



REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

# Driving Systems Change in Today's Context

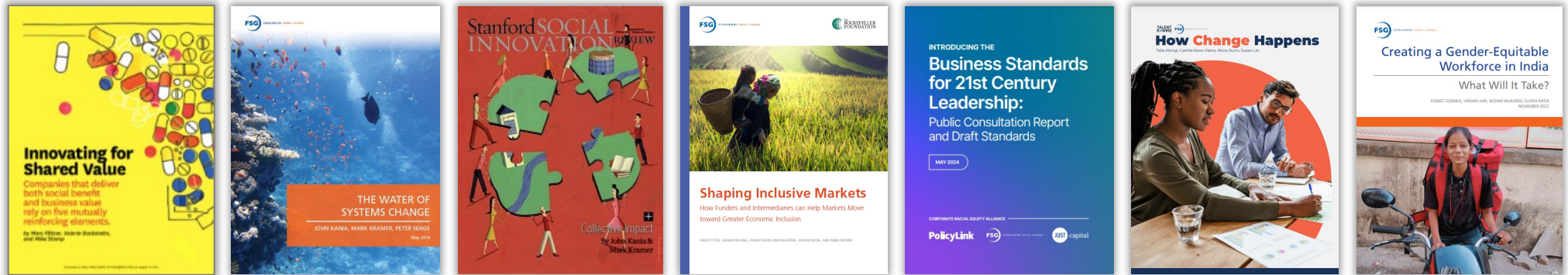
ECONOMIC MOBILITY ACTION NETWORK | ADVANCED COHORT

MARCH 19, 2025

[FSG.ORG](https://fsg.org)

# About us

FSG is a global social impact firm seeking to advance **economic mobility**, **health equity**, and **climate justice**. We work across sectors and across issues, guiding leaders to unlock transformation and create a more equitable world.



Our ideas and insights – **shared value**, **collective impact**, **equitable systems change**, and **inclusive markets** – continue to support changemakers across the globe.

# Overview of today's interactive session

## Objectives

- Build **shared understanding of systems change** and the systemic conditions often holding problems in place
- Discuss ways to approach your work in **today's context of change and uncertainty**
- **Learn from each other** about how people are navigating today's moment

## Session Flow

1	Introduction to Systems Change	15 min
2	Small Group Reflection & Share Out	20 min
3	Approaching Systems Change in Today's Context	10 min
4	Small Group Reflection & Share Out	20 min
5	Group Discussion & Close	25 min

# What is a system?

A system is a set of **interconnected, interdependent and interacting parts** that form a complex, unified whole

## Characteristics of a System

- History dependent
- Self-organizing
- Non-linear and counter-intuitive (size of outcome does not correlate with size of input)
- Players co-evolve with others in the system
- Entire system constantly *emerging* from a dense pattern of interactions

