions about what should change, and some members felt hesitant to leave behind the legacy practices that they were accustomed to working with. This led to tension and discomfort between people. To resolve this, Boitu guided the board using systems thinking to ensure that each member understood the whole system, rather than only the areas that they worked in. Once such understanding was established, mindsets were changed so that everyone recognized themselves as an agent of change who contributes to the team's collective capacity for transformation. Individuals were able to see the interconnections of their system and view change as a collaborative process. This facilitated the creation of a healthier culture of communication amongst team members and stakeholders to be able to make a positive change to the school system. In his own words he says:

'Initially the focus was on coaching. So how do we get an executive team of not only teachers, but also board members to understand that they need to understand practices of what they are doing well. So, it is almost like we're taking them through a process of feedback management, and this obviously requires a sense of honesty to be able to understand that to redesign that system, we have to know what the current reality is of that system. So [it's a question of] how do we get them to talk about the challenges that they are facing and how do we create the system that allows them to not only see it as a set structure, but one that is malleable.'

Boitu's experience shows that systems change may require recognizing the possibility to change seemingly established structures, through open and honest conversations.

A shift in mindset is also closely related to design innovation, and allowing people the space to be creative and apply design thinking without constraints of practicality or positionality, even if momentarily. Purvisha Sutaria notes that through facilitated workshops, she aids people to put aside their roles and titles in the organization and engage openly in creative conversations. Arsene Ngombe adds that exercises aimed at shifting mindsets and stimulating systems thinking can help with navigating resistance to change, as it allows people to experience how problems are interrelated, and hence see solutions differently. An example of using a 'what-if' technique to enable shifts in mindset is elaborated in Box 7.

Box 7: Fortune Tellus – Helping People Understand Systems Change

Shared by Purvisha Sutaria

Purvisha has done work on system innovation and on how to move towards more regenerative future cities. In her work she tries to define what system thinking means for cities. The primary goal has been to help people understand what it means and to present case studies of successful systems change interventions within cities.

We asked Purvisha to elaborate more on a specific project called Fortune Tellus which she states during her Master's dissertation with a classmate:

'[It is a project] that deals with climate change and essentially works within the climate change arena. We help organizations [and] individuals to understand and to give them the agency to think that they have the capability to make the changes that we need for moving from the mess that we are in, to a more sustainable approach. [...] it has been designed through the principles of systems thinking and foresight and narrative storytelling.

It takes people through an experience with tarot-like cards which asks big "what if" questions (e.g., "what if plants are given an equal legal right as humans?"), then they go through the

process to start conversations and reflections on what kind of world they want to see and what actions they can take to become a "climate warrior."'

Lastly, informants shared that an important mindset shift for changemakers is to transition the framing of their work to, in the words of Winne van Woerden, 'painting the new, not merely critiquing the old.' For instance, numerous experts have shown leaders data to prove that current systems (e.g., the economic system) are failing the majority. While this information is important for understanding what needs to change, it is also crucial to share a vision of what alternative systems would look like in order to catalyze positive action in the direction of achieving such vision.

POWER

Along with a shift in the way one perceives and interprets situations, and in tandem with behavior change, there also ought to be a change in power dynamics. Systems change requires a shift in the way one understands, navigates and exerts power. Participants emphasized the need to move away from hierarchical and patriarchal dynamics towards feminist and communal approaches, and fair distribution of power. This is closely related to the core principle of a community-led approach (See page 9) whereby ideas, decisions and expertise are locally-rooted and led.

Purvisha illustrates how shifts in mindset and power can occur simultaneously by using design thinking approaches with marginalized, or traditionally disempowered, communities. She has been part of initiatives which have centered around fostering the imagination of neighborhoods and using their power to solve complex problems. She notes 'Imagine that diversity of people being taken to the power of the community, wherein you can use the power of the imagination, the knowledge that everybody has, to solve these really complex and wicked problems.'

Linda, in Box 8, reflects on how sharing power amongst various stakeholders is an enabler of success in an agriculture program she worked on.

