

MASTERCLASS SERIES

in Systems Thinking



Principles & Practices of Systems Work: *Case Studies of Systems Change*

01 MAY 2024

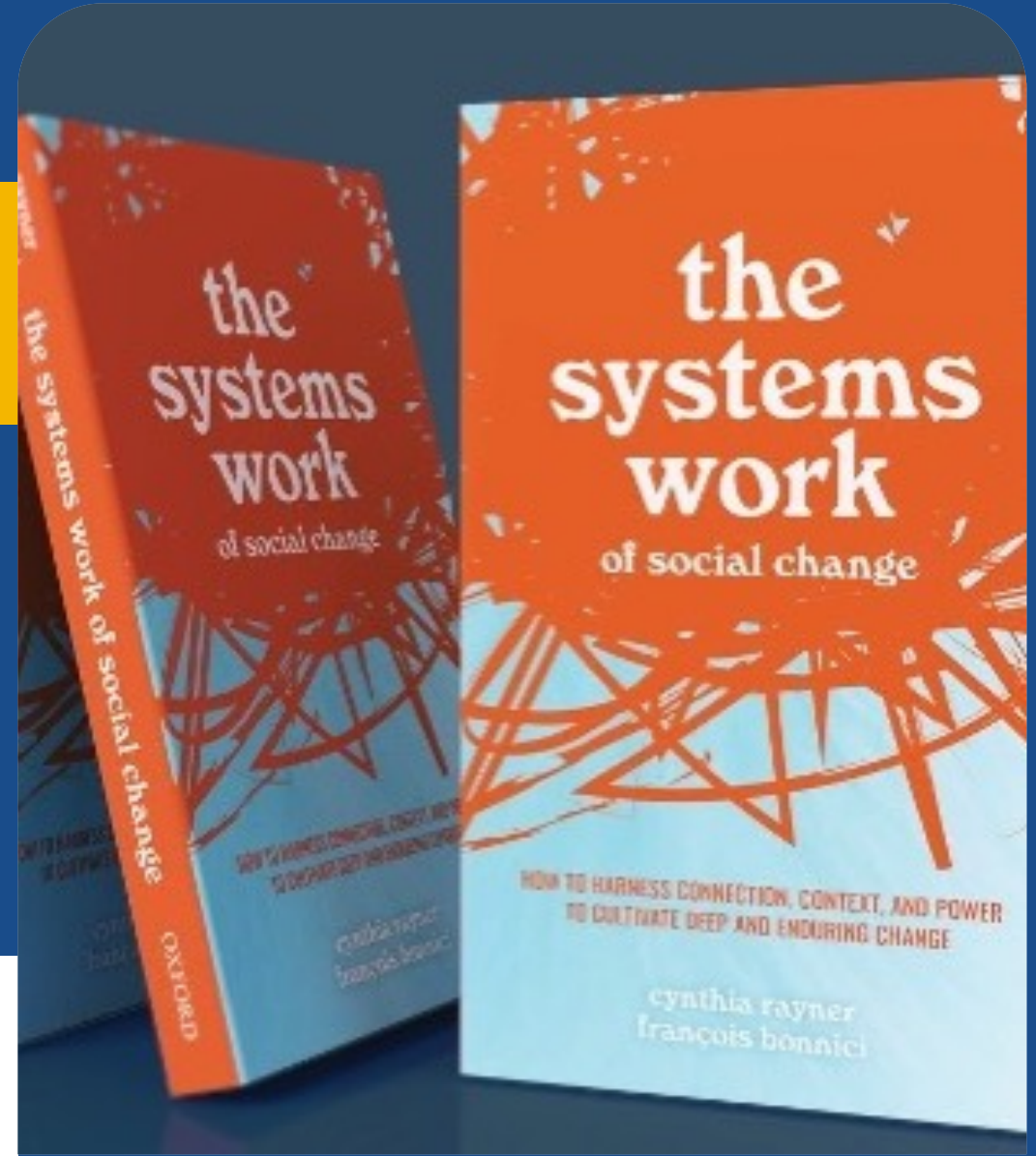
SPEAKERS

Cynthia Rayner, Bertha Centre for Social Innovation,
University of Cape Town

ECD EXPERT: Sharon Goldfeld, Director, Centre for
Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital

MODERATOR: Shekufeh Zonji, Global Technical
Lead, ECDAN

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



The Systems Thinking for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Initiative is a partnership between ECDAN and Harvard University and supported by Porticus.



