TAMARACK INSTITUTE

TRANSFORMATION AND SYSTEMS CHANGE: A PRIMER

By Mark Cabaj

The Transformation Framework Series

CONTENTS

1. PREFACE 3

2. WHY SYSTEMS CHANGE & TRANSFORMATION? WHY NOW? 4

3. DEFINITIONAL ISSUES: WHAT IS BEING CHANGED? HOW MUCH? 6

- **3.1 SYSTEMS AND SOCIETIES: TWO UNITS OF ANALYSIS 6**
- **3.2 IMPROVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION: TWO UNITS OF CHANGE 8**

4. FOUR ORIENTATIONS TO CHANGE 9

- **4.1 SYSTEMS CHANGE 10**
- **4.2 SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION 12**
- **4.3 SOCIETAL IMPROVEMENT 15**
- **4.4 SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION 17**

5. TACTICS CONFUSING PURPOSE & STRATEGY 22

6. CHANGE: GOOD, BAD OR UNCERTAIN 24

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS 26

HELPFUL RESOURCES 28

1. PREFACE

The language of **systems change** and **transformation** is now widely used across the fields of social innovation, philanthropy, public policy, and evaluation.

These terms are often applied loosely, interchangeably, or simply to signal that large scale change is required. However, they surface questions – even confusion – about what that means for the day-to-day work of changemaking.

The purpose of this primer is modest and deliberate: to establish a small set of working distinctions that set the context for the Tamarack-Here to There Consulting Inc. Transformation Framework Series.

In some cases, it may also help practitioners, funders, and evaluators think more clearly about the kinds of change they are pursuing – and the implications that follow.

The content of this primer should be read as a snapshot-in-time (late 2025), not a definitive map. The ideas discussed here are evolving rapidly in response to shifting social, economic, technological, and political conditions. The intent is to support shared understanding and better judgment, not to fix terminology in place.

2. WHY SYSTEMS CHANGE & TRANSFORMATION? WHY NOW?

Over the past several decades, enormous effort has gone into sustaining and improving societal outcomes. In many areas, that effort has paid off: life expectancy has increased in much of the world; extreme poverty has declined, and access to education, health care, and basic services has expanded.

At the same time, a growing set of outcomes remain deeply problematic – and in many cases are getting worse: wealth and income inequality continues to widen, climate change and ecological loss are accelerating, political polarization and violent conflict are increasing, and trust in institutions is declining. Many observers now describe these distinct yet overlapping trends as a "polycrisis."

These patterns suggest that many challenges cannot be addressed through isolated programs or incremental improvements alone. They point to deeper questions about the systems that produce these outcomes in the first place – systems that may be poorly aligned with today's realities, insufficiently designed to deliver better outcomes, or actively generating harm.

For a long time, a relatively small group of change-makers have been pre-occupied with systems change (e.g., political leaders, reformers, grass-roots activists, alternative visionaries).

No longer.

The pace, unpredictability, and depth of change in social, economic, ecological, and political systems have increased markedly. Shocks travel faster. Local disruptions cascade across systems. Long-standing assumptions about stability, progress, and control are harder to sustain. As a result, the number of people questioning whether existing systems can deliver acceptable futures has grown rapidly.

We appear to be at an inflection point. Calls for systems change and transformation are no longer confined to the margins. They are coming from governments, civil society, philanthropy, business, and communities themselves. More people are serious about working at this level, even as uncertainty about how to do so remains high.

The question is now less about why change is needed, and more about what this type of change really means and how it is done.

3. DEFINITIONAL ISSUES: WHAT IS BEING CHANGED? HOW MUCH?

Much of the confusion surrounding systems change and transformation stems from two unresolved questions that are often left implicit:

1. What is the primary **unit of analysis** we are trying to influence?
2. What depth or **unit of change** are we seeking?