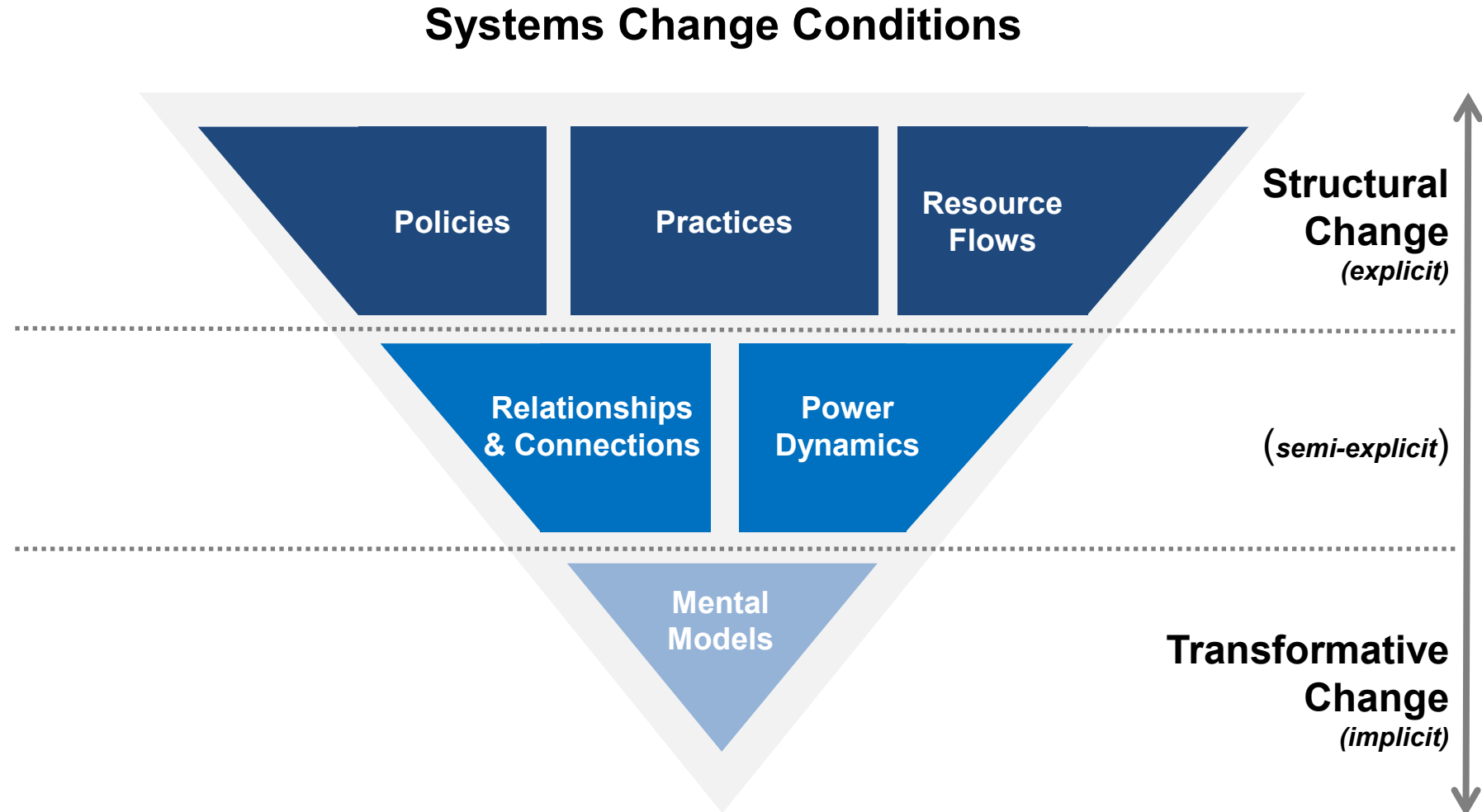


# Systems *Thinking* vs Systems *Change*

**Systems Thinking:** Systems thinking is defined as the ability to see how organizational systems, sub-systems, and their parts interact with and influence each other; and how these systems create and contribute to specific problems or opportunities.

**Systems Change:** “Shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place.” - Social Innovation Generation in Canada

To drive systems change, we must both **understand the system** and the **systemic conditions** holding problems in place.



These conditions represent **leverage points** in the system, some of which are more explicit than others

**STRUCTURAL  
CHANGE**

*explicit*

**Policies**

Government rules, regulations and priorities that guide its and others' actions

**Practices**

Organizational and practitioner activities that reflect their values and priorities

**Resource Flows**

How money, people, knowledge, and information are allocated and distributed

**RELATIONAL  
CHANGE**

*semi-explicit*

**Relationships & Connections**

Quality of connections and communication occurring between system players

**Power Dynamics**

Which individuals and organizations hold decision-making power, authority, influence

**TRANSFORMATIVE  
CHANGE**

*implicit*

**Mental Models**

Deeply held beliefs and assumptions that influence one's actions

most explicit

most implicit



# Common pitfalls associated with applying the systems change triangle

## You Don't Need to Do It All

- It is **unlikely** that any **one actor** can meaningfully impact all six conditions. The triangle can help folks to **understand persisting gaps**, better positioning them to advance **new targeted action** and/or strengthen the impact of existing activities.

