

MASTERCLASS SERIES

in Systems Thinking



Using Stories to Drive Systems Change & Learning

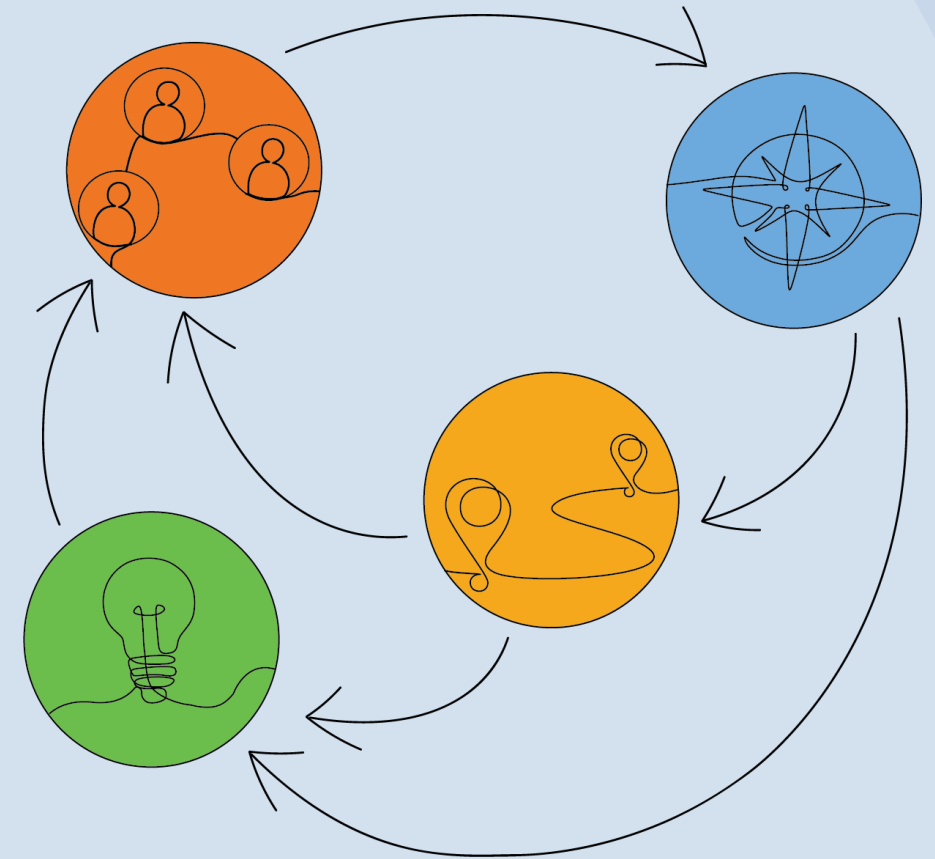
SPEAKERS

Freya Bradford, Rotary Charities of Traverse City
Jessica Conrad, Conrad Consulting

MODERATOR

Mark Tomlinson, Stellenbosch University

April 29, 2024



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

Who we are



Mark Tomlinson
Co-Director of the
Institute for Life Course
Health Research

Stellenbosch University

markt@sun.ac.za



Freya Bradford
Director of Systems Change
& Learning

Rotary Charities of Traverse
City

fbradford@rotarycharities.org



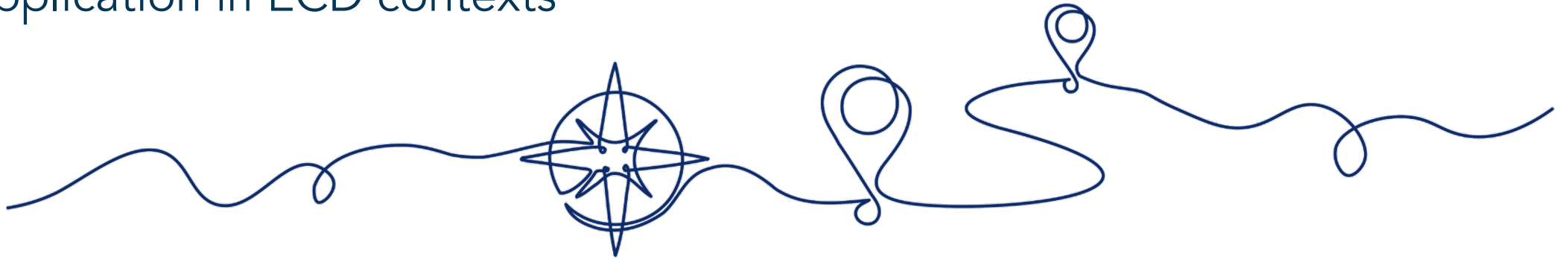
Jessica Conrad
Principal

Conrad Consulting

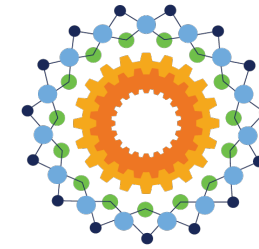
hello@jessicaconrad.com

Session flow

- Rotary Charities' approach to supporting systems change
- Systems learning and evaluation
- Using story to drive systems change and learning
- Ethical storytelling practices
- Systems change stories
- Application in ECD contexts



Rotary Charities of Traverse City (MI)



ROTARY
CHARITIES

Resources for change.

Mission

Working in partnerships with changemakers, Rotary Charities provides funding, learning, and connections to address our region's complex problems and create community assets for all.

Vision

We envision communities that are adaptive and thriving for everyone.



