NEWPROFIT

Deconstructing *the* Bird Cage

How Social Entrepreneurs are Catalyzing Systems Change

by YORDANOS EYOEL, JOHN KANIA, AND KIM SYMAN

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Writing on the topic of oppression, feminist author Marilyn Frye
invoked the analogy of a birdcage:

“If you look very closely
at just one wire in the cage,
you cannot see the other wires...

It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one,
microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage,
that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere;
and then you will see it in a moment . . .
the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers,
no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which,
by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.”

- Marilyn Frye

Introduction

Thirty six years after Frye wrote about the bird cage, her analogy remains a startlingly relevant way to describe why it is that despite billions of dollars invested in philanthropy and trillions in government programs, progress against health, education, and environmental inequities remains so agonizingly elusive. Simply put, there's been an outsized effort placed on individual "bars" – the microscopic view – of the birdcage. And remarkably little emphasis on responding to the macroscopic: deconstructing the cage as a whole.

Learning to adjust focus from the microscopic to the macroscopic has been a journey for many in the social sector. For New Profit (a venture philanthropy organization), and a number of our social entrepreneur[1] partners, this journey has manifested in a shift from focusing mostly on the programmatic to paying greater attention to the systemic. At the same time, we've become aware that, while engaging systemically may be newer for some of us in the field, those most marginalized in society – people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, those living in rural poverty to name a few – have been all too familiar with the bird cage, if not in name, then in lived experience. This experience gives them insights and expertise that has often gone unheeded. Borrowing a notion from activist Bryan Stevenson,

> **those most proximate to the problem are key to unlocking the ingenuity and innovation necessary to deconstruct the bird cage.**

A year ago, New Profit launched a new initiative called the Systemic Solutions Initiative to investigate whether the field of social entrepreneurship, which has spurred sector innovation at the program

[1] A social entrepreneur is an individual who innovates and implements new ways to solve a social problem.

and policy level for the past several decades, could also function as a catalyst for holistic systems change – change that eliminates multiple bars in the bird cage and brings down barriers to access and progress. To examine this question, over the last 12 months New Profit's Systemic Solutions team has engaged in conversation and analysis with over two dozen social entrepreneurs in the U.S. who are attempting to work at the systemic level of change. Our focus has been to understand how a social entrepreneur's systemic work differs in nature from scaling programmatic work and the implications for required organizational and leadership capacities. As this exploration has unfolded, we have also initiated New Profit's first multi-year investments in two organizations we believe have great potential to shift systems in their respective spheres of influence. You can learn more about these initial investments **here.**

As we have begun to understand the ways in which systems change is being advanced, we have identified three "system impact models" that the social entrepreneurs we have engaged with are pursuing. All of three of these system impact models target holistic systems change, but do so through different means. In this article, we share our emerging understanding of these three models as well as questions and implications for social entrepreneurs who might wish to pursue them. Our hope is that through sharing our learning to date we can contribute to strengthening the systems change field while also helping to clarify the best opportunities for social entrepreneurs to participate in systems change.

01

How Systems Change Happens

How Systems Change Happens

To begin this exploration, we'll return to a framework for systems change that one of us developed and shared through a recently published article, **"The Water of Systems Change".**[2] The article presented a definition for systems change (originally articulated by Social Innovation Generation in Canada):

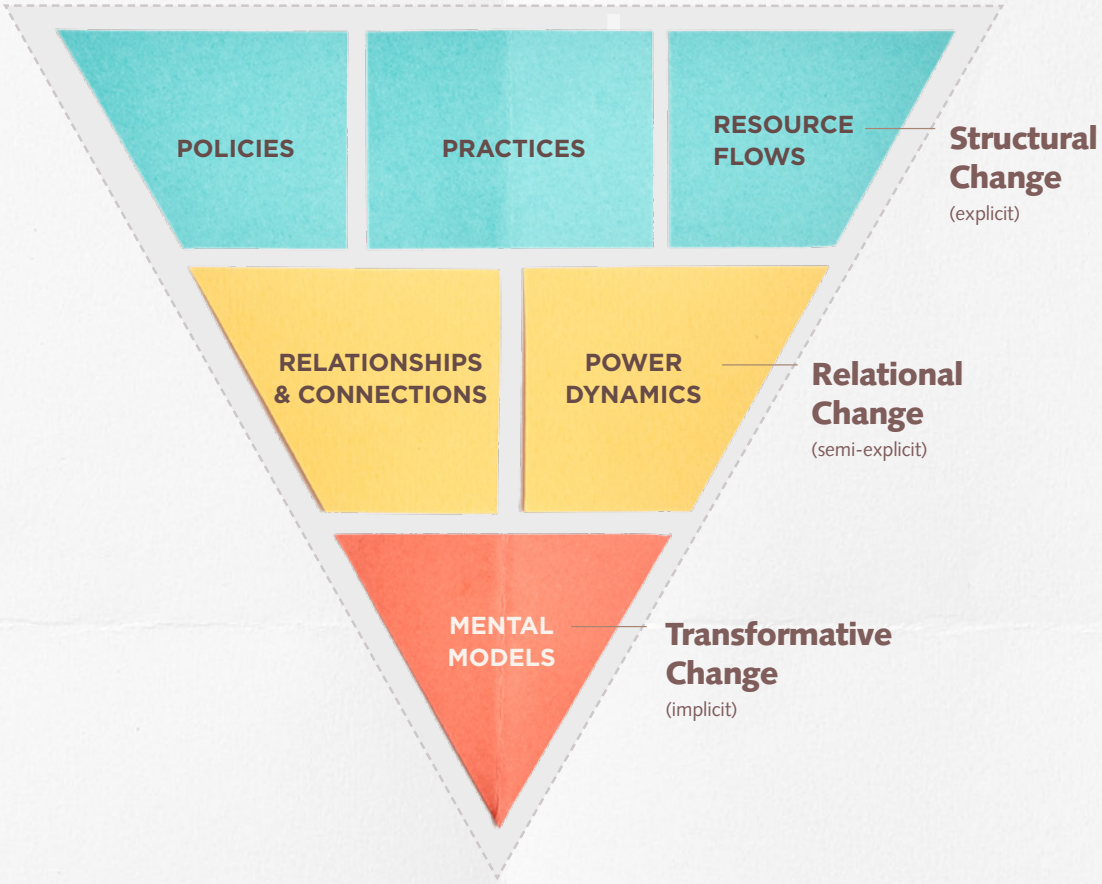
> **systems change is about shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place.**

What are these conditions? Figure 1 (page 8) shows six interdependent conditions that typically play significant roles in holding a social or environmental problem in place. The initial article shared several key themes that have been reinforced and added to through many conversations with change makers in the 18 months since the article was published. We highlight a few of those themes on the following spread.

[2] Source: Kania, John, Mark Kramar, and Peter Senge. *"The Water of Systems Change."* FSG (2018).

FIGURE 1

Six Conditions of Systems Change



Source: Kania, John, Mark Kramar, and Peter Senge. *"The Water of Systems Change."* FSG (2018).