This primer argues that clarity on both questions is essential. Without it, very different forms of change are discussed as if they were the same, leading to blurred strategies, mismatched expectations, weak learning, and uneven progress.

3.1 SYSTEMS AND SOCIETIES: TWO UNITS OF ANALYSIS

The first distinction concerns *what it is we are trying to change*.

A system refers to a relatively bounded configuration of actors, institutions, rules, practices, resources, and decision-making arrangements that interact to produce recurring outcomes. Workforce systems, health systems, education systems, and energy systems are familiar examples.

Systems typically have:

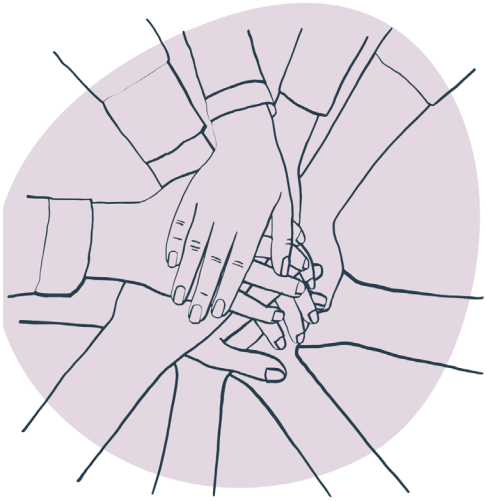
- Identifiable roles and authorities
- Formal or semi-formal governance arrangements
- Resource flows and incentives
- Operating logics that can be examined, adjusted, or redesigned

Because of these features, systems can often be mapped, stewarded, funded, and evaluated – even if imperfectly. Much of what is commonly described as "systems change" operates at this level.

Society, by contrast, refers to the broader cultural, political, and moral context within which multiple systems operate simultaneously. Societies are shaped by shared norms, values, identities, narratives, power relations, and assumptions about legitimacy and authority.

For example:

- A workforce system reflects societal beliefs about work, contribution, dignity, and responsibility
- A health system reflects societal assumptions about care, inequality, and collective obligation
- An education system reflects beliefs about merit, intelligence, opportunity, and social mobility



Unlike systems, societies are not governed or managed through formal structures alone. They have no clear boundaries, no single decision-making authority, and no agreed-upon performance indicators. Societal change therefore operates through culture, politics, identity, and power rather than through coordination or management.

Distinguishing between systems and societies matters because the strategies, time horizons, sources of authority, and signals of progress differ substantially depending on which unit of analysis is in focus.

3.2 IMPROVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION: TWO UNITS OF CHANGE

A second source of confusion concerns the degree or depth of change being pursued. This primer distinguishes between **improvement** and **transformation** as two broad orientations to change.

Improvement refers to efforts aimed at making an existing system or social arrangement work better. The underlying purposes, assumptions, and sources of legitimacy are largely taken as given. Problems are understood as arising from misalignment, inefficiency, insufficient capacity, or poor coordination.

Improvement-oriented change typically seeks to:

- Enhance performance, efficiency, equity, or reach
- Reduce gaps, bottlenecks, or unintended consequences
- Strengthen alignment between goals, practices, and outcomes

This form of change is usually planned, iterative, and cumulative. Progress is expected to be visible within relatively bounded time horizons and assessed using agreed indicators of success.

Transformation, by contrast, involves questioning and reworking the underlying logics, purposes, and assumptions that shape how systems or societies function. From this perspective, persistent problems are not primarily the result of poor execution, but of deeper paradigms that have become misaligned with current realities or values.

Transformation-oriented change typically involves:

- Challenging dominant narratives and problem framings
- Shifting power, voice, and legitimacy
- Reconfiguring identities, roles, and relationships
- Creating space for fundamentally different ways of organizing

Transformational change is nonlinear, contested, and difficult to control. Progress is uneven, often indirect, and frequently recognized only in retrospect.

