Driving Systems Change in Today's Context
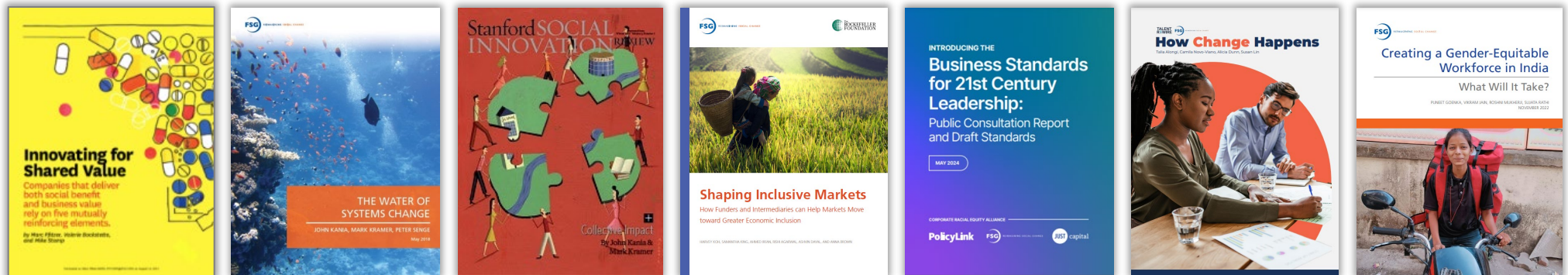
ECONOMIC MOBILITY ACTION NETWORK | INTERMEDIATE COHORT

MAY 13, 2025

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?

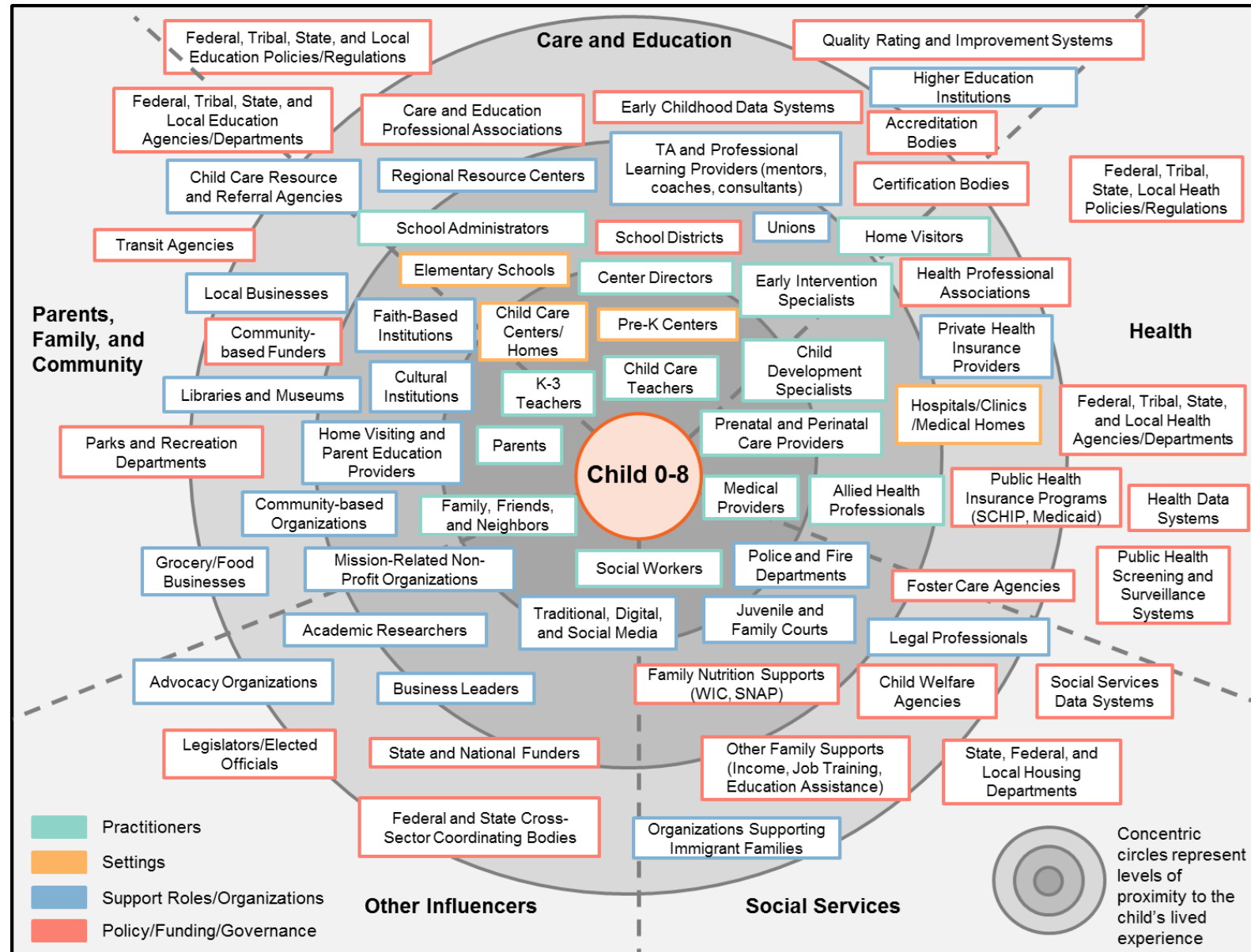*A system is a set of **interconnected, interdependent and interacting parts** that form a complex, unified whole*