Key Themes of the *Water of Systems Change*

01

The six conditions of systems change occur at three different levels with respect to their visibility to players in the system, largely due to how explicit, or tangible, they are made to most people. We refer to the three levels as ***Structural, Relational, and Transformational.***

02 Long-term sustainable, equitable social change is not possible unless significant attention is paid to the second and third levels of change – the Relational and Transformational – that are the deeper levels of systems change in which system behavior, rules, and resources are lodged.

03 One way to consider these conditions is that the Structural level of change (policies, practices, resource flows) requires technical skills to shift. For example, shifting policy most often requires an understanding of how government sets and makes laws. The Relational and Transformational levels (relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models) require cultural skills to create shifts. For example, supporting a shift in how people think about an issue such as marriage equality or climate change requires supporting ways that people can build empathy and openness, establish trust across traditionally oppositional boundaries, and enter into new relationship with each other.

04 To truly shift a system one must consider the system holistically. What does it take to shift barriers to change in all six conditions? Giving attention to one condition at the expense of all the others is unlikely to shift a whole system. Consistent with the bird cage metaphor, just deconstructing one bar of the bird cage leaves many other bars that will keep the bird trapped.

05 There is interdependence between the conditions. One can't think about shifting the conditions in silos. They are intertwined and interact with each other. The interaction can be mutually reinforcing (e.g. a change in community and legislator mental models may trigger a policy change). The interaction can also be counteracting (e.g. scaling effective practices may be thwarted by poor relationships between players in the system).

06 There is an internal dimension to systems change as well as an external dimension. As the saying goes, "the problems 'out there' are connected to the problems 'in here.'" There is no systems change without organizational change, and no organizational change without individual change.

These themes are explored in depth in **"The Water of Systems Change"** and we will return to a number of them as we examine systems change through the lens of the social entrepreneur. To this list, we would also add the extraordinary importance of clarifying the purpose or intent of holistic systems change, prior to actually determining the barriers to systems change one wishes to dislodge. In her seminal book, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, systems expert Donnella Meadows referred to ***shifting purpose of the system* as the penultimate leverage point in achieving systems change.**

> **When we consider a system's purpose in the context of today's so-called "broken" systems, it is important to note that systems deliver exactly what they are designed to deliver.**

What may seem for many to be undesirable outcomes are in fact the outcomes that the system was designed to produce. For example, what is often referred to as the "school to prison pipeline" is the result of numerous intentional policies and norms developed by mostly white males in positions of power that disadvantage youth of color and channel a disproportionate number of them into lengthy encounters with jail and often subsequent lives of despair. Until the system's overall purpose is shifted, individual interventions in various parts of the education and criminal justice systems are unlikely to yield sustained change.

Truly shifting the purpose of a system has the power to transform the quality and nature of all six conditions that hold social and environmental problems in place. In the next section we'll explore how entrepreneurs – through different system impact models – are focused on shifting system purpose. Examples will include shifting system purpose from "alleviating poverty to sustaining family success" and from "ensuring community safety to supporting youth wellbeing."

02

Social Entrepreneurs and System Impact Models

Social Enterpreneurs and System Impact Models

It is still early days in the efforts of social entrepreneurs working holistically to create systems change. Since systems change efforts take years to unfold, we cannot yet report out on many successes.

> **However, we are observing some compelling patterns in the approaches social entrepreneurs are taking to systems change – which we are calling "system impact models" – that seem promising to us.**

None of these system impact models are new in and of themselves. In fact, as approaches to systems change, they have been around for decades. Nonetheless, these approaches have the potential to take on increased salience when employed by social entrepreneurs. The system impact models we discuss here are as follows:

- **Fostering an Ecosystem:** Supporting a set of interdependent actors (often cross-sector) in making progress towards a common goal by helping players collaborate and co-create in mutually reinforcing ways

- **Building a Movement:** Strengthening agency amongst a group of individuals (often marginalized) who share common cause so that they have greater personal and collective capacity to change oppressive systems and achieve their goals

- **Changing Government Systems:** Catalyzing and supporting holistic change in government that results in transforming the quality and the scale of positive outcomes influenced by government

Each of the system impact models we explore here takes aim at addressing the three levels of systems change – Structural, Relational, and Transformational – though how they do so varies in accordance with the impact model. It is also important to note that the three system impact models are not mutually exclusive when applied in the context of creating change. Some social entrepreneurs are employing dimensions of more than one of these models in their approach to systems change.

However, there is a difference in the strategic point of leverage between each of the three that we believe connotes meaningful distinction. For "Fostering an Ecosystem," the leverage is in making connections across diverse actors and sectors who are interdependent, but not well connected. Typically this involves building bridges across nonprofit, government, business, and philanthropy. With "Building a Movement" the leverage is in catalyzing grassroots efforts and empowering individuals (versus organizations) to create change. Typically this involves capacity building for individuals, often centering on the frames of community organizing and power shifting. In "Changing Government Systems" the leverage is in change management within government organizations in ways that fundamentally transform government's approach to solving problems. This work typically requires stimulus from outside of government to spur change. At the same time it requires significant buy-in from agency leaders inside government and a heavy dose of culture shifting within the agencies.

Beyond differences in their strategic leverage points, there are a number of ways in which each of the three system impact models differ with respect to the structural emphases of their approaches. In the Appendix we explore some of these differences on key dimensions such as "inside the system" versus "outside the system," centralized versus decentralized, defined versus emergent goals, and the locus of stakeholder orientation.

The following section explores each of these system impact models in greater depth.

03

Fostering an Ecosystem

Fostering an Ecosystem

Many of the social entrepreneurs we observe who are focused on creating systems change through fostering ecosystems are adapting the collective impact approach (outlined below and described in a 2012 Stanford Social Innovation Review article co-authored by one of us).[3] Collective impact is a specific approach to bringing about cross-sector social and environmental problem solving through cultivating the existence of the following five conditions for change:

- **Common Agenda:** All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions

- **Shared Measurement:** Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable

- **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing set of actions

- **Continuous Communication:** Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, support collective learning, and create common motivation

- **Backbone organization:** An organization or set of resources is needed whose sole purpose is to support the common agenda through aligning and coordinating all other actors

[3] Kania, John and Mark Kramar. "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2012).

> **Most often we are seeing that social entrepreneurs using the "Fostering an Ecosystem" model assume the role of the backbone organization.**

As with any effective backbone organization, these social entrepreneurs are highly focused on increasing their awareness of the system in which they work and supporting others in doing so as well. They engage in significant and disciplined analysis to understand the interdependencies, interrelationships, and interactions of key actors that are influencing the system's purpose. Along the way they foster new connections and deeper levels of interaction to support the development of more connected relationships between actors, particularly actors who have different views on solutions. In effect, they play a major role in re-wiring the system and shifting its purpose.

Where social entrepreneur-led backbone organizations typically differ from others is their point of origin. The majority of backbone organizations involved in systems change emerge out of the actions of others who first catalyze the initiative. **On the other hand, the social entrepreneurs we studied were there at the beginning, bringing their bias for innovation – in this case, system innovation instead of program innovation – to catalyzing the collective impact effort themselves or in partnership with others.** These entrepreneurs are chief advocates at the beginning of the effort, and become central orchestrators as the effort gets rolling.