4. FOUR ORIENTATIONS TO CHANGE

Taken together, these two distinctions – **units of analysis** (systems vs. societies) and **unit of change** (improvement vs. transformation) – form a simple 2 × 2 framework.

	IMPROVE	TRANSFORM
SYSTEMS	Improving how an existing system functions	Reorienting or redesigning the underlying logic of a system
SOCIETIES	Incrementally shifting norms, policies, or institutions	Deeply reconfiguring cultural, political, and moral values across multiple systems

Table 1: Four Orientations to Change

Each quadrant reflects a distinct orientation to changemaking, each with a different set of strategies and expectations about pace, control, and evidence.

In practice, real-world initiatives may touch more than one quadrant at once. Even so, being explicit about where an effort is *primarily* oriented helps reduce strategic drift, align expectations, and support more meaningful learning and evaluation.

Each of the change orientations is explored below.

4.1 SYSTEMS CHANGE

Systems change starts from the diagnosis that a system is producing undesirable outcomes because key elements are misaligned, outdated, or insufficiently coordinated. The assumption is not that the system is fundamentally illegitimate, but that it can function better if its structures, rules, relationships, incentives, or resource flows are adjusted.

Typical systems change strategies include:

- Policy and regulatory reform
- Scaling or mainstreaming proven innovations
- Improving coordination across organizations or sectors
- Redesigning funding and incentive structures
- Strengthening institutional capacity and performance

These strategies are usually led by actors with formal authority and resources, such as governments, funders, intermediaries, and established institutions. While communities and service users may be pushing for – and influencing – such change, decision-making power generally remains with authorized actors inside the system.

The dynamics of systems change are largely planned and adaptive. Change often proceeds through pilots, learning cycles, refinement, and eventual institutionalization. Progress is expected to be cumulative rather than disruptive. While setbacks occur, the overall trajectory is assumed to be forward-moving.

Time horizons for systems change are typically medium-term, often aligned with strategy cycles, funding agreements, or policy windows. Results are expected to become visible within a few years, even if full maturation takes longer.

Signs of progress in systems change efforts include:

- Improved efficiency, effectiveness, equity, or reach
- Better alignment between stated goals and observed outcomes
- Reduced duplication, gaps, or bottlenecks
- Clear performance improvements against agreed indicators

Evaluation at this level focuses on contribution and performance. The core questions tend to be: Is the system working better? Are outcomes improving? What adjustments are needed to accelerate progress?

	ENERGY	HEALTH	WORKFORCE
DIAGNOSIS	Energy systems produce high emissions and affordability challenges due to outdated infrastructure, policy misalignment, centralized ownership models, and slow diffusion of clean technologies.	Patients experience poor health outcomes due to fragmented delivery, weak prevention, and insufficient coordination across providers and sectors.	The labour market produces persistent gaps for certain populations due to fragmented services, misaligned incentives, skills mismatches, and uneven employer engagement.
ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	Renewable energy targets, grid modernization, carbon pricing, energy efficiency programs, and electric vehicle incentives.	Integrated care models, digital health records, team-based primary care, and prevention and early intervention programs.	Reformed workforce development, aligned training with employer demand, strengthened coordination among service providers, and adjusted incentives to increase inclusive hiring and retention.
TYPICAL PROGRESS	Reduced emissions, increased renewable capacity, improved energy efficiency, and lower system costs over time.	Improved access, better care coordination, reduced hospitalizations, and improved population health indicators.	Higher employment rates, better job matching, improved retention, and reduced gaps for priority populations.

Table 2: Examples of Systems Change

4.2 SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

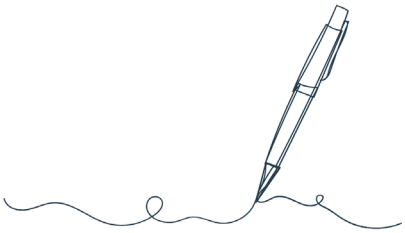
Those who seek to transform systems have concluded that whatever problematic situations and outcomes persist in a current system are not primarily problems of misalignment or inefficiency. Instead, they feel that a system's underlying logic, purpose, or organizing assumptions are themselves producing harm, exclusion, or unintended consequences.