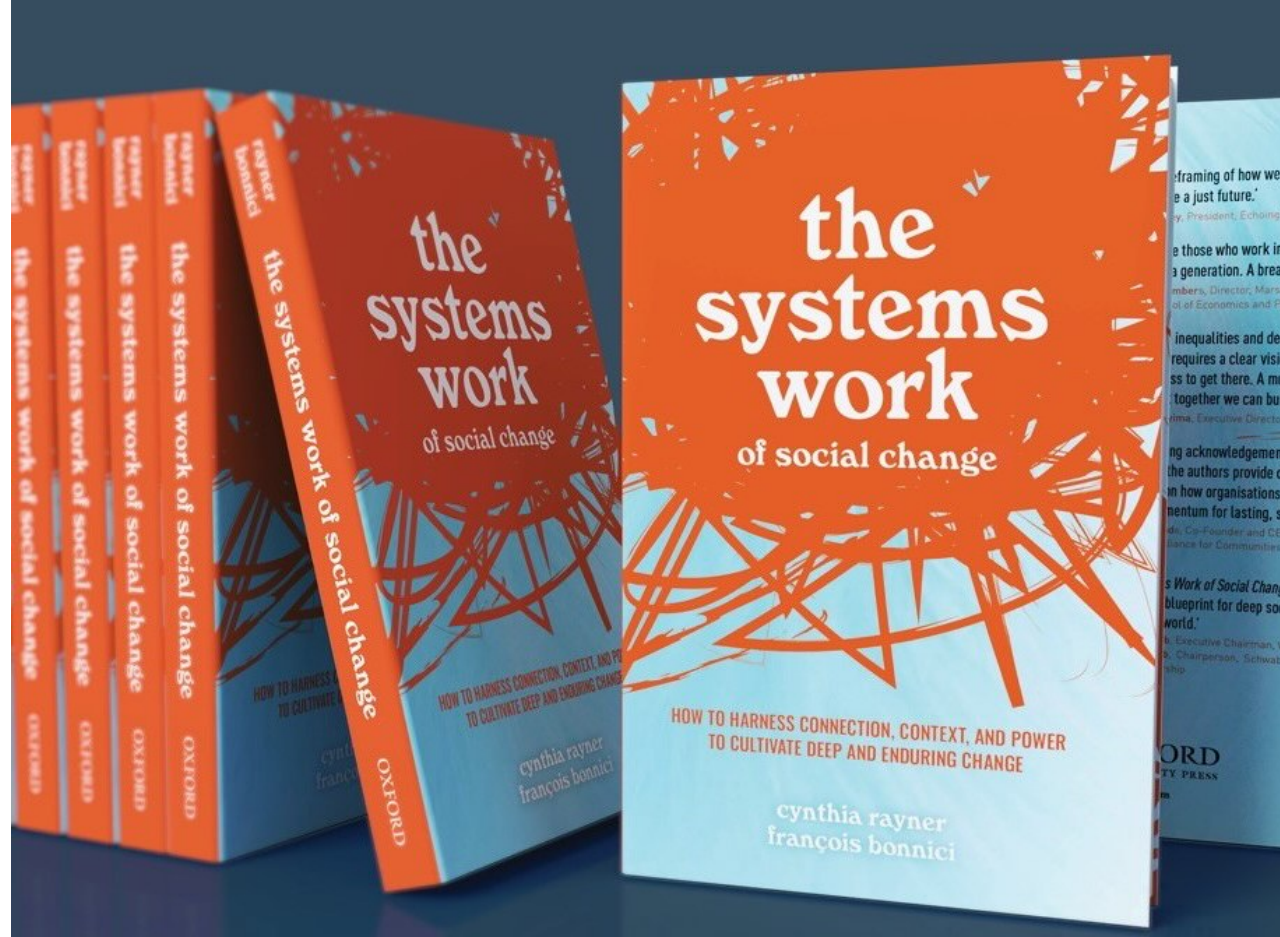
HARVARD T.H. CHAN
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Agenda

- Intro to Complexity: Simple, Complicated, Complex
- Principles & Practices of Systems Work
- Deep Dive: 4 Case Studies of Systems Work
- Homework Exercise: Systems Work Analysis
- Dialogue with Sharon Goldfeld, Director, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital
- Q&A

Background

- Interest from the field in understanding the term “systems change”
- Terminology originating in elite and funder circles, but very theoretical and not always representative of day-to-day work
- Led to an 8-year journey to understand from practitioners, primarily in the Global South