Take, for example, Curt Ellis and Cecily Upton and the work of their organization, **FoodCorps.** FoodCorps' mission is to help connect kids to healthy food in school. Today, one in five children in the United States struggle with hunger and a third are on track to develop type 2 diabetes and other diet-related diseases. The odds are stacked further against those who already face systemic barriers to wellness and success: children of color and children growing up in low-income homes. More than 30 million kids in the U.S. rely on schools for lunch, and more than 12 million for breakfast. Schools can help shape a child's relationship with food and the eating habits they'll carry for their whole lives. FoodCorps' school-based programs help schools to be places where kids have more opportunities to eat healthy

foods like fruits and vegetables, teaching them to love those foods and eat them on a daily basis.

FoodCorps began by delivering food education programs to schools via an AmeriCorps direct service program. They scaled quickly and today have a national network of offices, service sites, and state partners, collaborating to deliver consistently high-quality programs to kids in schools across 18 states. And they are having an impact. More than 75% of FoodCorps schools had measurably healthier school food environments by the end of the school year, and in schools with more of FoodCorps' hands-on learning activities, children are eating three times as many fruits and vegetables.

But as they succeeded in scaling the size and quality of their school-based programs, Ellis, Upton, and their colleagues at FoodCorps increasingly noticed that efforts to build a future of healthy food across all schools was never going to be possible until a plethora of stakeholders in the system could get on the same page and work together – at national, state, and local levels. For starters, the ecosystem of healthy school food includes: producers and manufacturers, distributors, school administrators, teachers, cafeteria staff, students, city/state government, NGOs, and parents. Each of these constituencies views school food from their own vantage point. Superintendents won't necessarily be familiar with the challenges of putting together weekly menus, while policy-makers may not have an understanding of what kids like to eat for lunch, and manufacturers may not know about the many hats a school nutrition director wears.

To respond to this fragmented system, FoodCorps built a partnership with social investment fund Bain Capital Double Impact, led by former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, and Forum for the Future, a global sustainability organization focused on accelerating systems strategies. After an intensive period of stakeholder mapping against influence and interest in shifting the system, FoodCorps, Bain Capital Double Impact, and Forum for the Future brought together a curated set of leaders from the fields of school nutrition, the food industry, philanthropy, government, and the nonprofit sector to design actionable solutions to a collectively-created diagnosis of the current challenges and barriers.

The vision, co-created by system players and now officially named reWorking Lunch, is for "all schools across the country to serve delicious, appealing, seasonally and culturally relevant food that is free from stigma and barriers to access."

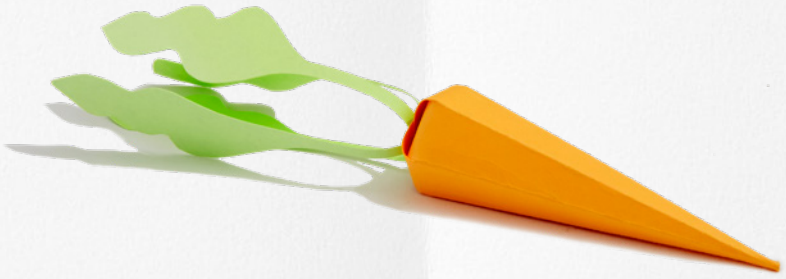
FoodCorp's catalytic role in reWorking Lunch presages an orientation that focuses on improving the health of the ecosystem itself in addition to achieving specific goals. Shifting how different players work with each other so that, over time, they can develop new innovations that address the conditions of tomorrow (complexity scientist Brenda Zimmerman called this improving system "fitness") seems to some like an ambiguous goal. It's actually the central goal systems change agents should be focused on to help society effectively address our existential challenges, which are continuously shape shifting. Consequently, FoodCorps has their eyes on achieving holistic systems change. They are intent on impacting all three levels of systems change – Structural, Relational, and Transformational. Figure 2 details a few of the barriers they are focused on.

At the core of FoodCorps' work and its leadership in the reWorking Lunch effort is the simple but profound re-purposing of the school food system. The goal is to align around centering healthy food as the sole purpose of school meal programs nationwide, ensuring millions of children, particularly those with limited access to nutritional food, get the nourishment they need to thrive every day in every school. 21,000 school districts across the country present a ripe target.

FIGURE 2

Improving Students Wellbeing Through Healthy School Food

WHAT KEY SYSTEMIC BARRIERS HOLD THE PROBLEM IN PLACE?



Structural Barriers (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows):

- Inconsistent sharing of best practices between school districts
- Complexity of school meal rules and regulations
- School districts' reliance on school meal programs for revenue generation

Relational Barriers (e.g. relationships and connections, power dynamics):

- Control of product offerings by distributors
- Lack of a coordination in distribution infrastructure
- Lack of collaboration between buyers and manufacturers in developing new products

Transformational Barriers (e.g. mental models):

- Lack of understanding about the link between healthy school food and student performance
- The cafeteria dining experience is not seen as positive and fun, and school meals are not seen as a culinary experience

The efforts of James Bell and the **Burns Institute** to foster healthier ecosystems in juvenile justice is every bit as profound as FoodCorp's efforts and has the potential to help change for the better the trajectories of hundreds of thousands of individuals who touch the juvenile justice system. The Burns Institute was founded in 2002 and works to improve the life outcomes of people of color involved in the administration of justice. To date, they have worked in over 200 jurisdictions.

Two years ago, previous CEO James Bell shifted out of his role running the Institute and into a role of innovating for systems change through performing the backbone role in efforts to transform juvenile justice in the U.S.

Bell was seeing challenges which suggested to him that bringing about transformation and radically changing the present disparities in racial outcomes in juvenile justice would require bringing together numerous actors and sectors, and also engaging multiple levels of systems change. A few of the key systemic challenges Bell felt needed to be addressed are listed in Figure 3.

Bell and the Burns Institute are now involved in fostering ecosystems change in pursuit of transformational change in two pilot communities: St. Paul, Minnesota and Toledo, Ohio. The ecosystem actors they are bringing together are: the executive branch of local government, health providers, child welfare, the courts, probation, law enforcement, community members, education, and the private sector. A critical and unique dimension of this work relative to many systems change efforts is Bell's insistence that the work begin with a focus on mental models. Bell explains that selection of pilot communities was predicated on an assessment of stakeholders' willingness to shift "their safety apparatus from a paradigm of custody, control, and suppression to a restorative approach focused on better life outcomes for communities of color."

Anyone reading Bell's statement closely would no doubt see that the role of ecosystem facilitator, or backbone, in this instance is not for the faint of heart. The work takes particular expertise.

FIGURE 3

Reforming the Juvenile Justice System for Youth Success

WHAT KEY SYSTEMIC BARRIERS HOLD THE PROBLEM IN PLACE?