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
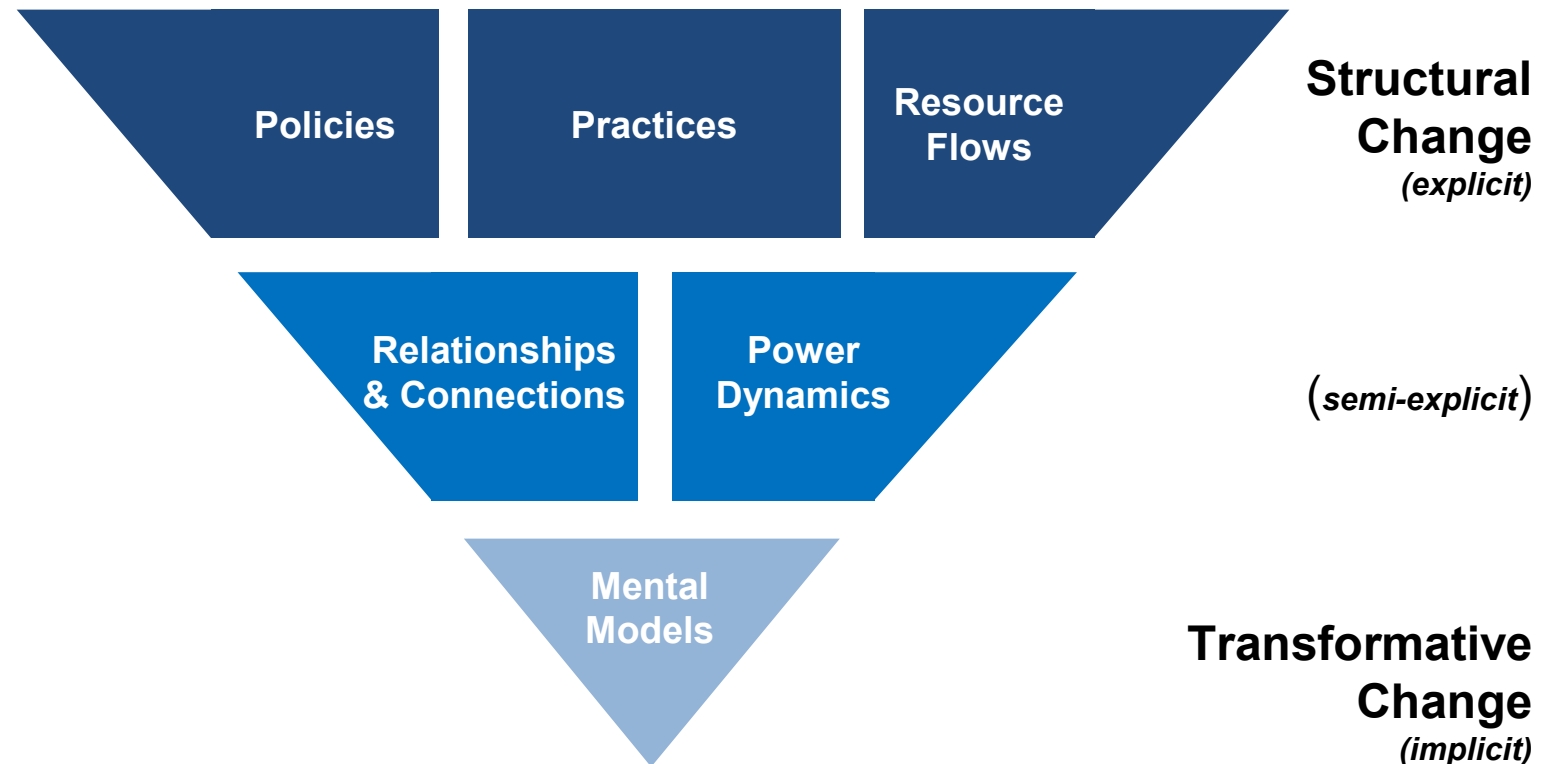
Illustrative Systems Map