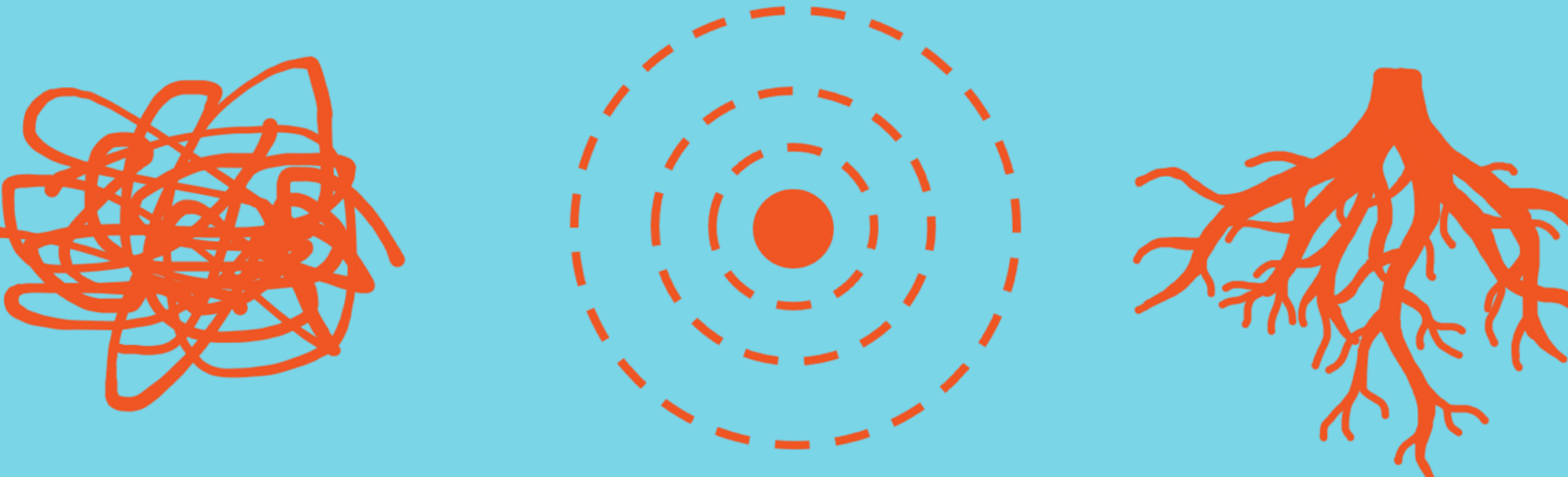


An 'Industry' of Social Change

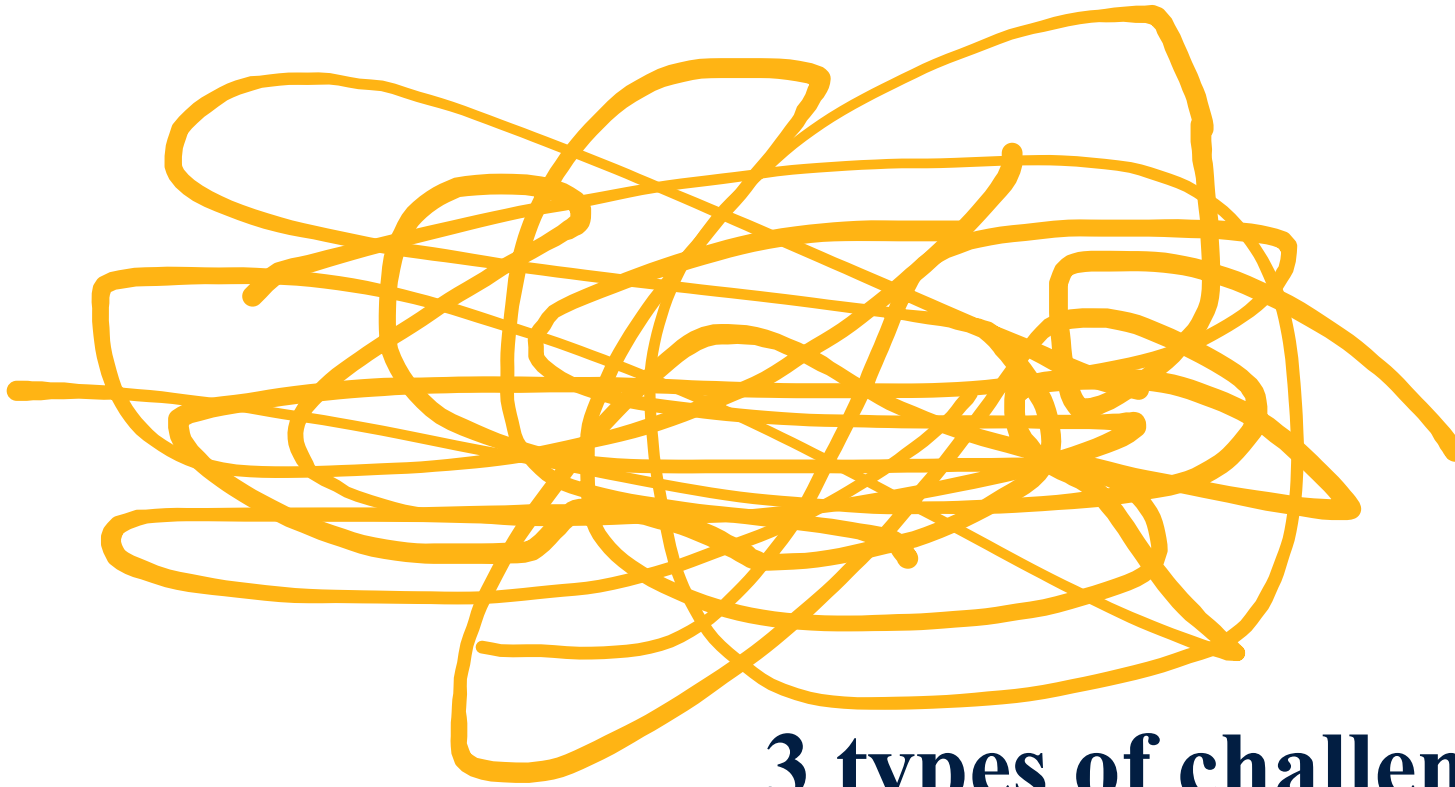
- Industry = mass production of goods and services for sale
- Public, private, and nonprofit sectors exchange large sums of money, expertise, and resources in pursuit of ambitious goals at a global scale
- Our approach to social change is driven by an industrial mindset and structure that has been two centuries in the making

Complexity, Scale, Depth

**Social challenges aren't like industrial problems...
they are complex, scale-dependent & deep**



What do we mean by 'complexity'?