## Don't Demonize the Top Row

- Efforts focused on **policies, practices, and resource flows** (the top row) help to meet **immediate needs** in a community and are incredibly important to continue supporting on the path to systems change.

## Remember that Systems Change Is Nonlinear

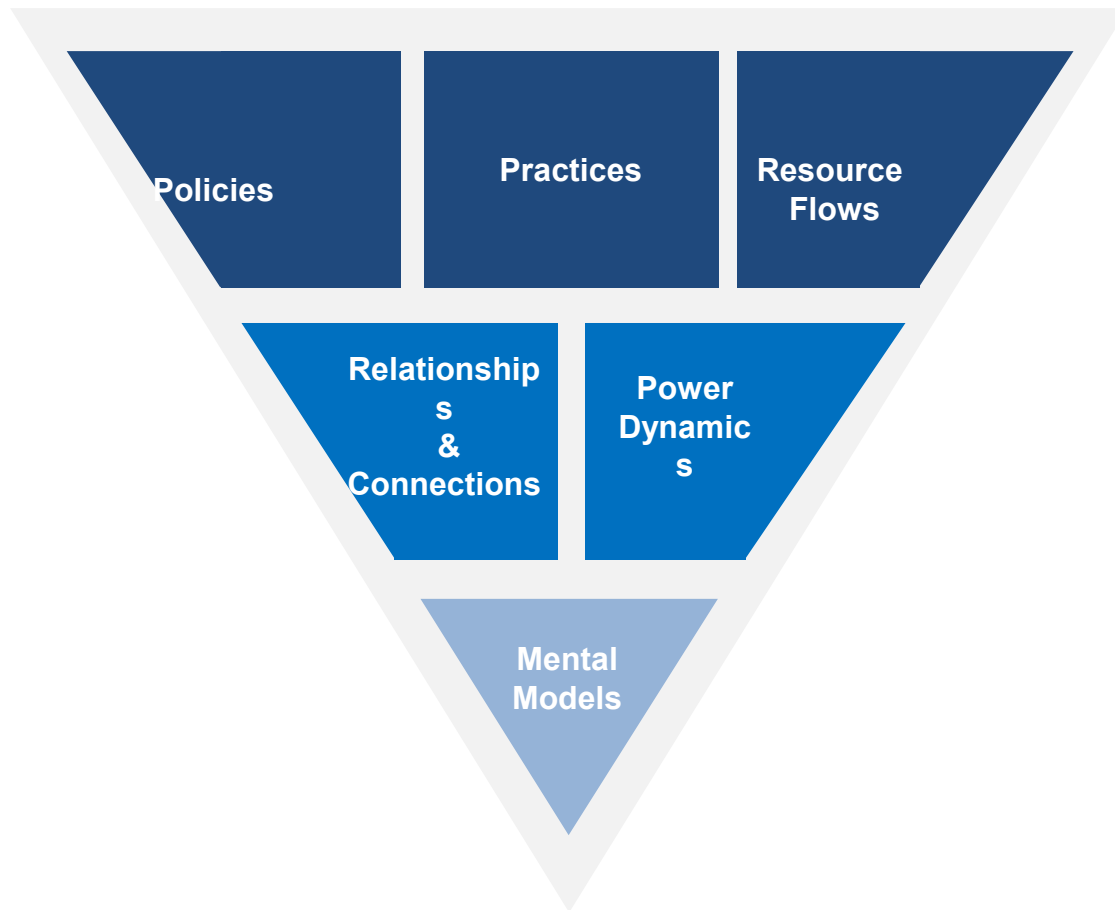
- Change does **not unfold linearly**. The prioritization of efforts to shift systemic conditions should be informed by an **external** (opportunities/needs) and **internal assessment** (assets/capabilities) of the current reality.

## Always Look Around the Table

- It is critically important to have a **diverse group** of stakeholders involved, especially given that **personal dimensions** (e.g., positional authority, lived experience) impact one's ability to see certain aspects of the system.