From this perspective, improving performance within existing structures is insufficient. The system may be functioning exactly as designed, yet it is delivering outcomes that are no longer acceptable or legitimate. Transformation therefore requires us to question what the system is for, who it serves, and whose knowledge and power shape its operation.

Transformational strategies differ in both intent and design. They often include:

- Challenging dominant assumptions, narratives, and problem framings
- Building alternative models, practices, or institutions alongside the existing system
- Shifting power, voice, and authority toward actors historically marginalized by the system
- Supporting experimentation that prioritizes coherence and integrity over scale

These efforts are frequently led or catalyzed by actors outside the system's traditional centres of authority, including communities, social movements, practitioners, and boundary-spanners. Established institutions may resist, adapt, or eventually follow.



The dynamics of systems transformation are nonlinear and contested. Old and new arrangements often coexist for extended periods. Progress is uneven. Conflict, failure, and reversal are common. Transformation rarely follows a clean sequence from pilot to scale.

The time horizons for systems transformation are longer than for systems change. Meaningful transformation often unfolds over decades, not strategy cycles. Early efforts may appear marginal or fragile, yet they still play an important role in shaping future possibilities.

Signs of progress in systems transformation are more qualitative and interpretive. They include:

- Shifts in narratives about what is possible or legitimate
- New roles, identities, and relationships among system actors
- Emergence of new institutional forms or governance arrangements
- Changes in lived experience, even if system-wide indicators lag

Evaluation at this level emphasizes sense-making and judgement rather than measurement alone. Key questions include: What assumptions are being disrupted? What new possibilities are emerging? Who is gaining or losing power?

	ENERGY SYSTEMS	HEALTH SYSTEMS	WORKFORCE SYSTEMS
DIAGNOSIS	The energy system is driving ecological harm and inequity because it is organized around extractive growth, centralized control, and market logics that prioritize supply expansion over sufficiency and shared benefit.	The health system is producing poor and unequal outcomes because its underlying logic treats health as something delivered by institutions rather than produced by social, cultural, and environmental conditions.	The employment system generates insecurity and exclusion because it equates dignity, contribution, and social participation primarily with waged work, marginalizing care, community, and non-market contributions.
ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	Develop community and Indigenous-owned energy systems; reframe energy as a public good or commons; prioritize demand reduction and sufficiency; and build parallel governance and ownership models alongside existing markets.	Shift authority toward communities and lived experience; build place-based and community-led health models; address social determinants as core drivers; and challenge professional and institutional dominance in defining health.	Experiment with basic income and income security models; invest in care and community economies; redefine work and contribution; and support alternative economic arrangements that sit outside traditional labour markets.
TYPICAL PROGRESS	Power and ownership shift toward communities; energy-use patterns change; legitimacy of extractive and growth-driven models erodes; and alternative energy arrangements become socially and politically credible.	Health is increasingly understood and governed as a collective and contextual outcome; trust and agency increase at the community level; and new institutional forms emerge that sit alongside or reshape formal health systems.	Security and dignity become less dependent on labour market attachment; diverse forms of contribution gain recognition; and new norms and institutions emerge around income, care, and social participation.

Table 3: Systems Transformation Orientation to Change

4.3 SOCIETAL IMPROVEMENT

Societal change at the level of improvement focuses on strengthening, renewing, or rebalancing a society within an existing dominant paradigm. Those seeking this level of change do not disagree with the core assumptions about legitimacy, authority, identity, and social order of existing society. Instead, they perceive societal challenges as the result of institutional drift, policy failure, or norms that have not kept pace with changing social, economic, or environmental conditions.