3 types of challenges

1. Baking a cake



- Has a recipe
- Reproducible
- Fewer variables
- Does not require expertise
- We know the likely outcome

2. Sending a rocket to the moon

- Extensive manual; a formula
- Reproducible, with hard work
- High level of expertise
- Separate into parts, then coordinate
- If we follow instructions, it will work



3. Raising a child

- No recipe or formula
- Success with one gives no assurance of future success
- Expertise is helpful but insufficient
- Outcome unknown!
- Relationships are key

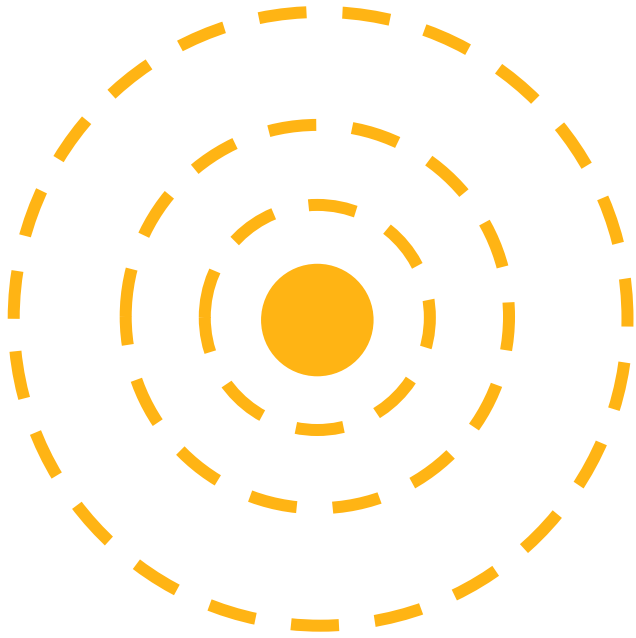


Simple, Complicated, Complex

SIMPLE	COMPLICATED	COMPLEX
		
The recipe is essential	Formula are critical	Formula only have limited application
Recipes are tested to assure replicability	Doing it once increases assurance for next time	Raising one gives no assurance of success
No particular expertise	High level of expertise & coordination necessary	Expertise is key but not sufficient; relationships!
Recipes produce standard products	Rockets are similar in critical ways	Can't separate parts from the whole
Certainty of same results every time	High degree of certainty of outcome	Every child is unique
Known!	Knowable!	Unknowable!

Westley, Zimmerman & Patton, 2006.

What do we mean by ‘scale-dependent’?



- Cause & Effects are different across larger geographies and populations
- Complex problems have no stopping point; we “see” more of them as we learn

We don't fully understand how scale works in complex adaptive systems (ie, social systems)

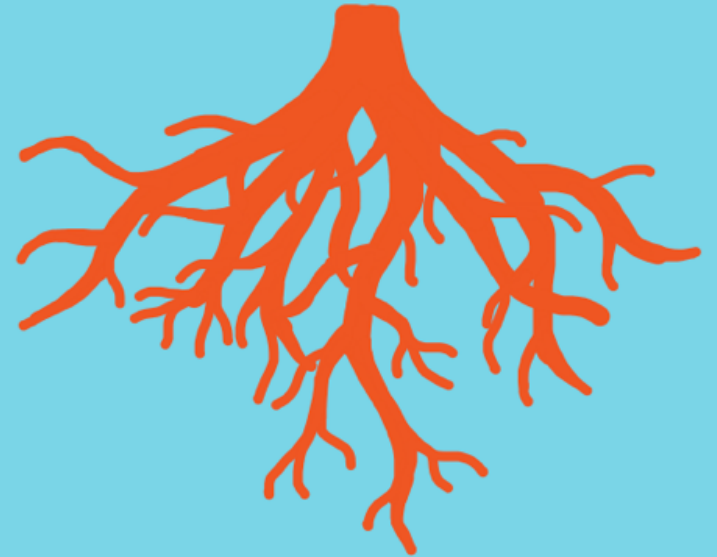
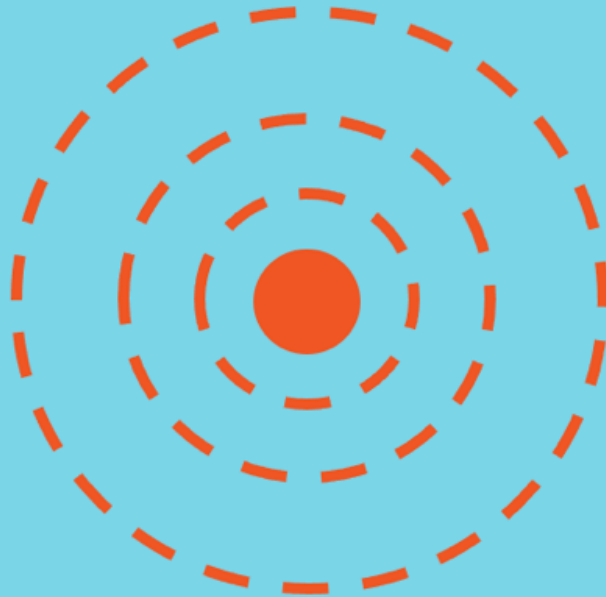
What do we mean by 'depth'?