Structural Barriers (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows):

- Historically, the supporting tools and technologies for reform efforts were adopted because they were viewed as "race neutral," but in reality they benefited white people, leading to a rising percentage of youth of color in the juvenile justice system

Relational Barriers (e.g. relationships and connections, power dynamics):

- Government is not organized to promote flexible cross-sector responses to complex human services problems that involve safety
- It is difficult for elected and appointed officials to share power with each other and with communities most in need of human service intervention

Transformational Barriers (e.g. mental models):

- The narrative around public safety has not served people of color; more specifically, "safety" in white communities is perceived as beneficial and benign, yet in communities of color the term has become a proxy for "social control"
- Many parties and institutions in the justice system (e.g. prosecutors, judges, probation) claim to be unbiased but the data in practices and outcomes suggests otherwise

It's a combination of data collection and interpretation, facilitating difficult and uncomfortable conversations, and comprehension of the drivers and incentives of the agencies responsible for reform. Bell further notes, "Guiding meetings with community members of color that have felt deliberately shut out of power, and public practitioners whose polices are being explained or challenged, requires special skills and bona fides." Says Bell, "We can offer the assistance that brings the voices and skills necessary to move the agenda that engages structural racism in the delivery of public system services to communities of color."

FoodCorps in their reWorking Lunch initiative and James Bell in his efforts to take on structural racism in the juvenile justice system both illustrate the power of engaging multiple players in the system in order to bring about change at scale. As the adage goes, "if you want to change the system, get the system in the room." When one is fostering an ecosystem it's important to note that ultimately, you can't do the work for the system – it's about fostering the capacity of systems players to see connections they may have missed, take on new world views, and identify new ways of working together that lead to innovative solutions.

> **Social entrepreneurs engaged in fostering ecosystems understand that building the capacity of the ecosystem itself to continue to grow in a thriving and equitable direction must be a core focus of the focus of the work.**

This often puts them at odds with a funding community that is oriented towards prioritizing end outcomes over all else. Increasingly, for social entrepreneurs or others to be successful in fostering ecosystems, funders must understand that teaching the system to learn on its own will be as important, if not more important, than intervening with solutions to see "the needle move." Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive.

04

Building a Movement

Building a Movement

Over the last 150 years, movements have arguably led to some of the highest profile systems change efforts. Often initiated by those marginalized by existing policies and/or norms in a society, movements place strategic pressure on power structures to attain their desired objective. With the rise of global inequity, everyday activism, and ubiquity of social media, the word "movement" has become a trendy way to describe social change efforts. However, to paraphrase Manual Pastor of USC, having a Twitter handle does not make your cause a movement. There is a difference between exercising one's agency and voice to influence a dialogue or build an advocacy platform vs. truly building a movement.

Movements are an amalgamation of strategy and serendipity. From the Civil Rights Movement to the Arab Spring, successful movements require a robust network of resources and infrastructure as well as the fluidity to capture opportunity as it arises. In **"How Change Happens: Why Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Don't,"** Leslie Crutchfield shares six characteristics of successful movements: a focus on the grassroots; a recognition of the importance of state and local efforts; a commitment to changing norms and attitudes as well as policy; a willingness to reckon with adversarial allies; acceptance of the fact that business is not always the enemy and often can be a key ally; and being "leaderfull" a concept developed by the civil rights activist, Ella Baker. "Leaderfull" means that the movement is not sustained solely by a charismatic and heroic leader, although there often is one, but by a powerful and collaborative network of leaders. These characteristics are consistent with the six conditions of systems change mentioned earlier in this article. For movements to be successful, they must take a holistic approach to impact.

Recognizing both the building blocks and impact of movements,

> **a new generation of social entrepreneurs are building organizational models that intentionally cultivate and grow movements to drive systemic change.**

Two entrepreneurial organizations at the forefront of this are GirlTrek and The People.

GirlTrek is a national health movement modeled in the footsteps of a Civil Rights legacy that activates Black women to be change makers in their lives and communities – through walking. Black women have and continue to play linchpin roles in their communities as mothers, leaders, activists, and peacekeepers. Yet they are disproportionally impacted by the health crisis in America today: 82% of Black women are overweight, 59% are obese, and 137 black women die of heart disease every day – more than gun violence, smoking, and HIV/AIDS combined.

Despite the clarity of the evidence, most solutions focused on addressing this epidemic have failed because they often lack context, cultural relevance, and focus on individual behavioral change without an underpinning ideology and approach that resonates with Black women. They also often lack proximate leadership that deeply understands both the power of Black women as well as the outsized burdens that inflict their wellbeing. Examples of the systemic barriers that hold the health crisis among Black women in place are listed in Figure 4 (page 26).

FIGURE 4

Addressing the Health Crisis Among Black Women in America

WHAT KEY SYSTEMIC BARRIERS HOLD THE PROBLEM IN PLACE?

Structural Barriers (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows):

- Inadequate preventative practices to improve the health outcomes of Black women
- Public policies that contribute to deterioration of Black women's wellbeing

Relational Barriers (e.g. relationships and connections, power dynamics):

- Limited access among Black women to community networks that celebrate and edify Black women
- A health care system that disempowers Black women through lack of cultural relevance

Transformational Barriers (e.g. mental models):

- Generational trauma caused by structural racism that affects Black women's sense of self, the world, safety, and danger
- Lack of awareness and understanding that wellbeing is an expression of personal, political, and social power

For T. Morgan Dixon and Vanessa Garrison, two Black women who started GirlTrek, the health crisis was not a research query but a deadly assault that targeted their family, friends, and community. Together, Morgan and Vanessa combined their experiences as educators and advocates and developed a culturally-relevant systems approach informed by Civil Rights history and practices to train and organize Black women as health champions.

To date, GirlTrek has organized over 300,000 Black women to walk and is building a movement to reach 1 million Trekers by 2020. Wrote national obesity expert Dr. Gary Bennett (who has since become a board member) on GirlTrek in a recent New York Times article:

> **"I have been doing work on obesity as it affects medically vulnerable populations for 15 years, and I don't know of anything in the scientific community or any public health campaigns that have been able to produce and sustain engagement around physical activity for Black women like GirlTrek does. Not even close."**

GirlTrek's approach is grounded in the scientific evidence that daily walking dramatically reduces risk of individual's chronic disease. This in and of itself creates a powerful impact. However, as a movement GirlTrek goes beyond the individual to addressing community-level empowerment and change. Their systemic approach begins with shifting mental models among Black women regarding their health, agency, and ability to advocate for themselves. The model then works upward and outward through supporting relationship building and shifting power dynamics in order to ultimately affect policies, practices, and resource flows within local government.

GirlTrek targets four key outcomes to their work:

01 Black Women Walk and Build a Healthy Foundation for Grassroots Leadership.

GirlTrek inspires Black women to start walking and builds accountability systems that support the formation of life-saving daily habits. The model recognizes that Black women are highly effective influencers, leaders, breadwinners, and advocates for themselves and their communities.

02 Healthy Black Women Revitalize the Community's Care for Itself.

GirlTrek leverages the grassroots leadership of Black women to build a community's capacity to identify needs and solutions. The movement is focused on building a network of women who are determined to serve as advocates for their communities and as healthy role models for their families — as bright, vivid, true-to-form living examples of what active living looks like.

03 Community Infrastructure Improves.

Frequent group walks increase safety and energized walkers audit the needs of their neighborhoods to become local change makers. Contingent on local need and initiative, Trekers plant gardens, create safe walkways, clean parks, and spur local community improvement.

04 New Local Public Health Advocates Sustain Efforts.

The organization trains a number of Trekers in communities to serve as skilled and educated public health advocates to recruit new walkers, lead local programming, and advocate with local policy makers to eliminate barriers to healthy living.