Resources for systems change



- **Seed Grants:** \$10,000 - \$20,000 for early stages of systems change
- **Systems Change Accelerator:** \$150,000 for implementation stage, 2-3 yr, renewable
- Regular grantee check-ins with **discretionary support** available as new needs emerge



- Systems Change Workshop Series
- Support for other Systems Practice training
- Systems Change Navigators Cohort for local consultants & conveners



- Systems Change Community of Practice
- Systems Change Coaching Pool

Child Caring Now – A coordinated constellation of actions to increase access to affordable, high-quality care and learning opportunities

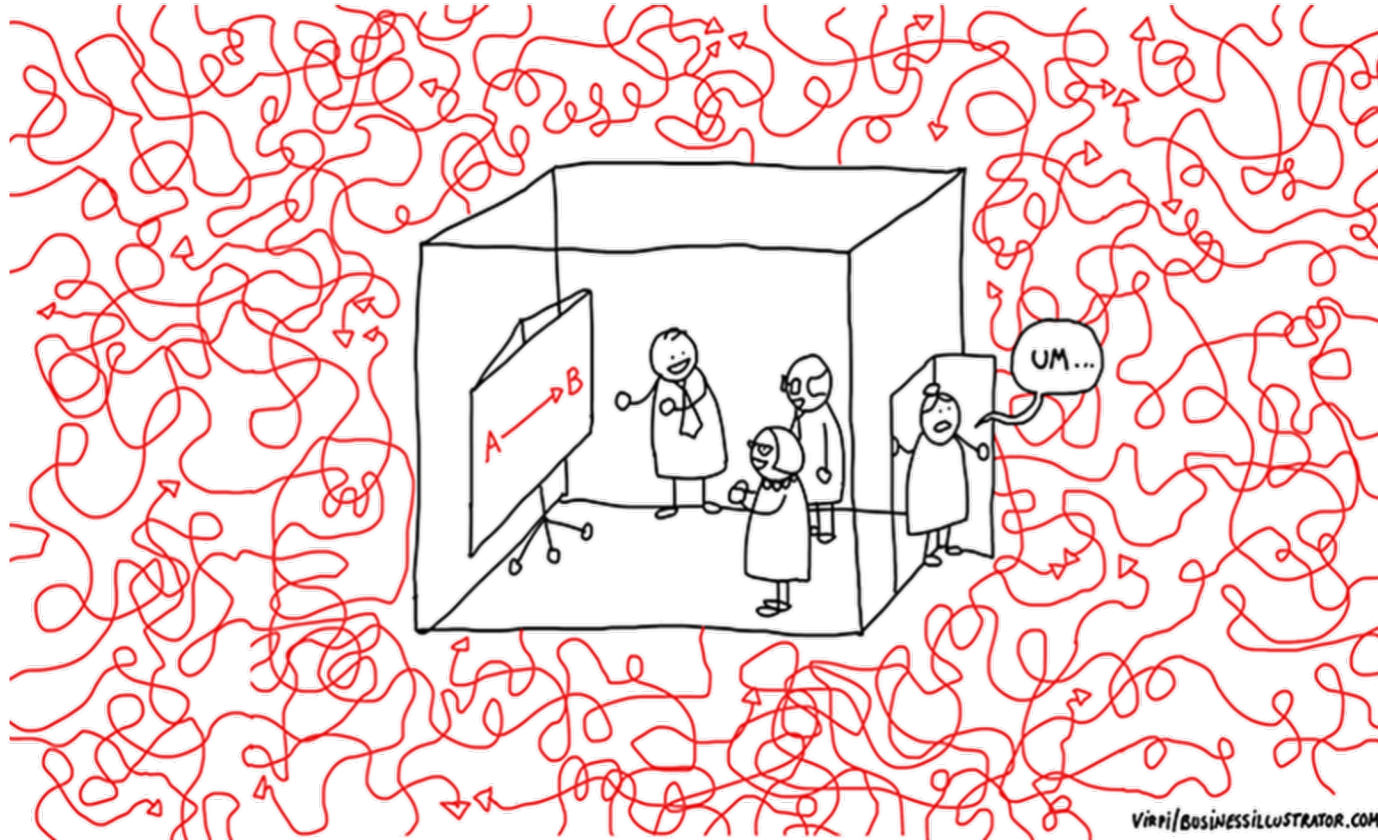
Expand the Early Care & Learning (ECL) Workforce

Enhance ECL Private Provider Sustainability

Expand System-Wide Capacity through Shared Services

Strengthen Overall System Support





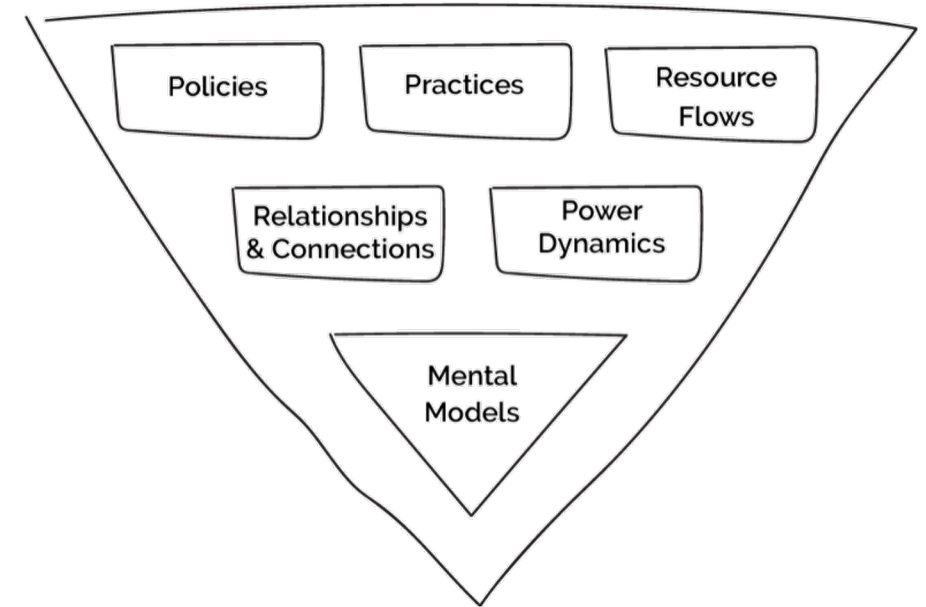
Why we **transformed** to support systems change approaches

Together our region **explored** what it would take to make progress on our complex problems