The guiding question is: *How can this society function better, more fairly, or more sustainably without redefining what it fundamentally is?*

Let's use the example of Canada, where I live. Here, the dominant societal paradigm can be broadly described as liberal democratic governance combined with a mixed market economy and increasingly diverse demographic and cultural make-up. This paradigm assumes democratic legitimacy, pluralism, individual rights, market coordination tempered by public regulation, and a role for the state in providing public goods and social protection.

From a societal improvement perspective, this paradigm is not rejected. Instead, it is treated as capable of adaptation and renewal. Improvement-oriented change focuses on addressing shortcomings that have emerged over time, such as rising inequality, declining trust in institutions, gaps in inclusion, or environmental degradation.

Illustrative forms of societal improvement within this paradigm include:

- Institutional renewal: strengthening democratic accountability, reducing corruption, and modernizing public governance
- Rights expansion and inclusion: extending legal and social protections to groups historically excluded from full participation
- Economic rebalancing: adjusting market rules, social protections, and taxation to reduce precarity and inequality
- Environmental protection: strengthening regulations, incentives, and norms to reduce ecological harm while remaining within a market-based economic framework

	AN AGING SOCIETY	DEMOGRAPHIC GOVERNANCE	CULTURAL AND RACIAL DIVERSITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE
DIAGNOSIS	Demographic aging is increasing the proportion of older adults – straining institutions originally designed around shorter life expectancy and full-time employment – and reshaping intergenerational relationships, care needs, labour markets, and public finances.	Declining trust, participation, and legitimacy reflect institutional drift, polarization, and democratic practices that have not kept pace with social and technological change.	Increasing cultural and racial diversity is outpacing the informal norms, workplace practices, and service models that shape everyday life – creating friction, exclusion, and misalignment in ordinary social settings.
ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	Pension and retirement system adjustments; age-friendly community design; flexible work and phased retirement; expanded home and community-based care; and intergenerational policy and planning.	Electoral reform; transparency and accountability measures; civic education; participatory governance mechanisms; and modernization of public institutions.	Recognition of diverse holidays and observances; workplace accommodation for clothing and religious practice; culturally responsive food systems (e.g., food banks, schools, hospitals); and support for diverse small businesses and community spaces.
TYPICAL PROGRESS	Greater social inclusion of older adults; improved care and quality of life; more sustainable public systems; and healthier intergenerational relationships.	Higher participation and trust; improved accountability; reduced corruption; and renewed confidence in democratic institutions.	Increased normalization of diversity in everyday settings; reduced friction and exclusion; and broader social comfort with pluralism in daily work, service, and community life.

Table 4: Examples of Societal Improvement

Change at this level is political and contested, but it is generally bounded by shared assumptions about the legitimacy of democratic institutions, pluralism, and the mixed economy. Disagreements focus on degree, priority, and design of institutional arrangements rather than on the fundamental nature of society itself.

Progress in societal improvement is reflected in:

- Renewed institutional legitimacy and public trust
- Expanded inclusion and protection without destabilizing core identities
- Incremental norm shifts aligned with widely shared civic values
- Greater coherence between societal values and observed outcomes

This gradualist orientation contrasts with societal transformation, which does not seek to repair or rebalance the dominant paradigm, but to challenge and replace it altogether.

4.4 SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

Societal transformation operates at a fundamentally deeper level than societal improvement. Rather than seeking to strengthen or rebalance a society within an existing paradigm, it involves contesting, destabilizing, or replacing the dominant assumptions that underpin that society. Core ideas about identity, authority, morality, legitimacy, and social order are no longer treated as settled, but as historically contingent and open to challenge.

The central question shifts accordingly: what kind of society should exist—and who has the authority to decide?

Societal transformation typically emerges when large groups conclude that existing arrangements are not merely underperforming, but structurally unjust, exclusionary, or morally illegitimate. In these contexts, incremental reform is often judged insufficient, ineffective, or even complicit in sustaining harm. As a result, transformation-oriented efforts seek change at the level of cultural meaning, political authority, and institutional foundations rather than programmatic adjustment alone.