Box 8: Sharing Power to Establish Common Vision

Shared by Linda Kuvheya

Linda is part of a global online community of diverse actors who aim to co-create inclusive, culturally relevant, innovative solutions to complex problems. Their approach emphasizes the importance of genuine community engagement and decision-making power in projects. Instead of treating communities as passive recipients or speaking to them in complex technical language, it is more impactful to involve them as equal partners. In their program, communities actively participate in projects, such as testing crops on remediated coal mine land, to ensure their voices inform policy and business plans. This approach contrasts with methods that often exclude meaningful community input.

'What really worked is the idea of actually bringing different stakeholders in the same room, and to develop a shared understanding of the challenges [...] what we have been doing is that everyone will be sitting with their own challenge and in their own space and everybody is kind of pointing fingers at each other for what is going wrong [...] bringing these people together now in the same room helps people to kind of understand each other and understand that we all want the same thing in the end.'

When intentionally shifting power in a group or space, psychological safety is a key element to consider, according to Boitu Nkonde. This means that space is created whereby everyone feels valued and safe to share constructive feedback. He notes that 'as a practitioner or facilitator coach, you're not being prescriptive in your approach, but you're trying to create an environment where the person sees themselves at the center of the ability to make change.'

POLICY SHIFTS

This refers to political will, policies and regulatory frameworks that ought to shift from being mismatched with the needs of the communities to becoming more justly aligned with the lived experiences of people. Much can be said about the required policy shifts across sectors and countries, but the focus of our participants was on the bigger picture and emphasized how policy shift alone is not a solution. Instead, it is interrelated to the other shifts and ought to happen simultaneously. Luana explains 'a legislation is not a tool to make a change, a systematic change. Legislation is just something that you need to comply with, it's not something that makes the real transformation happen'. She goes on to explain that real transformation comes from the people (enabled by mindset and power shift), and unless they are part of it, then systemic change is difficult to achieve.

Jairo da Costa also provides an interesting example how he used a systems design approach to enable shifts in mindset, power and policies together, when designing a better energy-related product for the low-income energy market in Brazil.

Box 9: Three Birds with One Stone: Using Systems Thinking in Brazil

Shared by Jairo da Costa

Working with the public sector of Brazil, he wanted to design a better energy-related product and service to ensure that low-income and marginalized communities had sufficient access to energy. Using systems thinking, he examined various levels of the problem and desired outcomes, and how they are all interrelated. He noted that the program aimed at achieving universal access to electricity, decreasing green-house emissions and decreasing electricity consumption. To do that, programs replace inefficient household appliances, provide education for people to consume energy better, and work on the infrastructure of the house. But for the service to be truly transformative, he emphasized the needs to 1) listen to community needs around energy consumption, 2) understand relationships between communities and institutions, and 3) challenge profit-oriented societal goals and policies which tend to restrict social equality. Using a systems change approach, these conditions are put into perspective and related to each other in order of micro, meso and macro. He explains:

'The best way to approach is to make sure that this intervention starts from the micro level and evolve it until it can really have an [positive] effect. At a micro level, we can create better products, at a meso level we need behavior change to enable people to use those products. Finally, at the macro level, we can seek to change visions and regulate policy.'

While Jairo's discussion remains somewhat theoretical, it demonstrates that understanding the different levels of the systems in their uniqueness and connectivity can contribute to a cycle in which changes in mindset, power, and policy reinforce each other to ultimately contribute to the creation of a more just, inclusive solution.

According to informants, when mindset, power and policy shifts happen intentionally, context-specifically and together, then there is an opportunity for the emergence of a new system. Graphic 1 in the conclusion summarizes key ideas of each shift.

5 CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the critical approaches and shifts highlighted in this paper are difficult but not impossible for the development sector to achieve, as exemplified by the stories of the participants. These approaches are also validated and strengthened in practical ways by stakeholders of the FAIR for ALL program. Cyclical learning between external and internal stakeholders has been the foundation of the learning trajectory mentioned in the introduction. Following this research conducted with external changemakers to learn more about systems change/thinking, a parallel learning stream was started to learn about how diverse partners across 14 countries and 2 regions perceive, strive for, and contribute to systems change for creating fairer and more sustainable trade and value chains. Conversations from this external research provided us with useful language and lens to make sense of partners' experiences and knowledge to allow us to start forming a narrative on systems change for the program: Although there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach, F4A partners apply diverse human-centered approaches and mindful scaling to challenge patriarchal, profit-centered systems. They are strengthened by cross -disciplinary and -geographical collaboration, power sharing, and gender and climate justice-oriented approaches. For instance, in knowledge exchange sessions, partners have shared the importance of centering local communities – e.g., women farmers and entrepreneurs - to develop alternative business models, which then are mindfully scaled up to national and/or regional levels through partnerships with CSOs and the public and private sectors. As local communities are given more resources and freedom of agency and power, their practices scale up to become more normalized, challenging the status quo and nudging systems to become more people- and planet-focused.