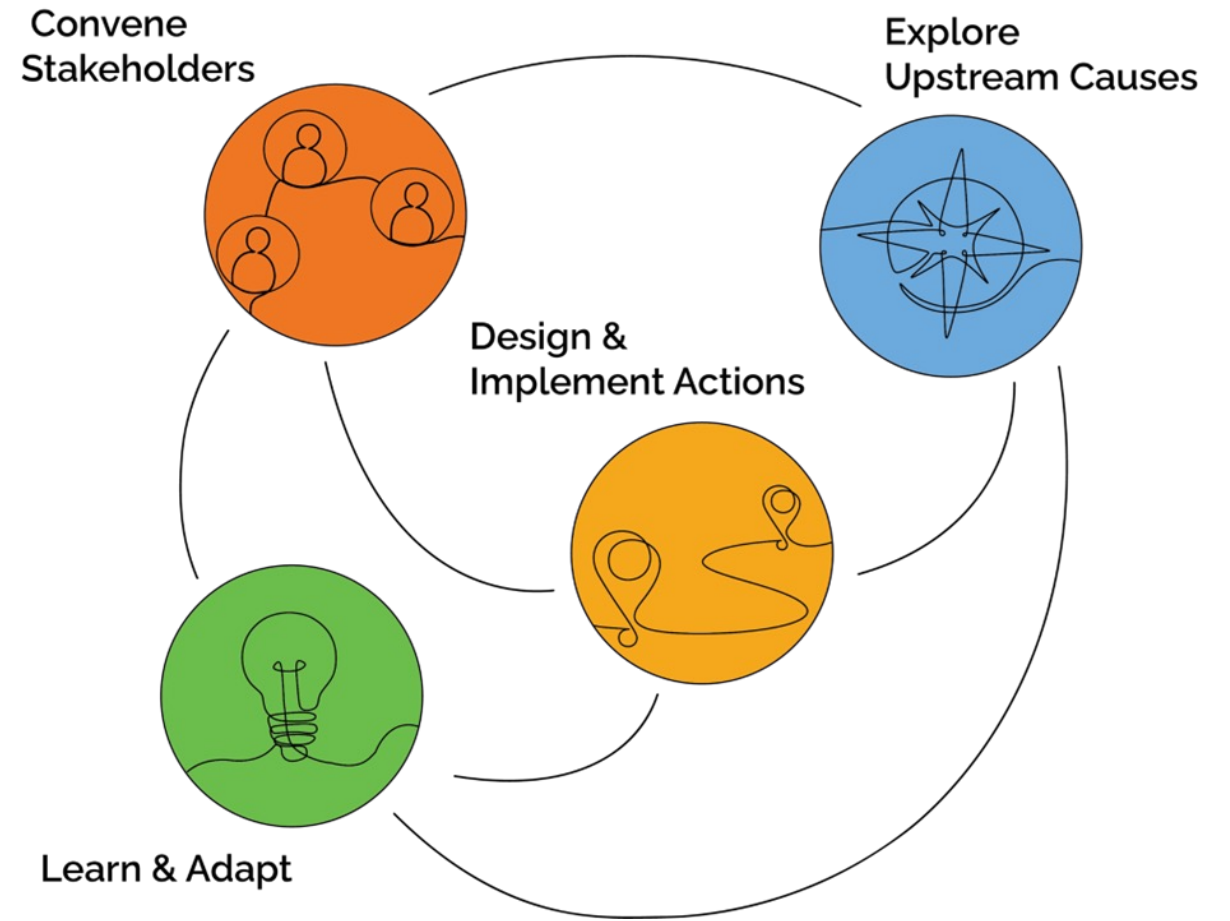
Work together differently



Work on different things



For us, systems change is an **ongoing way of working** that we support to accelerate progress on complex community issues



Because complex community problems are...



Systems learning & evaluation must be...

Dynamic: Evolve over time with changing circumstances

Multi-dimensional: Arise from inter-relationships at many nested “levels” – individual, organizational, network/group, community, country/region/globe

Multi-stakeholder: Intersect the work of many organizations, sectors, and disciplines

Non-linear & uncertain: They are not predictable and there is uncertainty about the best approaches

Rooted in context and human behavior: Deeply influenced by values, beliefs, and norms of the communities from which they arise

Adaptive: Able to shift focus or methods as the situation changes and new insights are gained, on-going

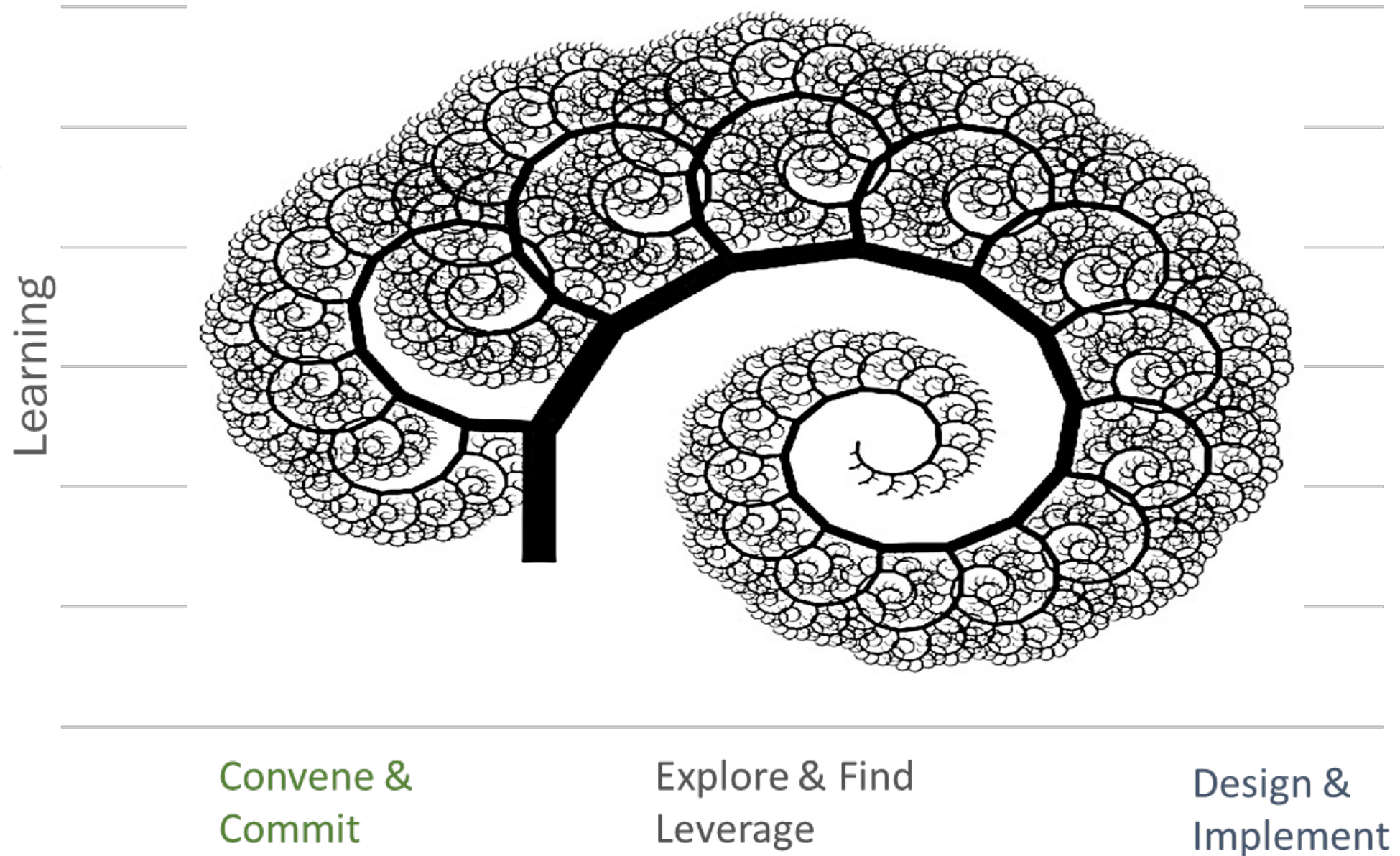
Integrated, scalable, flexible, and shared: Methods can be modified and used for different contexts; learnings are shared/usable across dimensions