Care and Education

- Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Education Policies/Regulations
- Quality Rating and Improvement Systems
- Higher Education Institutions
- Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Education Agencies/Departments
- Care and Education Professional Associations
- Early Childhood Data Systems
- Accreditation Bodies
- Federal, Tribal, State, Local Heath Policies/Regulations
- Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
- Regional Resource Centers
- TA and Professional Learning Providers (mentors, coaches, consultants)
- Certification Bodies
- Transit Agencies
- School Administrators
- School Districts
- Unions
- Home Visitors
- Health Professional Associations

Parents, Family, and Community

- Elementary Schools
- Center Directors
- Early Intervention Specialists
- Local Businesses
- Faith-Based Institutions
- Child Care Centers/ Homes
- Pre-K Centers
- Private Health Insurance Providers
- Community-based Funders
- **Health**
- Cultural Institutions
- Child Care Teachers
- Child Development Specialists
- Hospitals/Clinics /Medical Homes
- Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Health Agencies/Departments
- Libraries and Museums
- K-3 Teachers
- Parks and Recreation Departments
- Home Visiting and Parent Education Providers
- Parents
- Prenatal and Perinatal Care Providers
- **Child 0-8**
- Medical Providers
- Allied Health Professionals
- Public Health Insurance Programs (SCHIP, Medicaid)
- Health Data Systems
- Community-based Organizations
- Family, Friends, and Neighbors
- Grocery/Food Businesses
- Mission-Related Non-Profit Organizations
- Social Workers
- Police and Fire Departments
- Foster Care Agencies
- Public Health Screening and Surveillance Systems
- Academic Researchers
- Traditional, Digital, and Social Media
- Juvenile and Family Courts
- Legal Professionals
- Advocacy Organizations
- Business Leaders
- Family Nutrition Supports (WIC, SNAP)
- Child Welfare Agencies
- Social Services Data Systems
- Legislators/Elected Officials
- State and National Funders
- Other Family Supports (Income, Job Training, Education Assistance)
- State, Federal, and Local Housing Departments
- Federal and State Cross-Sector Coordinating Bodies
- Organizations Supporting Immigrant Families

Other Influencers   **Social Services**

Legend:
- Practitioners
- Settings
- Support Roles/Organizations
- Policy/Funding/Governance

Concentric circles represent levels of proximity to the child's lived experience

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.