# Applying systems change conditions to your work

## Systems Change Conditions



5 MIN

## REFLECT

Using the handout provided, reflect on the following questions:

As we consider the **economic mobility work** that we are supporting and engaging in:

1. Where do we see our work **aligning** with these conditions of systems change?
2. Which of the six areas do we think we are **most effectively** supporting / engaging?
3. In which of the six areas are we experiencing the greatest **challenge** or barriers?
4. Where might we consider investing or engaging **more deeply**?



15 MIN

## TABLE DISCUSSION

# Group Discussion



# Pursuing systems change in today's shifting context

## *A Framework for Navigating Rapid Change and Uncertainty*



# Illustrative activities for each response



## Protect

- Provide legal, HR, security, and other **non-programmatic support** to existing grantee partners
- Loosen grant requirements and **streamline communications** with grantees and partners
- Maintain **set-aside** for rapid response and emergency funds
- Increase **investment**



## Resist

- Support **pro-democracy**, civil rights organizations, coalitions, and **community organizing** efforts
- Promote **strategic outreach**, public engagement, and **independent media** and fact-checking
- Invest in proactive **strategic litigation efforts**
- Develop or leverage relationships with **elected officials** and corporate leaders



## Build

- Support leadership development, fellowships, and other long-term **power-building activities**
- Invest in **civic and collaborative infrastructure** spaces
- Support long-term **policy development**
- Fund nonprofit **infrastructure and capacity** through multi-year and capacity-building grants



## Bridge

- Strengthen relationships with issue-adjacent funders and coalitions seeking **shared objectives**
- Convene or support **cross-sector partnerships**
- Fund **dialogue** and **relationship-building initiatives** across racial, political, religious, and/or socioeconomic divides
- Invest in **media initiatives** and **narrative work** that uplifts diverse voices to shift public perceptions