- Deeply held **beliefs, values, and assumptions**—qualities that are extraordinarily difficult to shift
- Systems fail when they **entrench our beliefs and behaviors** to the extent that we cannot only not change, we cannot even *imagine change*

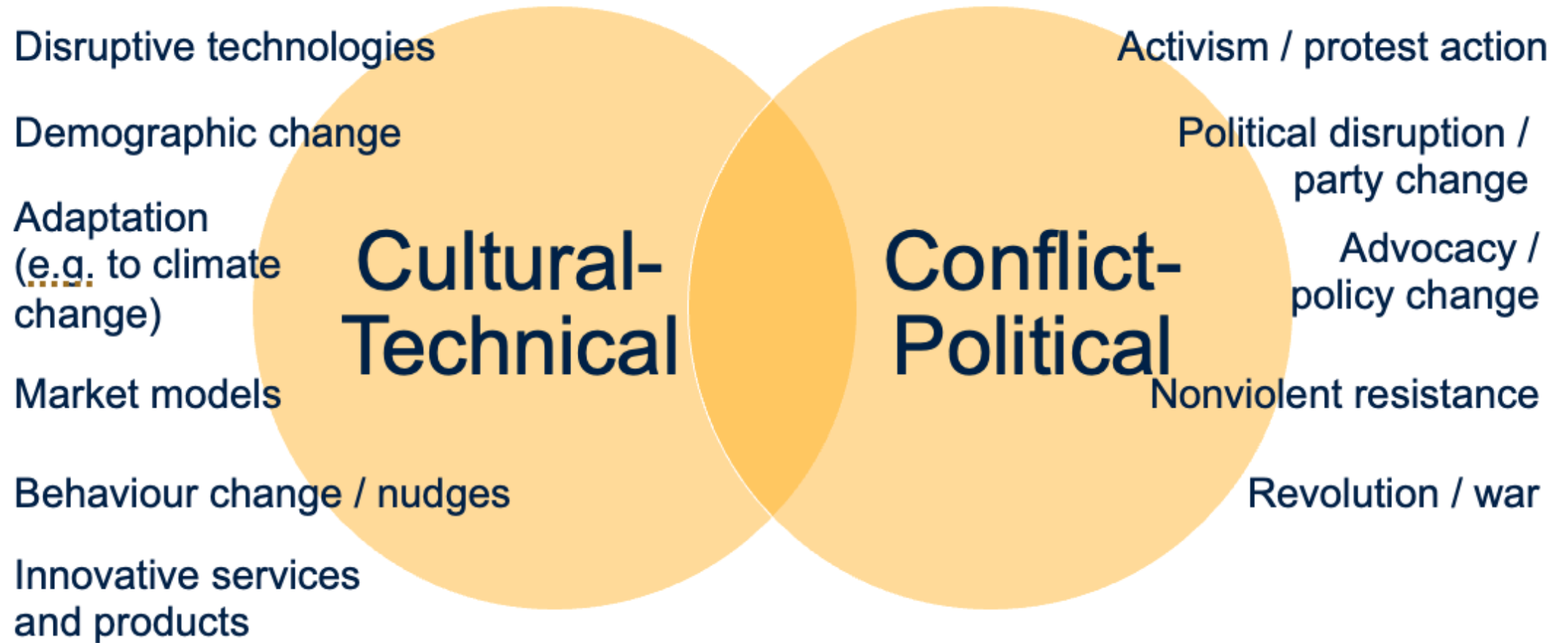
**We are the systems we seek to change.
By participating in them, we maintain
and extend them**

So, what do we do?