Participatory: Methods include and are used by many actors from across a system; learnings are shared

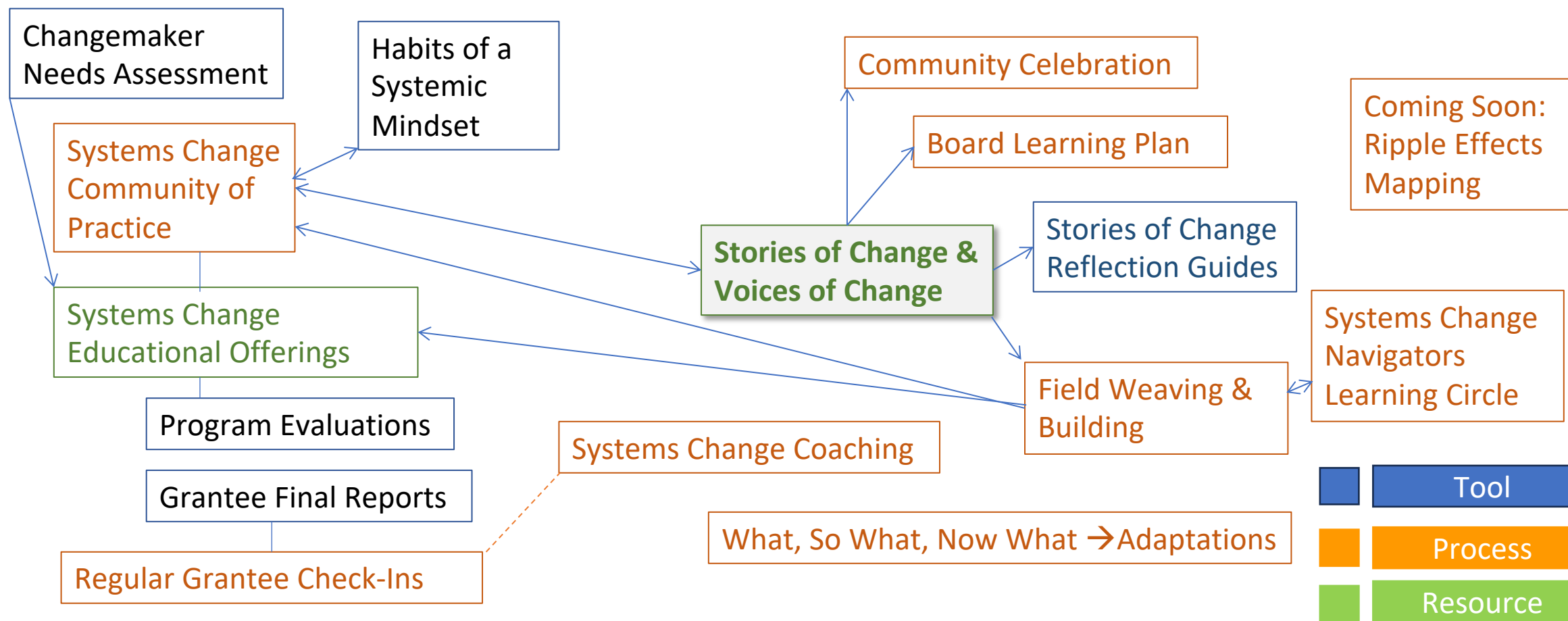
Experimental & iterative: Failure is an expected outcome and a necessary input for adaptation, feedback loops inform wiser next actions

Culturally & contextually sensitive: Responsive to local nuances - social, cultural, economic, and political

Systems change learning & evaluation



Our systems learning ecosystem



Signs of change we're seeing broadly



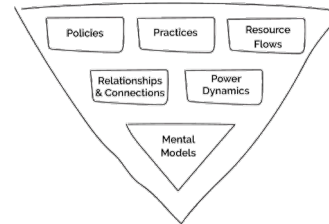
Individual

- Mindset shifts: what's possible, most fitting role in system, whose voices count, accountable to whom and for what, contribution over attribution
- Skills: seeing complexity, using tension, finding leverage points, co-designing



Working Systemically

- Increased numbers and diversity of orgs working together
- New shared understanding of the complexity of an issue
- Shared purpose and alignment
- Working experimentally and sharing learning across system