A member of the movement describes the impact of GirlTrek this way:

> **The most powerful thing is that GirlTrek is not rooted in dominant pathology to fix Black women but operates from a stance of love and moving you to health. GirlTrek's language and framing is both powerful and radical, and deeply resonates with Black women. Their actions are also rooted in a deep commitment to community – what's necessary to build relationships that create connection, power, and leadership. The impact cascades to the various ways in which women lead and show up at work and in other aspects of their personal lives.**

GirlTrek has become the new "Citizen school" that ameliorates health conditions, empowers women, and helps to revitalize communities through grassroots leadership training for black women to advocate for policy changes that reduce barriers to health. Even as an early stage enterprise, GirlTrek is already showing significant success in deconstructing the birdcage of systemic oppression for black women.

As with GirlTrek, **The People** is a movement based on a national network of grassroots organizations. The People brings Americans together to engage in civil discourse and establish and carry out nonpartisan governmental reforms in order to create a representative democracy. To accomplish this, The People focuses on informing and building the capacity of individuals to express their civic agency while building the infrastructure to amplify the voice of ordinary people in America.

Consistent with a 21st century movement, the story of The People began on social media. Katie Fahey of Michigan posted on Facebook the day after the 2016 presidential election asking if anyone wanted to work with her to end gerrymandering in Michigan (accompanied by the obligatory emoji of choice, which in this case was a 🙂). Soon after, Katie began to receive an outpouring of messages, which led to the creation of Voters Not Politicians, a grassroots-led movement that mobilized 14,000 volunteers, raised $16M, collected 425,000 signatures to create a ballot initiative, and ultimately won with over 61% of the vote, ending partisan gerrymandering in Michigan.

Katie and Voters Not Politicians led a counter-cultural movement during a time of polarization and political tribalism by bringing together people across political, socio-economic, and racial difference to achieve a common goal. Keys to their success included introducing new practices of volunteer engagement as well as shifting relationship and power dynamics between people of different backgrounds to create a "leaderfull" movement. Katie said, "As a millennial, I am accustomed to people crowd funding whether it's for a cat surgery or a trip, and I wanted to create a model where we can crowd source talent and allow every person to contribute in a meaningful way." Through an extensive competency and interest survey, Voters Not Politicians created a complex and yet intuitive volunteer infrastructure that enabled it to have a strong and committed grassroots base.

In 2019, Katie launched The People to scale nationally this successful playbook of Michigan's Voters Not Politicians and support grassroots leaders like her across the country. Figure 5 shares examples of the systemic barriers that are the focus of her efforts.

As a first step in their work, The People conducted a national listening tour and convened a representative group of grassroots leaders from all 50 states. Together they created a common vision and a set of values. Similar to her work in Michigan, Katie's national effort is focused on being "leaderfull" at scale. As an example, The People is in the process of building a model that will enable organizers from all 50 states to contribute to the design of their governing structure. While still in its early days, The People represents a new type of organization that is bridging traditional social movement tactics with entrepreneurship to drive systems change.

Movement building requires significant clarity and congruency between the values of the leader(s) and the values of the movement. Because these leaders are often visible and personify the movement, they face a great deal of scrutiny. And because they are often working to address deep systemic inequities, the personal sacrifice is tremendous and often unacknowledged.

FIGURE 5

Building a Representative Democracy in the U.S.

WHAT KEY SYSTEMIC BARRIERS HOLD THE PROBLEM IN PLACE?

Structural Barriers (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows):

- Undemocratic policies such as political gerrymandering that undermine political participation
- Lack of transparent governing practices that perpetuate apathy among the citizenship

Relational Barriers (e.g. relationships and connections, power dynamics):

- Too few civic and political organizations focused on building agency for citizens to mobilize and make changes in our democracy
- Lack of authentic and meaningful participation for citizens throughout the policy and governing processes
- Lack of representation in elected officials that mirrors the diversity of the country

Transformational Barriers (e.g. mental models):

- Perception by many Americans that the political system is "rigged" and that ordinary citizens do not have the power to change it
- Perception by the political establishment that polarizing campaigns are the most effective way to win elections
- Belief among many citizens that there are more values that divide our country than unify us

05

Changing Government Systems

Changing Government Systems

With public funding dwarfing all other sources spent on core U.S. functions like education and health, and on human services like food and economic assistance, social entrepreneurs seeking to address change at scale often aim at changing government.

For some social entrepreneurs, the work goes well beyond a focus on the structural (e.g. changing public policy or shifting resource flows by capturing public contracts to support innovative programs). **We are beginning to see a set of social entrepreneurs who are doing deep work that fundamentally shifts the mental models, power dynamics, and relationships and connections within government, and between departments and agencies and the key public constituencies with which they interface.** Although ultimately these efforts intend to create structural changes, the real locus of work lies in the more transformative conditions of systems change. Family Independence Initiative (FII), led by Jesús Gerena, and Prosecutor Impact, led by Adam Foss, provide two cases in point.

FII's exclusive focus is on addressing poverty through empowering those most impacted to build sustainable futures for themselves. The fifty-year war on poverty has made living in poverty more tolerable but not more escapable. Today, with assistance, 75% of low-income families climb above the poverty line, but half of those families slip back below it within four years. FII's work with thousands of families who create a sustained, positive trajectory out of poverty has demonstrated that an alternative to this cycling may be in reach for millions more. More recently, they have begun work to transform government's approach to supporting families struggling with poverty based on what they have learned.

Examples of systemic barriers that prevent poor families from building sustainable futures for themselves are shown in Exhibit 6 (page 34).

FIGURE 6

Supporting Families in Poverty to Build Sustainable Futures for Themselves

WHAT KEY SYSTEMIC BARRIERS HOLD THE PROBLEM IN PLACE?

Structural Barriers (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows):

- Government subsidies, such as TANF and SNAP, and many philanthropic programs penalize those who climb out of poverty by cutting off support as poor families' income grows beyond program eligibility limits
- Families in poverty have extremely limited access to borrowing capital to improve their situation

Relational Barriers (e.g. relationships and connections, power dynamics):

- Structures often don't exist that provide ways for families in poverty to work together to mutually support one another
- Government programs supporting poor people rarely include input from families in poverty

Transformational Barriers (e.g. mental models):

- There is a core narrative among many human service agencies and philanthropic funders that families who are poor are that way because they lack initiative to change their situation
- Families in poverty often lack a frame for how they can create a sustainable future for themselves

For the past eighteen years, FII's operations in cities across the U.S. have shown that when low-income families are trusted and invested in directly, they work individually and collectively to achieve prosperity, averting the pernicious cycling around the poverty line. FII's provides a technology platform, UpTogether, for families to define and track success for themselves, strengthen social networks, access capital, and support one another. Families come together to set their own goals and help each other find solutions to problems like identifying resources for child care, tuition, or starting a business. Through UpTogether, families report monthly on their activities, finances, and steps taken toward their goals. FII uses that data to learn and capture trends, providing reports for families to see and understand their own journey. They also use the data to enable other stakeholders, including government and philanthropists, to better understand what it looks like for families to move out of poverty.