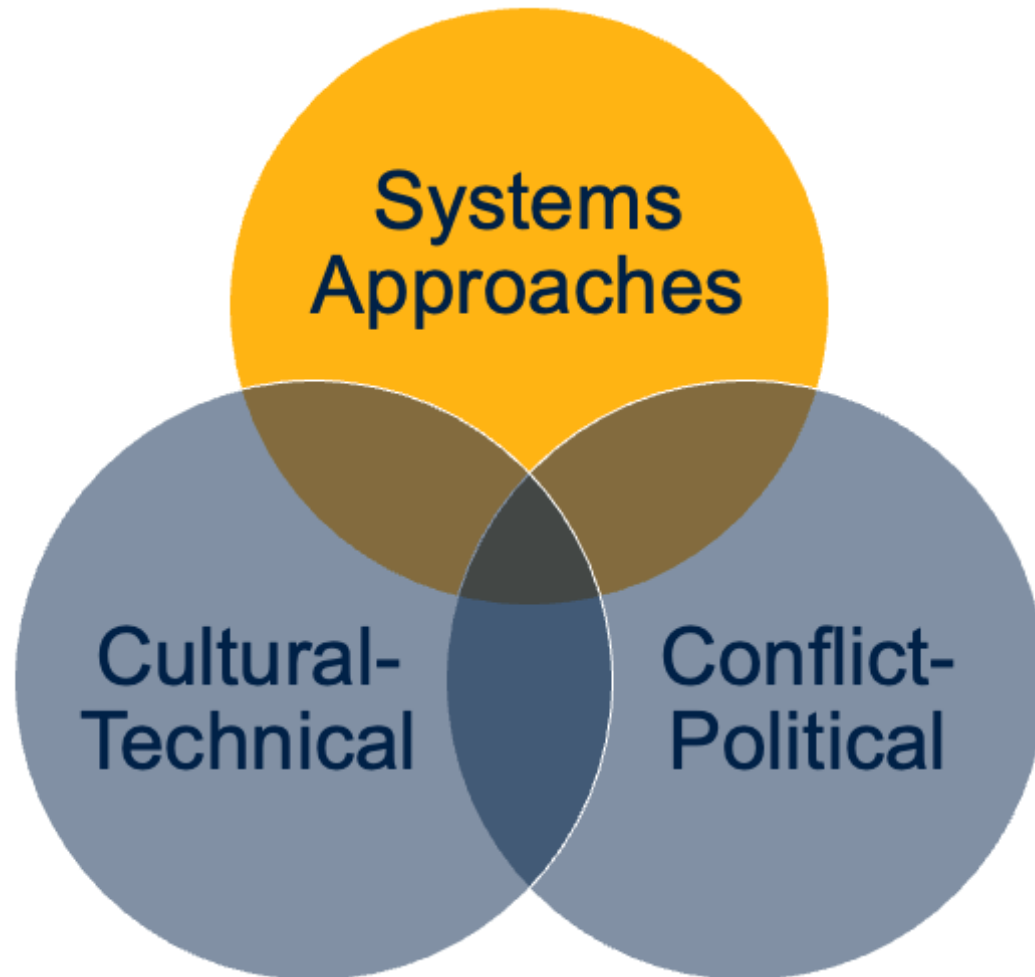
**Social challenges aren't like industrial problems...
they are complex, scale-dependent & deep**



Sociological Change Theories



Can we draw on the best of both?



- Inside-out, not outside-in
- Experience as important as expertise
- Learning- rather than solution- focused
- Process as important as outcomes
- Adaptive rather than conclusive

Rayner, Oxford Impact Lab, 2024.

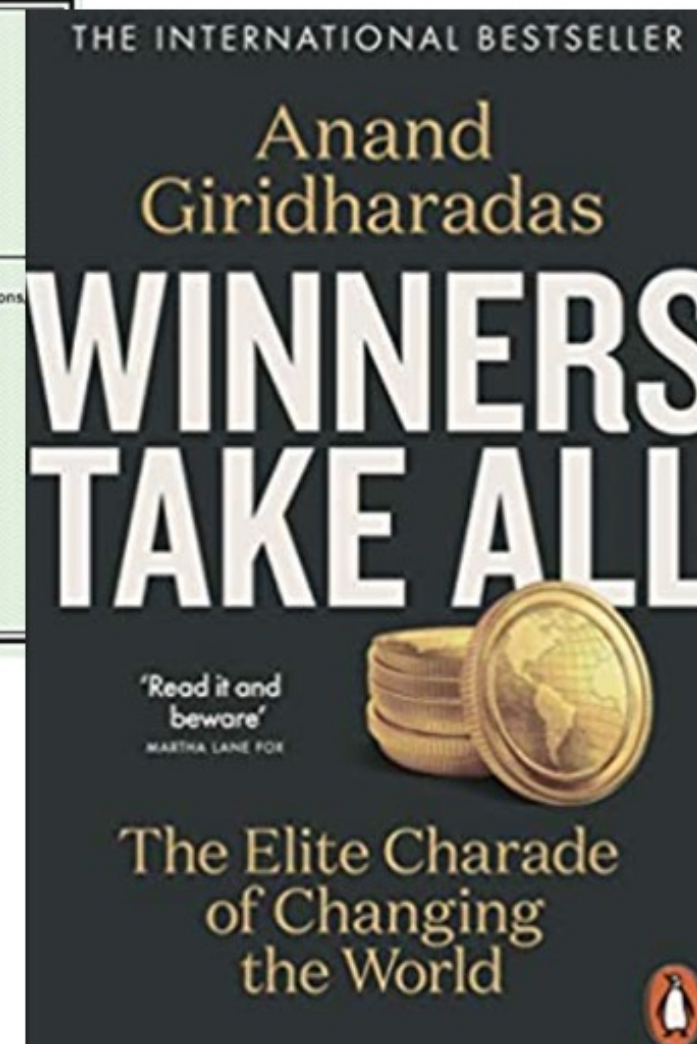
Who decides what change?