# Considerations for **how you work** in this moment



## Moving Forward During Uncertainty

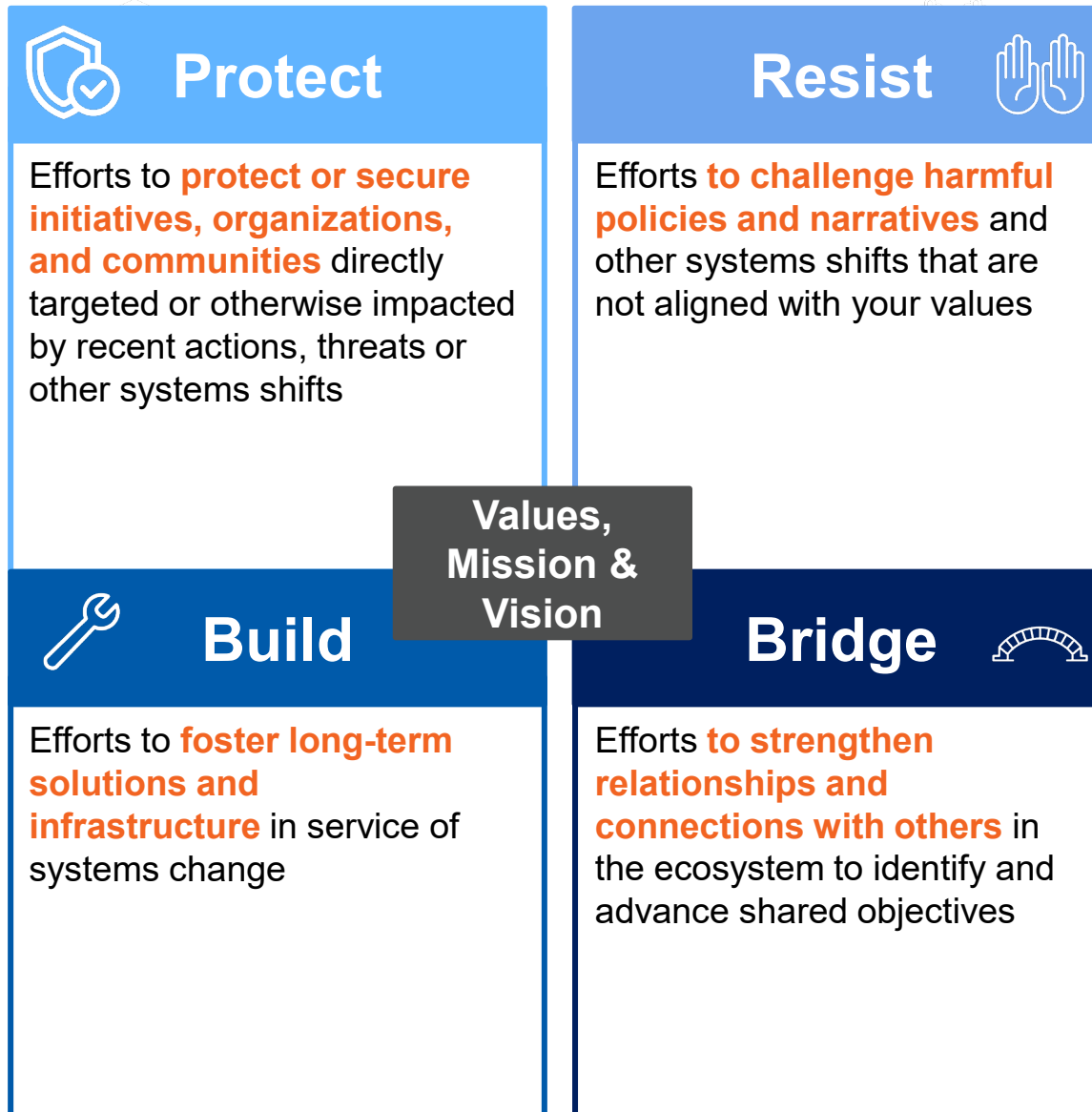
- **Listen** to grantees and impacted communities
- Commit to **ongoing and collaborative learning** with staff, partners, grantees, and residents
- **Prepare**, but don't overreach
- **Care** for staff and partners
- **Communicate**, communicate, communicate!



## Long Term Considerations

- Institutionalize **new ways of working** (e.g., multi-year support, institutionalizing some of the immediate shifts)
- Consider **resilience** of the ecosystem
- **Respond consistent** with your values
- **Build and bridge** now as preparation for the future

# Adapting your strategy to today's context



5 MIN

## REFLECT

In our economic mobility work:

1. Where are we **leaning in right now** in immediate response?
2. Where are we investing and working on **longer term efforts**?
3. What are our **local peers** doing, and where does their work fit?
4. What **might we do differently** when considering this framing?



15 MIN

## TABLE DISCUSSION

## & CHARTING

1. Share **reflections** at your table.
2. Using post its, **capture your work** along these 4 categories; we will place post its on the wall during the break at the end of this discussion.

# Group Discussion





# FSG is excited to offer additional **customized technical assistance** (TA) for interested EMAN teams

## *Illustrative TA Offerings:*

- Board, staff or partner learning sessions on key topics like **systems change** or **collective impact**
- Team working session to help craft or refine your **theory of change**
- 1:1 coaching related to **place-based collaboration** and **community engagement**
- Thought-partnership on **private sector engagement** in economic mobility efforts
- Other support related to **strategy, learning** and **evaluation**



# Let's stay connected!

## Stay Connected and Learn More



**John Harper**  
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### The Water of Systems Change



#### *White Paper*

Read more about FSG's actionable model for social sector institutions interested in creating systems change



#### *Action Learning Exercise*

Conduct this activity to explore how you and your organization can pursue large-scale change in a disciplined and holistic manner

### Systems Thinking Toolkit



Explore our toolkit for putting systems thinking into practice in your organization



### Collective Impact Forum

Connect with CIF for resources, learning events, and coaching that can help advance your collective impact work. Includes [Responding to Threats and Challenges Planning Tool](#) and other resources