Transformation at the societal level is driven less by formal reform processes and more by a combination of movement-building and system-level disruption – including narrative and moral reframing; identity-based mobilization; cultural struggle over symbols, language, and legitimacy; strategic use of crises or punctuating events; and the distribution, disruption, capture, and even replacement of institutions.

These strategies exist along a continuum that ranges from evolutionary to revolutionary approaches. At one end are efforts that gradually reshape norms, values, and institutions through long-term cultural change and incremental realignment of power. At the other end are more abrupt ruptures that seek rapid departure from existing arrangements, often triggered by crisis, mass mobilization of people and networks, or the collapse of institutional legitimacy. Most real-world transformation efforts combine elements of both, shifting position on this continuum as conditions change.

The 20th century offers a lot of examples of this continuum in action.

EXAMPLE	PREDOMINANT MODE	ILLUSTRATIVE FEATURES
Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)	Rapid / Revolutionary	Sudden collapse of political legitimacy following long-term stagnation, civic resistance, and geopolitical pressure
U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s–1960s)	Evolutionary with punctuating moments	Sustained mobilization, legal challenges, cultural reframing, and episodic confrontation reshaping law and social norms
Feminist movements (20th century)	Primarily evolutionary	Long-term redefinition of gender roles, rights, and social expectations across culture, law, and institutions
Environmental movement	Evolutionary	Gradual reframing of human-nature relationships, leading to new policies, norms, and institutions over decades
Collapse of apartheid in South Africa	Mixed	Prolonged resistance and negotiation followed by rapid political transition and institutional reconfiguration

Table 5: Examples of Societal Transformation

The first quarter of the 21st century is thick with transformation activity. The following table summarizes three of the more powerful movements for change that are currently active in North America that aim to rework the still-dominant liberal democratic paradigm on this continent.

	ECO-CENTRIC / DEGROWTH	CRITICAL / POST-MODERN	POPULIST NATIONALIST
CORE DIAGNOSIS	Growth-oriented, human-dominant paradigms are ecologically unsustainable and ethically misaligned	Existing institutions reproduce inequality by privileging dominant identities, categories, and histories	Liberal pluralism and institutional neutrality undermine moral order, cohesion, and national identity
ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	Reframing prosperity around sufficiency; challenging growth imperatives; and advancing ecological limits and relational ethics	Redefining justice and legitimacy around lived experience and historical harm and challenging claims of neutrality	Reasserting cultural, religious, or national foundations of authority and restructuring institutions accordingly
TYPICAL SIGNALS OF CHANGE	Shifts in language about growth and well-being; policy experimentation; and new norms around consumption and care	Changes in discourse, representation, and institutional practices and heightened contestation over norms and authority	Rapid policy shifts; institutional capture; and redefinition of legitimacy, belonging, and authority

Table 6: Examples of Societal Transformation

As of the time of writing this primer, the populist-nationalist transformation movement is ascendant in the United States. Following the election of a transformation-oriented regime – an instance of systems-level change – United States leadership is now actively reworking elements of the post-Second World War international order related to security, trade, and multilateral cooperation, while also challenging long-standing institutional practices associated with pluralism, separation of powers, and liberal neutrality in the country itself. Participants of the other movements are resisting and offering alternatives and the short- to long-term outcomes are very difficult to predict.

Clashes among competing societal transformation projects are inevitable, messy, and high stakes. They create friction, confusion, and anxiety because very different ideas about what is right, fair, or legitimate are being pushed at the same time, creating polarization. This is made harder by the loss of familiar rules and institutions, uncertainty about the future, and the sense that deeply held values and identities are under threat. In these conditions, disagreement can turn into blaming, sidelining, exclusion, and at times, the use of power to suppress or oppress others.