During two years of engagement with FII, families report on average a 22 percent increase in monthly income, a 55 percent decrease in subsidies such as TANF and SNAP, and doubling of their assets. They also report increased educational outcomes for their children. Families additionally report increases in social capital exchanges over the same period, like giving and receiving childcare, information, financial support, job referrals, and more.

FII's approach shows that when families cycle in and out of poverty, it's not due to their lack of initiative or being helpless victims in need of intervention – a core narrative about poor families that is enshrined in the mental models of many human service agencies and philanthropic funders. Instead, that cycling is due to policies and practices on the part of both government and philanthropy that serve to limit families' access to information about paths taken by those who achieve economic mobility, fail to provide access to capital to families who can then invest in their own efforts, and focus on individuals' progress (or lack thereof) rather than on communities, even though communities are what historically shape opportunity for families to rise.

Currently, in partnership with government, FII has created several pilots that re-program government resources to invest directly in families (with support on essential data functions from Google.org). FII's efforts in Boston provide one example. Low-income families are coming to the table as equals with FII, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's Department of Transitional Assistance, and the City of Boston to help shape the pilot project and give input on proposed shifts in policies and practices. This approach, for which FII provides training that very intentionally prepares all partners, addresses the middle layer of the six conditions: relationships, connections, and power dynamics. The data and stories that FII shares with institutional partners are important, but bringing government directly into proximity with families in this way can be transformative, helping to shift mental models on the part of public workers and reinforcing families' sense of their own efficacy. Similar pilots are unfolding in Illinois, Michigan, and Oregon, and are under development elsewhere.

In this way, FII's approach seeks to shift all three layers of systems conditions: their approach – and their public communications – are explicitly centered on the implications of two very different mental models about low-income families: one mental model is foundational to trapping families in cycles of poverty, the other to supporting them on their path out. By connecting families with people in government and philanthropy, they build relationships that, alongside the data and stories, help shift the mental models of decision makers, which in turn shift the structural conditions – the practices, policies, and resource flows – in ways that better support those families. FII is also shifting power – using its organizational credibility and the capabilities of its leaders to help decision makers create space for new perspectives. Though small scale today, these shifts in their pilot regions show what can be accomplished with a transition in a government system away from a model that sees itself as rescuing families struggling with poverty (or spurring their efforts) to one that trusts and invests in them.

Through the organization he founded in 2016, **Prosecutor Impact (PI)**, Adam Foss also focuses on changing government. PI brings together public prosecutors with those most directly impacted – the mostly young, Black and Latino/a/x people from low-income communities – to create better outcomes for those accused of crimes and to improve community safety. Though rarely the focal point of criminal justice reform, the power of prosecutors in the U.S. to shape the life-long trajectory of those accused of a crime is nearly limitless: they choose who to charge, what to charge them with, whether to oppose appeals for clemency, and a myriad of other decisions that significantly impact people's lives. And when prosecutors choose to prosecute, often what results is a criminal record that sets in motion a cycle that makes it hard to find a job, find funding to attend school, or acquire stable housing, often resulting in further criminal activity. For Foss, a former assistant District Attorney himself, the leverage in focusing on prosecutors was all too clear.

Part of what drives extraordinary incarceration rates, especially for young low-income black and brown men, is the degree to which prosecutors' formal education and training (and life experiences) fail to equip them to understand either those accused of a crime, or the implications of their own choices to prosecute or pursue alternatives. Prosecutors are also often unaware of the many community-related supports that may be available to individuals who need assistance in accessing more productive paths. PI works with prosecutors in District Attorney's offices in a growing number of cities around the nation, addressing these factors.

Examples of systemic barriers to shifting prosecutor behavior towards more humane outcomes are detailed in Figure 7 (page 38).

FIGURE 7

Addressing Mass Incarceration Through More Humane Prosecutor Behavior

WHAT KEY SYSTEMIC BARRIERS HOLD THE PROBLEM IN PLACE?

Structural Barriers (e.g. policies, practices, resource flows):

- District Attorney policies are either nonexistent, outdated, or out of touch with the realities faced by the front-line prosecutors
- Prosecutors operate in a black box, siloed from other system actors and cut off from community-based resources that could aid them in achieving their goals
- There are few metrics of success in prosecutors' offices, and even fewer moments of evaluation or feedback to let them know how they are doing

Relational Barriers (e.g. relationships and connections, power dynamics):

- The criminal justice system provides little opportunity for prosecutors to learn about the people they are impacting with their decisions, including crime survivors, the defendants, witnesses, and their families and communities
- Prosecutors with a more progressive approach may feel isolated, ostracized, punished, or threatened in their offices and departments, and by other stakeholders
- Community distrust in the criminal justice system and law enforcement keeps prosecutors from fulfilling their goals and leaves victims vulnerable to further harm

FIGURE 7

Transformational Barriers (e.g. mental models):

- Prosecutors have implicit, and in some cases, explicit biases that influence their decision-making and can lead to disparities
- Prosecutors may misunderstand the long-term impact of their decision making resulting in unintended, counterproductive consequences
- A lack of awareness about trauma and cycles of violence has deprived prosecutors of opportunities to better respond to violent crime

PI supports prosecutors in gaining a fuller view of people like those they're likely to encounter in the courtroom, shifting the mental models of who these people are, how they got there, and what paths in life might be available. PI also provides prosecutors with the data, training, and tools to consider a more creative array of options that take into account the implications of saddling someone with a criminal record as well as the wellbeing of victims and the need for public safety.

These shifts are beginning to show up in changes in criminal justice practices – alternative sentencing and pursuit of treatment for addiction and mental health issues, for example – and policies, such as the conditions under which prosecutors choose to prosecute. Over time, these efforts should result in shifts in resource flows as well, with a reduction in the tens of billions spent on incarceration, parole, and probation as people who might have otherwise have been ensnared in the criminal justice system find life paths that are more productive for themselves and their communities.

06

Challenges in the Work

Challenges in the Work

While the three system impact models discussed here have different locus and leverage points, the social entrepreneurs we studied across these models share a number of challenges in achieving impact. Here we share seven that seem most pressing from our analysis to date.

01 **"The Fierce Urgency of Now":** Whether it is the crisis of health, criminal justice, or democracy, we are bombarded with the present and persistent implications of systems that are stuck in neutral or negative gear. Yet we know that holistic systems change is a long-term effort that requires structural, relational, and transformational shifts. Social entrepreneurs seeking to achieve this type of impact must continually wrestle with how to balance the incremental progress of today with the larger revolutionary change they aspire to achieve in the longer term, and they must do this in a world obsessively driven by immediate results. Both in strategy and narrative, social entrepreneurs must find a way to navigate the balance between urgency and cultivating the conditions for long-term, sustainable change.

02 **Balancing Scale and Impact:** As a venture philanthropy organization, New Profit has spent 20+ years helping social entrepreneurs scale their models. Scale will continue to be an important success metric for us and others who care about advancing progress. For social entrepreneurs seeking systems change, the question of scale is more complex as the deep layers of relational and transformational change are cultural and informed by context. An effort to create competitive elections by ending partisan gerrymandering in Michigan will look vastly different from an effort in Arizona pursuing the same goal. Systems change organizations are not creating a product or service that can easily be customized for a community. They are trying to change the very design of that community in relation to a specific system. This creates a tension between scale and impact for social entrepreneurs, which they must wrestle with in order to identify a culturally and strategically appropriate resolution.