Philanthropy in Democratic Societies

History,
Institutions,
Values

Edited by
ROB REICH,
CHIARA CORDELLI,
and
LUCY BERNHOLZ



Studying Systems Approaches

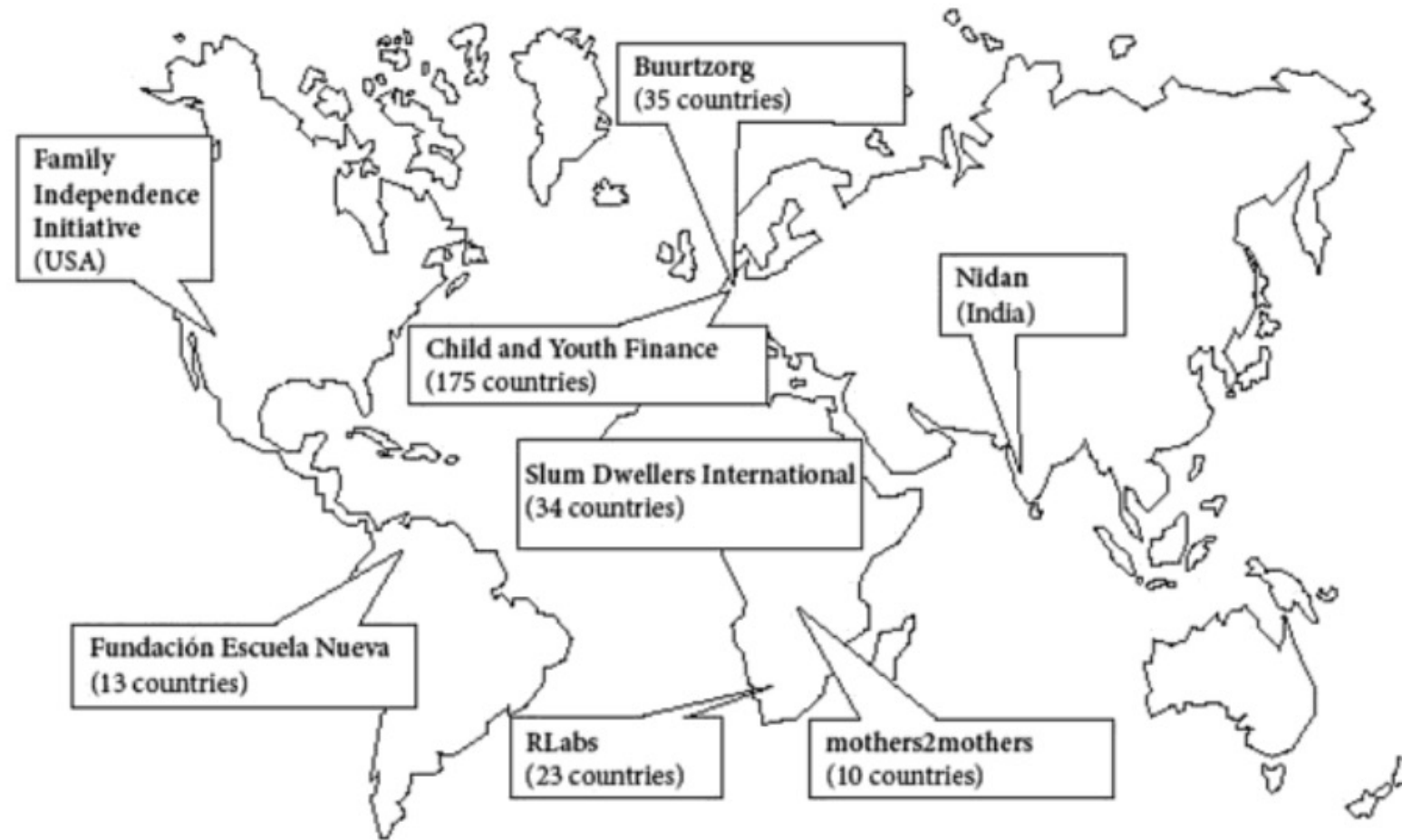


Fig. 0.1 Eight organizations practicing systems work around the world

Source: Authors.

Who should drive change?