Getting a handle on progress in societal transformation efforts is inherently challenging. Such change rarely follows a linear path, and its significance is often clearer in hindsight than in real time. Signals of progress may include shifts in dominant narratives, reconfiguration of collective identity and belonging, realignment of institutions across multiple systems, and periods of heightened polarization that precede new forms of social settlement. Rather than producing definitive verdicts of success or failure, the task is to understand how societal patterns, power relations, and future possibilities are being reshaped – and what those shifts mean for different groups over time.

5. TACTICS CONFUSING PURPOSE & STRATEGY

Many change efforts use similar tactics – e.g., experimental initiatives, networks, policy engagement, and public education – while pursuing different purposes. When tactics are mistaken for purpose, strategies drift, evaluation misfires, and expectations become misaligned.

Consider a pilot project in the domain of early childhood development and learning. Pilot projects are an experimental tactic that can serve very different purposes across systems change, systems transformation, and societal transformation.

	DESCRIPTION	KEY ELEMENTS	SUCCESS
IMPROVING THE SYSTEM	The U.S. Head Start program began in 1965 as a large-scale pilot aimed at improving school readiness for children from low-income families and was rapidly expanded and institutionalized through the late 1960s and 1970s	In this case, the pilot was designed to fit within existing education and social service systems, with standardized components that could be replicated nationally	Progress was assessed through participation, school readiness outcomes, and the ability to scale the program through federal funding and policy
TRANSFORMING THE SYSTEM	A fictional community-led early learning pilot replaces standardized readiness benchmarks with play-based, culturally grounded learning and shared authority between educators and families	Here, the pilot is intentionally designed to challenge prevailing assumptions about learning, expertise, and success in early childhood education	The pilot's value lies less in replication and more in its influence on professional practice, training models, and policy conversations, even if it remains locally rooted
CHANGING/ TRANSFORMING THE SOCIETY	A fictional network of cooperative, community-run early childhood centres become a visible reference point in public debates about care, gender roles, and collective responsibility for children	The pilot functions as a cultural signal that celebrates commitment to a new way of perceiving the early years, rather than a program to be adopted at scale	The pilot's influence is seen in shifts in public language, legitimacy, and expectations about who is responsible for care and early learning, often well before formal policy change occurs

Table 7: Different Ways to Approach Change in Early Childhood Development Domain

Being clear about a group's purpose matters. When left implicit, their efforts are likely to be misinterpreted, overburdened, or dismissed. When they are made explicit, the same tactic can be used more intentionally and more fairly in service of the kind of change it is actually meant to advance.

6. CHANGE: GOOD, BAD OR UNCERTAIN

A final distinction is worth making explicit: change is not inherently good or bad. Whether a particular change is judged as desirable, harmful, or acceptable depends heavily on *who is doing the judging*, *from what position*, and *with what values and interests at stake*.

As a general pattern:

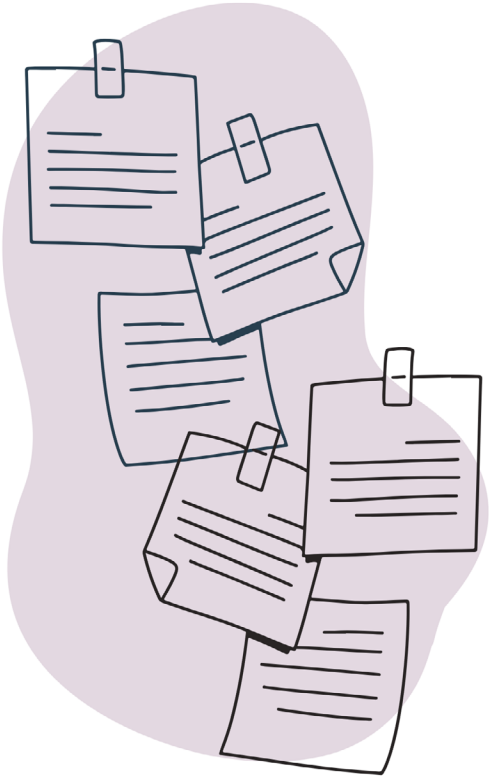
- Those who benefit from current systems tend to prefer stability and incremental change
- Those who pay a disproportionate price under existing arrangements tend to seek deeper or faster change
- Most people experience ambivalence, recognizing both the necessity of change and the real costs, risks, and uncertainty associated with transition