03 **Measuring What Matters:** Similar to scale, measurement is another building block of social entrepreneurship. In systems change the challenge with measurement is not its absence but rather its meaning. **Systems change efforts spool out over time in a one-thing-leads-to-another progression that is often nonlinear.** How should social entrepreneurs engaged in systems change measure the progressive nature of systems change activities to demonstrate their short, medium, and long-term effects? Additionally, what are the most meaningful metrics to assess progress? How do funders support social entrepreneurs in measuring and evaluating their systems change work in order to learn, iterate, and improve to achieve their desired outcomes?" While the field has progressed in its understanding here, the question of how to measure systems change is a persistent challenge confronting social entrepreneurs and funders.

04 **Money. Money. Money:** "Long-game." "Complicated to scale." "Nuanced to measure." "Contribution vs. attribution." Systems change models are by design in conflict with the dominant paradigm in philanthropy that focuses on short-term, quickly scalable, and easy to measure solutions. Unfortunately, in addition to the traditional challenges of fundraising, social entrepreneurs seeking systems change must challenge prevailing practices in philanthropy to capitalize their efforts. Often this requires very compelling and data-informed narratives that addresses both the "fierce urgency of now" and the possibility of transformative change in the future. Social entrepreneurs engaged in systems change must enlist funders to be partners in the journey, likely by employing strategies that shift the mindsets and behaviors of funders – no small feat.

05 **"Every Action Has an Equal and Opposite Reaction":** Systems are constructs created, managed, and sustained by people. Any effort that aims to shift this status quo will inevitably experience opposition, most notably from those upholding and benefiting from the system. This means that social entrepreneurs seeking systems change not only need an offensive strategy but a defensive one in order to persevere through what often are better capitalized and powerful forces. The world of social impact has in general become more comfortable discussing risk yet still shies away from acknowledging and proactively preparing for opposition. However, for systems change efforts, this is not an option. Social entrepreneurs must intentionally define their strategies for victory in the face of opposition.

06 **Adaptation is the Rule Rather Than the Exception:** It might seem trite to say that the only constant in systems change is change. But that's the case. Systems are comprised of relationships and interdependencies between the people and organizations who make up the system – a mosaic that is forever shifting like the colorful glass plates in a kaleidoscope. For social entrepreneurs attempting systems change (and particularly for their boards), the assumption should be that their model, approach, and theory of change will need to be revised regularly, no matter how smart they are. In fact, **social entrepreneurs who are truly listening to the system will quite likely find themselves continually surprised.** Why surprised? If they or someone else knew the complete answer to how to shift they system, they'd have done it already!

07 **Systems Change is an "Inside-Out" Game:** It can be tempting to assume that the inequitable problems of a system "out there" have no relation to what's "in here" (within ourselves). Real change starts with recognizing that not only are we a part of the systems we seek to change, many of us often benefit from the "brokenness" of the system. Our actions won't become more effective until we shift the nature of the awareness and thinking behind our actions. As Bill O'Brien, a corporate leader in the systems thinking field once said, "the success of the intervention is based on the interior condition of the intervener."

For social entrepreneurs, as for any individual engaged in serious change, it may take a while to recognize that their personal stance towards attempting to solve problems manifests in the public reality. James Bell at the Burns Institute puts it this way: "The deeper I move into systems change activity the more time I spend thinking about how I show up for the work. For me, that means coming as much as possible from a place of peace, where I can un-attach from my own idea of how things need to happen and move instead to bringing about shared perspective and collective action from others."

07

Leadership in the Work

Leadership in the Work

One of the most profound implications of acknowledging that systems change happens holistically is the need in systems change work to adopt a mode of collective leadership. Because of its multi-dimensional, multi-actor nature, one cannot *drive* systems change. The goal should be to support systems change by catalyzing leadership in others. As a result, social entrepreneurs who engage in systems change must ensure that they possess sufficient capacity to lead collectively. As one of us wrote about in a recent article, social entrepreneurs aspiring to change systems must engage as a system leader.[4]

There are three core capabilities that system leaders must possess in order to catalyze collective leadership in others.

01 **Seeing the larger system.** In any complex setting, people typically focus their attention on the parts of the system most visible from their own vantage point. Helping people see the larger system is essential to building a shared understanding of a complex problem.

02 **Encouraging reflection and more generative conversation.** Deep shared reflection is a critical step in enabling groups of organizations and individuals to "hear" a point of view that is different than their own, and to appreciate emotionally as well as cognitively each others' reality.

03 **Shifting from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.** Change often starts with conditions that are undesirable, but artful system leaders help people move from just reacting to those problems to building positive collective visions of the future.

As New Profit continues our exploration of social entrepreneurs engaged in systems change, we hope to gain an even deeper understanding of how these dimensions of collective leadership play out across the system impact models we've explored here.

[4] Hamilton, Hal, John Kania, and Peter Senge. "Dawn of System Leadership." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2015).

08

Conclusion

Conclusion

We conclude with our perspective, based on our research and our work to date, on a key question for us and perhaps for many of our readers: what qualities are most important for a social entrepreneur to be successful in catalyzing systems change? We list below our current thinking and look forward to engaging with others in the field regarding the relevancy and cogency of this list.

It is our current belief that social entrepreneurs aspiring to systems change must:

01 Have or create **proximity** to those most affected by the problem, engaging them as co-creators to develop solutions

02 Be **system-aware** (e.g. understand the relationships and dynamics at play between players and resources in the system)

03 Focus her/his efforts towards shifting **multiple interrelated systemic conditions** across the three levels of systems change

04 Give sufficient **attention to the deeper relational and transformative levers** of systems change that ultimately are the source of long term sustainable change

05 View and embody **collective leadership** as a critical part of the work in achieving systems change

We suspect that social entrepreneurs who possess these capacities will have better odds of success in their systems change efforts, although success in systems change is never guaranteed, is hard to measure, and may take a long time to achieve. Yet, investing thoughtfully in the face of uncertainty – believing that *maybe* these entrepreneurs will be successful – with these criteria in mind is still a bet we are making. The grassroots social change book, **"Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed,"** puts it this way:

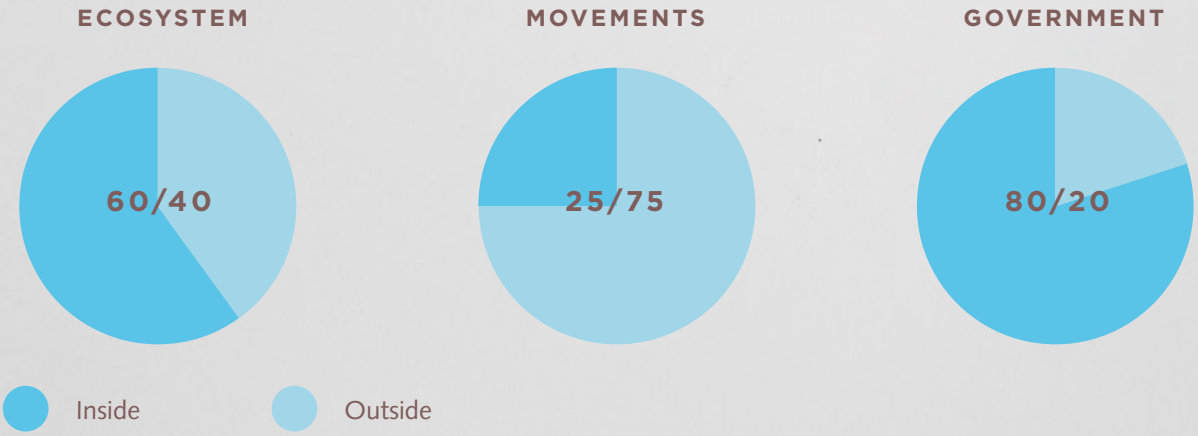
> **Maybe is not a cautious word.**
> **It is a defiant claim of possibility in the face of a status quo we are unwilling to accept.**