Primary Actors

are individuals and groups
living at the point of greatest
complexity in the system

Systems Work Principles

Aim to build responsive & representative systems

FOSTER CONNECTION



EMBRACE CONTEXT



RECONFIGURE POWER



Systems Work Practices

Ensure primary actors at the heart of the process

FOSTER CONNECTION

EMBRACE CONTEXT

RECONFIGURE POWER

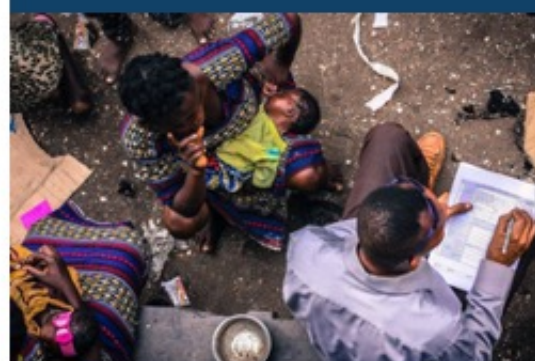
CULTIVATE COLLECTIVES



EQUIP
PROBLEM-SOLVERS



PROMOTE PLATFORMS



DISRUPT POLICIES AND
PATTERNS



Uncovering Systems Work

Case Studies

- Context
- Surface Work
- Systems Work Principles
- Systems Work Practices
- Tactics
- Deep Systems Change

PRACTICE 1

Cultivate Collectives

Create a new web of relationships
& stay together while learning

Cultivating Collectives

- Tactic 1: Building a “We”
- Tactic 2: Shifting stigma to pride
- Tactic 3: Hosting “Havens”
- Tactic 4: “Pooling”



mothers2mothers

Uncovering Systems Work

mothers2mothers

- **Context:** Limited healthcare infrastructure; Emotional isolation of pregnant women and mothers living with HIV
- **Surface Work:** Employing peer mentors for women and families in clinics
- **Systems Work Principle:** Foster connection
- **Systems Work Practice:** Cultivate collectives
- **Tactics:**
 - i) Shift stigma to pride
 - ii) Host safe havens
 - iii) “Pooling” experiences
- **Deep Systems Change:** Transforming mental models about healthcare workers and women living with HIV

PRACTICE 2

Equipping Problem-Solvers

Build the capacity of changemakers
to be *contextually responsive*

Equipping Problem-Solvers

- Tactic 1: Circulating data (both big and small)
- Tactic 2: Decentralising decision-making
- Tactic 3: Positioning problem-solvers
- Tactic 4: Sustaining motivation



Family Independence Initiative (FII)

Uncovering Systems Work

Family Independence Initiative (FII)

- **Context:** Families frequently cycling in and out of poverty programs; more funding to social workers and ecosystem of poverty alleviation than families themselves
- **Surface Work:** Peer groups for families lifting themselves out of poverty
- **Systems Work Principle:** Embrace context
- **Systems Work Practice:** Equip problem-solvers
- **Tactics:**
 - i) Circulate data (both big and small)
 - ii) Decentralise decision-making
- **Deep Systems Change:** Building economies of trust

PRACTICE 3

Promoting Platforms

Connecting groups to one another
to share learnings & create
large-scale action

Promoting Platforms

- Tactic 1: Linking groups together
- Tactic 2: Observing rituals
- Tactic 3: Encouraging collaboration with flexibility
- Tactic 4: Moving from outrageous to acceptable



Slumdwellers International (SDI)

Uncovering Systems Work

Slumdweller International (SDI)

- **Context:** In cities around the world, economic growth and a rise in inequality result in large portions of the population living in informal areas, often in close proximity to high- and middle-income areas
- **Surface Work:** Balancing grassroots activities and big picture advocacy
- **Systems Work Principle:** Embrace context / Reconfigure power
- **Systems Work Practice:** Promote platforms
- **Tactics:**
 - i) Link groups together – horizontal connections
 - ii) Enable participation – inverted funnel organogram
- **Deep Systems Change:** Local efforts impact the political context, while national and transnational affiliation enables slum dwellers to develop a ‘globalized’ imagination

PRACTICE 4

Disrupting Policies & Patterns

Change the “rules” while also
changing “ways of being”

Disrupting Policies & Patterns

- Tactic 1: Agitate for policies of participation
- Tactic 2: Advocate for patterns of perpetuity
- Tactic 3: See the micro, meso and macro
- Tactic 4: Iterate between policies & patterns



Nidan

Uncovering Systems Work

Nidan

- **Context:** Informal work is seen as a temporary and unlawful state of employment, driving disruptions to livelihoods and confiscation of goods
- **Surface Work:** Advancing the rights and livelihoods of informal workers
- **Systems Work Principle:** Reconfigure power
- **Systems Work Practice:** Disrupting policies and patterns
- **Tactics:**
 - i) Agitate for participatory policies
 - ii) Iterate between policy and pattern work
- **Deep Systems Change:** A new understanding of the value of informal labour

HOMEWORK

APPLICATION EXERCISE

- Who are the *primary actors* in your system?
- Consider how to deepen the system's relationships with:
 - Cultivating collectives
 - Equipping problem-solvers
 - Promoting platforms
 - Disrupting policies & patterns
- What tactics might you use to promote these practices in your system?