It is also reasonable to imagine that the ways in which participants of this external research and F4A have nudged towards change can also be applicable to other sectors that are not covered by programs like FAIR for ALL. For example, these shifts may be applicable to issues seen in the conventional aid system and attempts to disrupt them. The changemakers who were part of this research and part of the F4A program point out the need for the aid system to transform itself so that it can authentically transform other systems through programmatic and influencing efforts. Participants encourage the need for the development sector to make more time and space for discussion and reflection to challenge the status quo and shift away from conventional mindsets and power dynamics, which can influence transformations in policies. We have summarized some key points of these shifts for development practitioners to reflect on in Figure 1 below as a point of departure for continued discussions.

Figure 1: Mindset, Power, and Policy Shifts for Reflection

Additionally, it is very likely that other shifts are also required to achieve systems change. We invite the reader to reflect and engage in conversations on additional critical shifts and continue the conversation across the development aid and humanitarian sectors. Meanwhile, the FAIR for ALL program will continue to learn from the valuable experiences of systems changemakers within and outside of the program, and explore, document and expand innovative methods of systems change in its programmatic work. It will also seek to continue to nourish cyclical learning – sharing its lessons and success to inspire other changemakers across diverse sectors.

NOTES

[1] As per its Horizon 2 plan, Oxfam Novib is committed to 'implement programs focused on systemic change, organized around [...] four change goals, managed in a professional manner, and in authentic partnerships with others within and beyond the confederation'.

[2] FAIR for ALL is a Power of Voices partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in consortium with SOMO, Third World Network – Africa (TWN-Africa), the Huairou Commission and Oxfam Novib.

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[11] Deepak Nanda's organization, Idobro, developed the PECOsystem framework for enhancing multistakeholder engagement and collaboration for entrepreneurial ventures to achieve impactful outcomes. It is a persona-centric approach involving non-hierarchical, value-driven synergies between Partners, Entrepreneurs, and Citizens for collective Ownership of an initiative. See https://www.idobro.com/toolkit/

[12] See the Principles for Shifting Funding Practices by Catalyst 2030, a movement that Jeroo Billimoria is a part of.

[13] Woltering, L, Leñero, E. M. V., Boa-Alvarado, M., Van Loon, J., Ubels, J., & Leeuwis, C. (2024). Supporting a systems approach to scaling for all; insights from using the Scaling Scan tool. Agricultural Systems, 217, 103927. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agsy.2024.103927

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[15] ibid.

[16] The three dimensions of scaling were explained by Maya Narayan, a consultant from Mumbai and Eva Valenica, a CSO scaling coordinator and founder of Tricolor Coalition for Sustainable Transitions in Mexico City. They are also further elaborated upon in the research by Moore, Riddel and Vocisano (2015), who were the first to suggest the idea of 'scaling deep'.

[17] Michele-Lee Moore, Darcy Riddel, & Dana Vocisano. (2015). Scaling Out, Scaling Up, Scaling Deep: Strategies of Non-Profits in Advancing Systemic Social Innovation. The Journal of Corporate Citizenship, 58. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/jcorpciti.58.67

[18] 5.Tatiana Fraser. (2023). The Art of Scaling Deep. The Systems Sanctuary. Retrieved from https://systemsanctuary.com/scale-deep

[19] Ride hailing is a form of 'taxi' or ride sharing whereby passengers can book ride on an app, and drivers take them to their desired destination with or without other passengers. Uber and Bolt are examples of ride hailing. For more information on ride hailing in South Africa, see The booming R7 billion industry in South Africa – BusinessTech

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