As our work in systems change unfolds, we plan to continue sharing what we are learning about the role of social entrepreneurs in systems change, and we invite your reactions and reflections. We are also eager to engage with and learn from others who are on this journey in the hopes that, collectively, we can all contribute to increasing society's capacity to fix our flawed and broken systems. Nothing more and nothing less than deconstructing the bird cage of systemic oppression stands between us and getting beyond "maybe."

APPENDIX

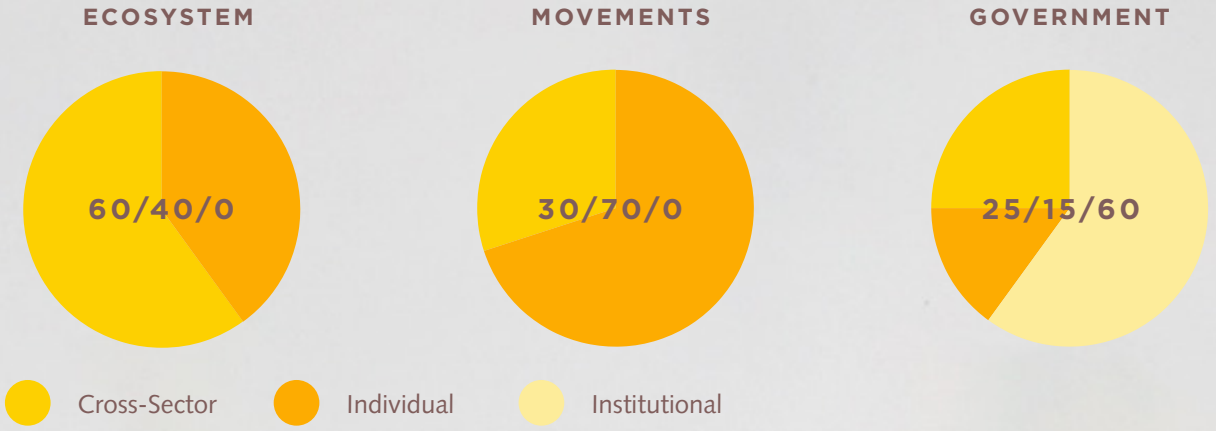
Comparing Impact Models*

Inside *vs.* Outside the System Approach

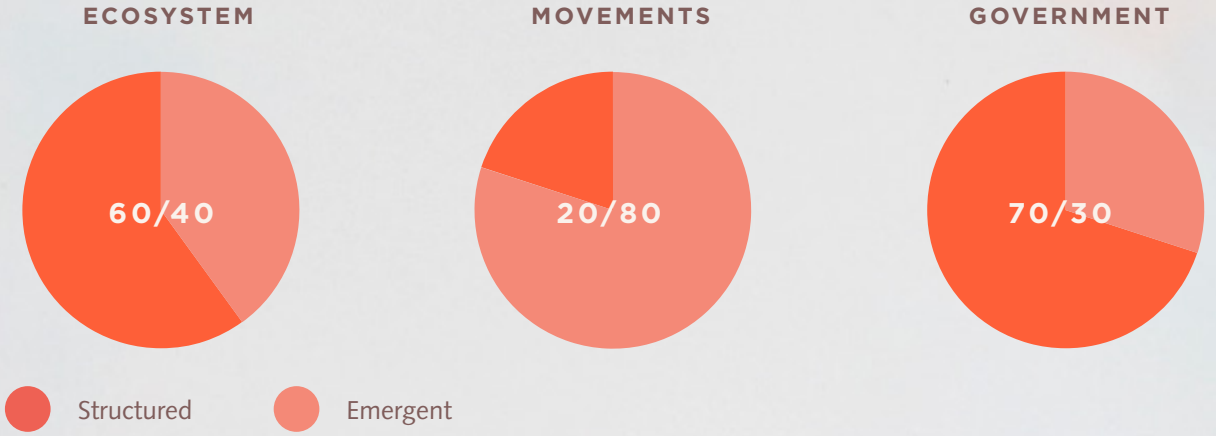


*The information here is intended to be directional, based on the observations of the authors, and does not represent a statistical level of analysis. The comparisons along the represented dimensions are intended to deepen understanding of the differences in how the respective system impact models are structured to create social and environmental change.

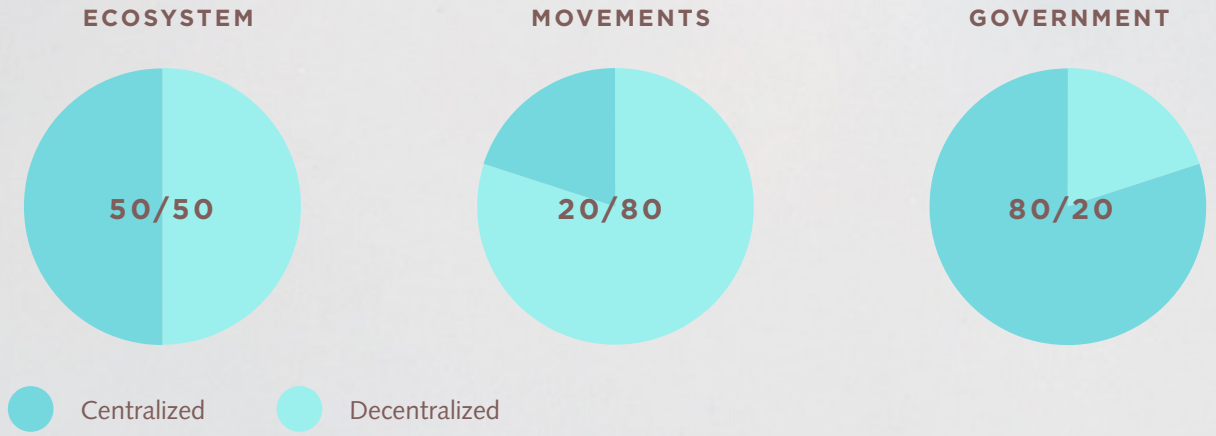
Cross-Sector *vs.* Individual *vs.* Institutional Focus



Structured Common Agenda *vs.* Focused Goals but Emergent



Centralized *vs.* Decentralized Structure, Process, Decision-making



We welcome your thoughts and perspectives.
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New Profit is grateful for the collaboration of artist Koren Harpaz.

Produced by Hiker

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