This is especially true in contexts involving large-scale economic and societal transitions, where benefits and burdens are unevenly distributed over time and across groups.

Take, for example, the debates about reducing reliance on fossil fuel production – particularly oil sands development – in Alberta, the Canadian Province in which I live.

From one perspective, accelerating the transition away from fossil fuels is judged positively. It is seen as necessary to address climate change, reduce ecological harm, and align energy systems with long-term global trends. From this vantage point, delaying transition increases future risk and locks in unsustainable pathways.

From another perspective, the same transition is judged far more ambivalently or negatively. Alberta's energy sector has provided livelihoods, public revenues, and a sense of identity for decades. Rapid change threatens jobs, communities, and regional economic stability. For those directly employed in or dependent on the sector, transition can feel less like progress and more like loss.



A third perspective acknowledges both realities. It recognizes the necessity of transition while emphasizing the social, economic, and psychological costs involved. From this view, the central concern is not whether change should happen, but how, how fast, and who bears the risks during the transition.

These differences in judgement are not a problem to be resolved, they are an unavoidable feature of large-scale change. In contexts of systems change and societal transformation, disagreement often reflects real differences in experience, exposure to risk, values, and expectations about the future.

As a result, efforts to plan, implement, fund, evaluate, or communicate change must take these divergent perspectives seriously. Strategies that appear sensible or necessary from one vantage point may be experienced as threatening, premature, or unjust from another. Ignoring these differences can undermine legitimacy, trust, and durability– even when the direction of change is widely acknowledged as necessary.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this primer is to offer sharper distinctions between commonly used terms related to change in systems and societies, and to show how different orientations to change lead to substantive differences in the day-to-day work of changemaking.

In practice, these distinctions have direct and practical implications for several core functions or roles in changemaking.

For strategy:

- What are we trying to change (e.g., a system or a society) and what degree (e.g., improve or transform)?
- Are we assuming that change must scale, stabilize, or converge quickly, and if so, why?
- Do our chosen strategies fit the depth of change we believe is needed, or are we forcing familiar tools onto unfamiliar problems?

For evaluation:

- What kind of change is being assessed (improvement or transformation, system or society)?
- Whose definitions of success and failure are being applied?
- Who benefits, who bears costs, and over what time horizon?
- How is the transition experienced by different groups?
- Which claims can be tested with evidence, and which require judgement?
- How can evaluation support shared sense-making rather than false certainty?

For communication:

- Are we being clear and honest about our intent, contribution, and limits?
- Does our language reflect uncertainty, emergence, and contestation where appropriate?
- Are we setting realistic expectations about what success can look like in the near and longer term?

For funding and philanthropy:

- Do our funding structures align with the time horizons and uncertainty of the change we hope to support?
- Are we prepared to invest in work whose influence may be indirect, delayed, or difficult to attribute?
- Are we supporting relationships, infrastructure, and learning, or only discrete initiatives?

This primer offers one way to define and – and make distinctions between – different types of changes. There are other legitimate ways of doing this. It does not matter which definitions and taxonomy we adopt, but that we make the types of distinctions explicit. Without them, strategies blur, evaluation becomes misaligned, communication overreaches, and resources are deployed in ways that undermine their own aims.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

These resources reflect diverse intellectual traditions relevant to systems change, societal improvement, and societal transformation. They are intended as entry points rather than an exhaustive review.

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