Shifting System Factors

- Power shifts to people with lived experience
- New resources leveraged for the issue, shifts in how resources are used/shared
- Shift in media messages and public discourse
- Policy and practice changes



Changing Results

Changes in levels of the problem:

- From 13% to 70% of area pantries and meal sites providing fresh produce (over 260,000 pounds purchased to support 21 local farms)
- Youth homelessness at "functional zero"
- Millions in health care savings

Using **story** to drive **systems change & learning**

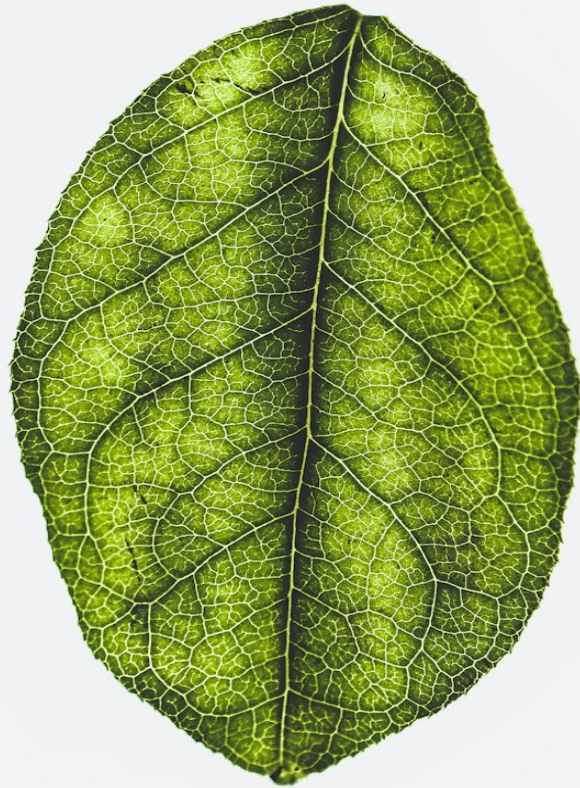


"Story is one of the most basic ways that the human brain structures and relates human experience."

– Gregory Cajete

"Stories make, prop up, and bring down systems. Stories shape how we understand the world, our place in it, and our ability to change it."

– Ella Saltmarshe, *Telling the Difference*



Stories

Individual, inspiring

Hold the power to engage our imaginations, evoke emotions, and influence worldviews, beliefs, and behavior.

Narrative

Collection of stories

Can be connected into narratives, leading to a deeper meaning.

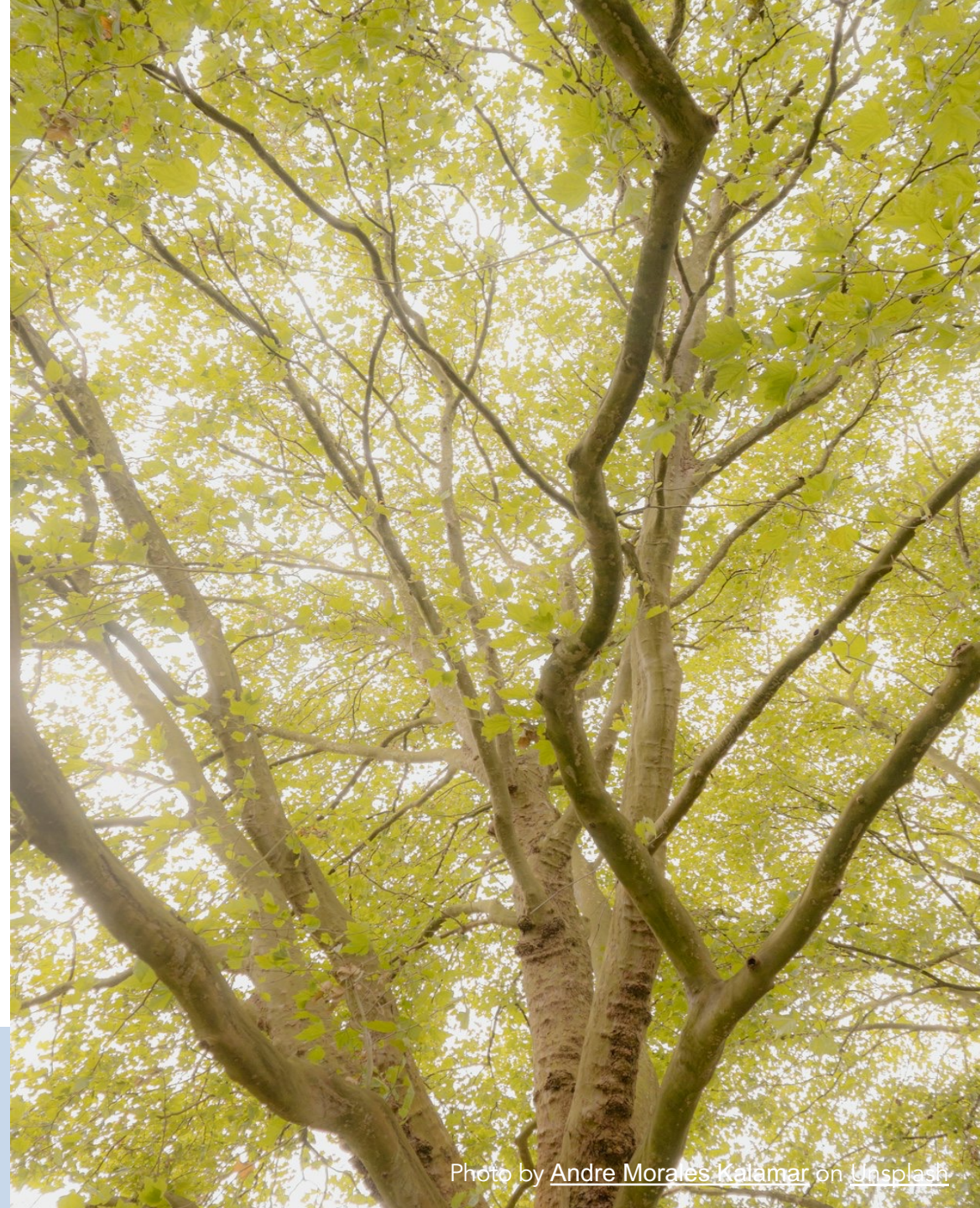
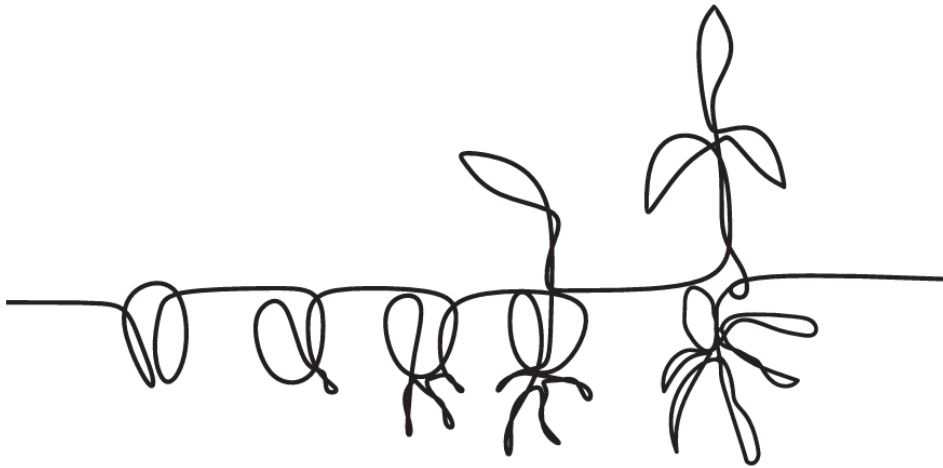


Photo by [Andre Morales Katamar](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Storytelling

- Our oldest "technology" or tool to create meaning
- Shapes our perception of reality and our worldviews, beliefs, and values
- How we select, sequence, moralize, and accept and integrate difference
- Makes up the foundation of our communities and culture

Storylistening

- Listening to understand
- A generative practice grounded in humility, empathy, heart
- Involves listening with curiosity while suspending judgement
- Values the process of listening as much as emerging insights



Story is helping to **chronicle** and **catalyze** systems change

- Creates and reinforces a common language
- Connects people
- Surfaces patterns
- Opens windows to new possibilities



1

Build Storytelling
& Storylistening
Capacities

- Workshops for systems change practitioners & funders
- 1: 1 Coaching with systems change initiatives
- Help to move from insight to action – ex. tool: What, So What, Now What

We convene a **systems change community of practice** with established **processes** to **share stories** about:

- Challenges of Practice
- Artifacts of Practice
- Signs of Change

2

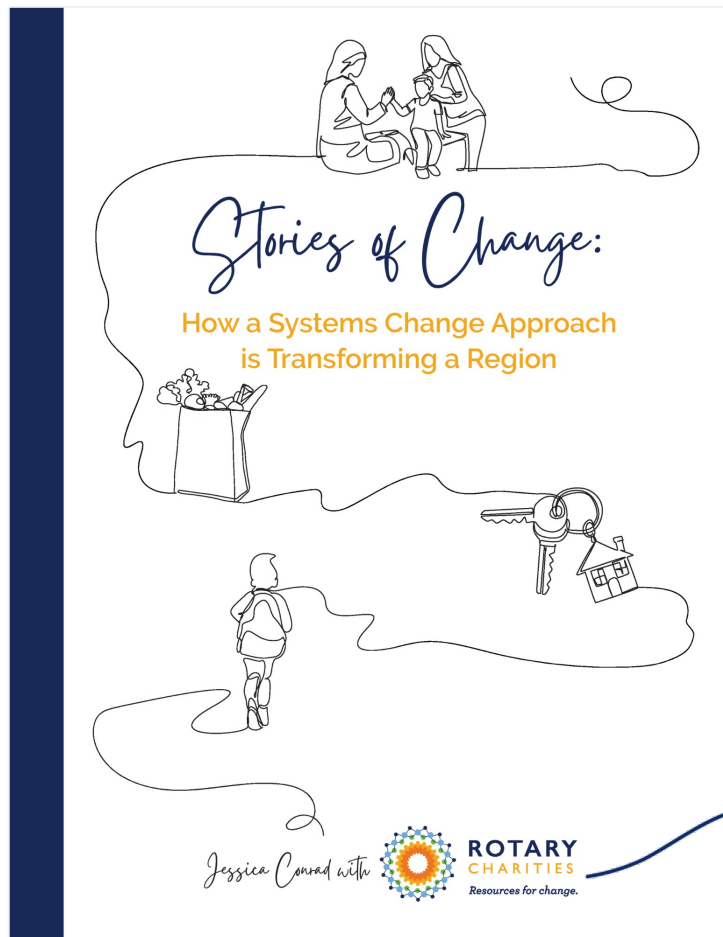
Create & Support
Storytelling Spaces
& Processes

3

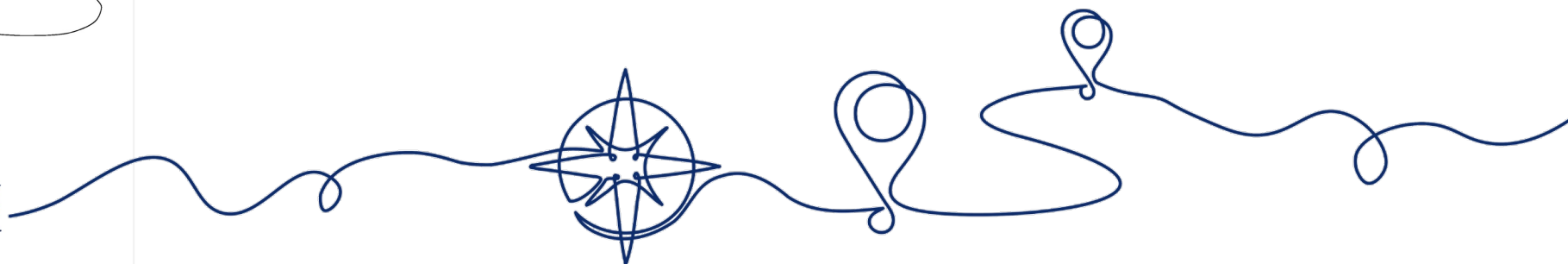
Amplify &
Celebrate Stories
of Change

We celebrate and share Stories of Change with our community and with the broader field





Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region

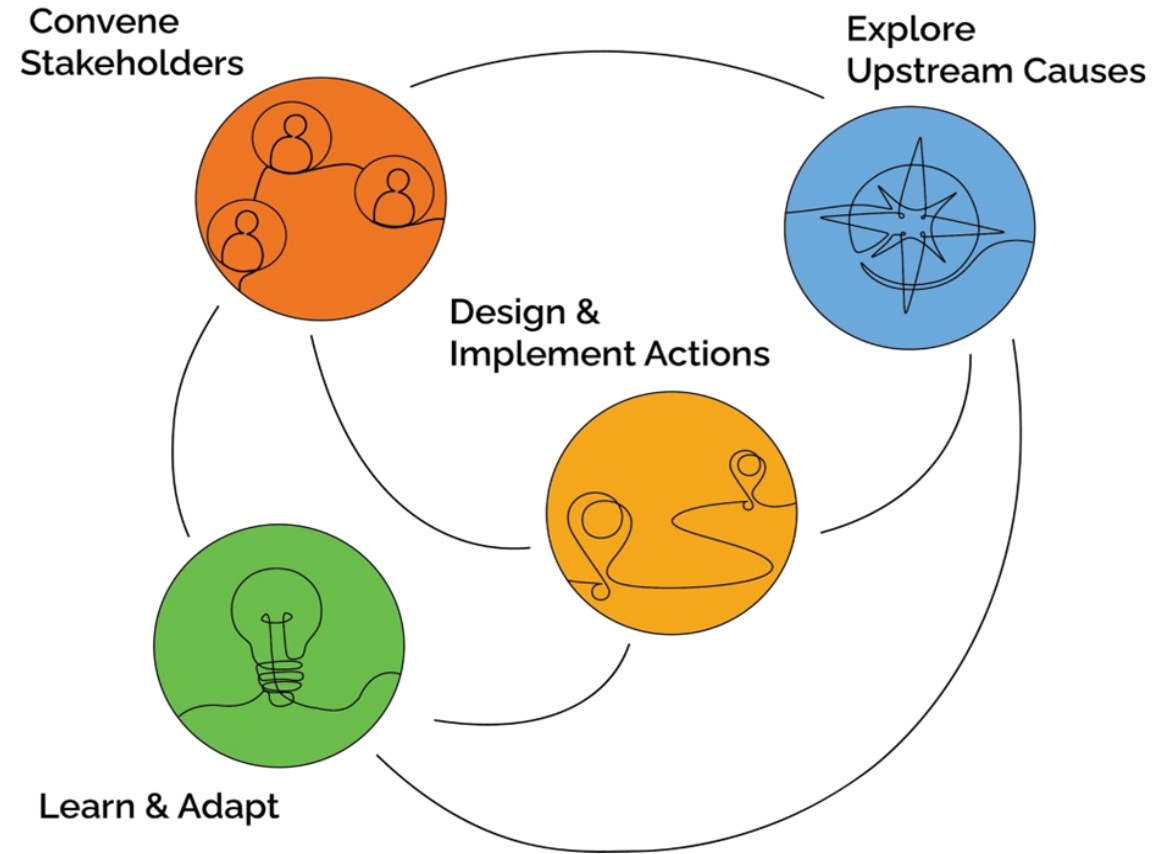




www.rotarycharities.org/stories-of-change

Stories of Change **narrative arc**

- **Introduction** and context
- **Convening stakeholders** and committing to a shared purpose
- **Exploring the problem** and finding opportunities for leverage
- Designing and carrying out a **constellation of actions**
- **Learning and adapting** for continuous improvement



Ethical storytelling

An **ongoing, collaborative process** that ...

- Values **relationship building**
- Moves at the speed of **trust** and **consent**
- Defers to the **knowledge of the storyteller**, incorporating their expertise at the very beginning
- Sees people as multifaceted, **whole human beings**



Ethical storytelling is about **creating the conditions** for people to **feel empowered** and for their stories to be **portrayed with strength and dignity**.

Ethical storytelling **practices**

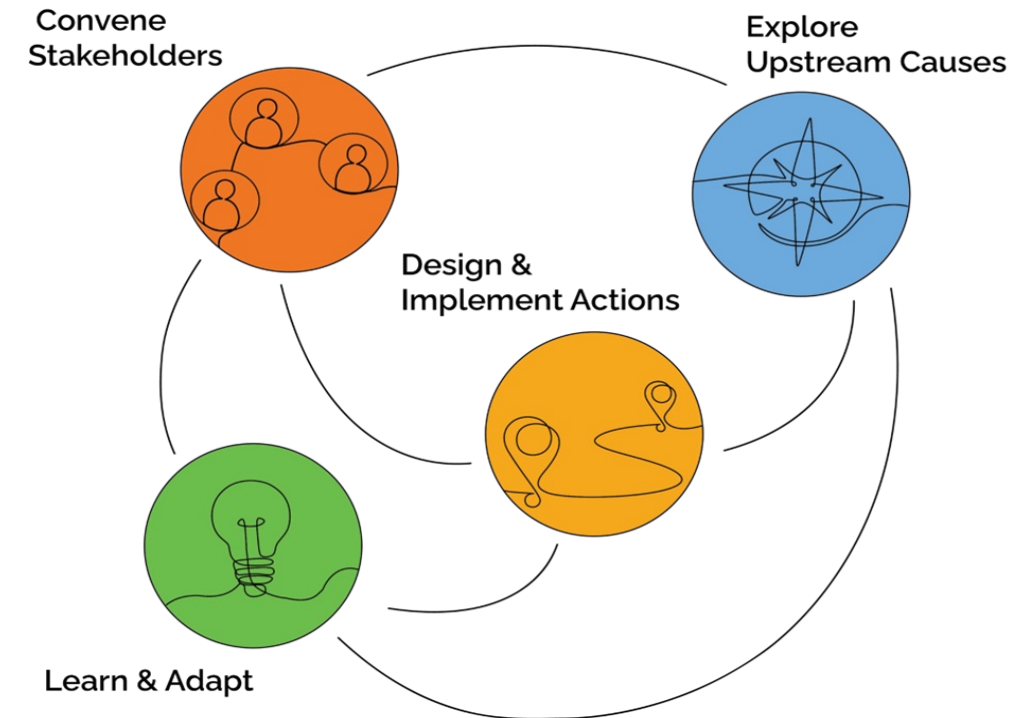
- Acknowledge each participant as the expert of their own story
- Seek deep and continuous consent
- Create safe containers for participants
- Adopt a beginner's mindset
- Lead with curiosity
- Look beyond the obvious story
- Use empowered writing
- Avoid simplifying, dramatization, and stereotypes

Using these practices can support us in **collecting** and **crafting** ethical stories that . . .

- Reveal complexity and nuance
- Include historical and systemic contexts
- Honor participant storytellers' dignity and voice

Ethical story structure

- **Summary**
Include community assets, shared values, and goals
- **Systemic contexts**
The historical, current, and systemic contexts giving rise to the challenge
- **Community assets**
Uplifting assets and strengths
- **Collaborative action**
Highlighting diverse perspectives, action and strategies
- **Sustaining success**
Drawing on its strengths, how might the community own and sustain its success?



Attending to **three levels of story**

Working with multiple perspectives

Individual

Level of the
single person

First person
language

"I, me"

Interpersonal

Level of the
community

Second person
language

"we, you"

Systemic

Level of the
system "out
there"

Third person
language

"it, its, they"

Examples of three levels of story

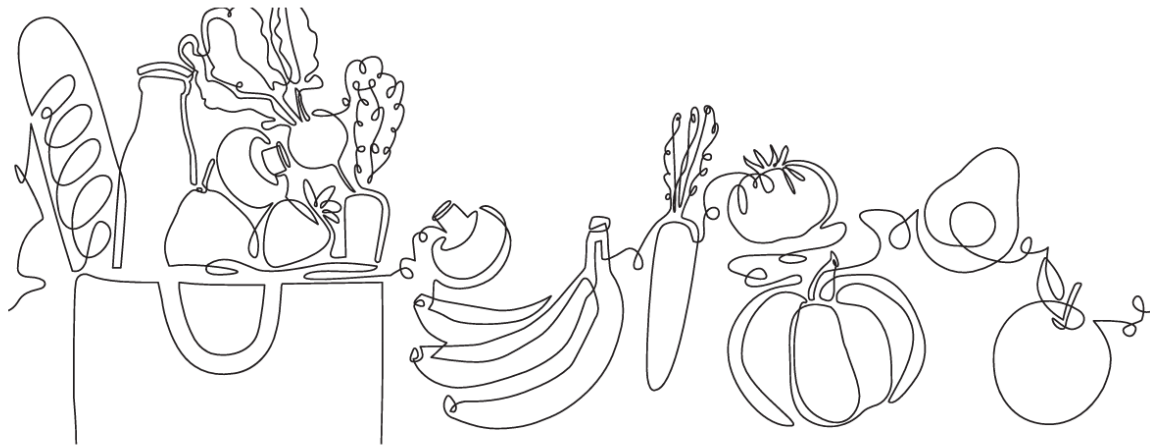
Healthy Food Access Partnership perspectives

"Our meetings start with a review of our community agreements, which remind us how to be decent to each other. I love it. It's been good for my personal life, too."

– Anneke Wegman, Food Coalition volunteer

"We are stronger together. We don't concern ourselves with who gets credit for what. Instead, we each do our part. Our goal isn't to benefit our individual groups, but to support our neighbors."

– Val Stone, Northwest Food Coalition Director



"During the first year of the pandemic, the Healthy Food Access Partnership facilitated over \$100,000 in purchases of 70,000 pounds of locally grown produce."

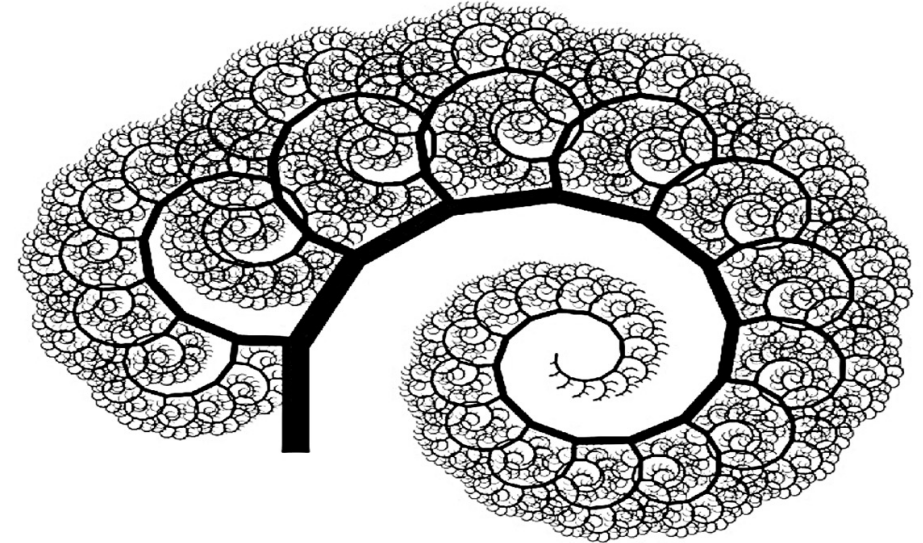
Systems change **stories**

- Rooted in context
- Center people and relationships
- Reveal complexity and nuance
- Reflect emergence
- Enable shared learning



Stories are accelerating our learning and adaptation

- Stories have become **shared artifacts** between the foundation and initiatives
- Stories have been a **tool** for:
 - Illumination & celebration
 - Inspiration - shifting the cultural narrative about what's possible
 - Shared reflection - new insights & adaptations
 - Field building locally and globally
- **Coming in 2024-5:** Stories of Change II, new stories and “where are they now” updates; increased focus on storylistening capacity and use



We welcome you to **get in touch!**



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