Systems Change Conditions

Policies	Practices	Resource Flows

Structural Change
(explicit)

Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics

(*semi-explicit*)

Mental Models

Transformative Change
(implicit)

Source: Kania, J., Kramer, M., Senge, P. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. FSG.

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

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

explicit

RELATIONAL CHANGE

semi-explicit

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

implicit

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

Relationships & Connections
Quality of connections and communication occurring between system players

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

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

| Policies | Practices | Resource Flows |

Relationships & Connections

Power Dynamics

Mental Models
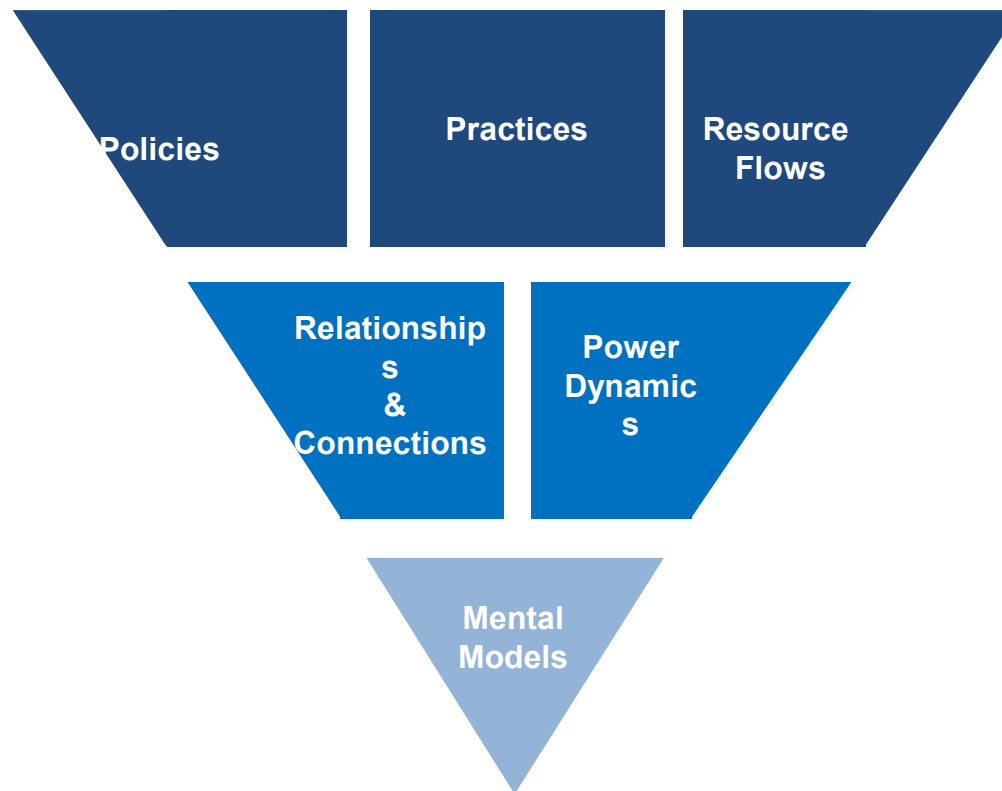
REFLECT

5 MIN

Using the handout provided, reflect on the following questions:

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

1. Which of the 6 areas are we **currently supporting**, and why?
2. Which of the 6 areas should we be **supporting more deeply**, and why?
3. What **challenges or barriers** have we experienced or anticipate experiencing in supporting systems change efforts?
4. What **might we do differently** when considering this framing?

TABLE DISCUSSION

15 MIN   Share **reflections** at your table.

Group Discussion

Pursuing systems change in today's shifting context

A Framework for Navigating Rapid Change and Uncertainty

Protect

Efforts to **protect or secure initiatives, organizations, and communities** directly targeted or otherwise impacted by recent actions, threats or other systems shifts

Resist

Efforts to **challenge harmful policies and narratives** and other systems shifts that are not aligned with your values

Vision, Mission & Values

Build

Efforts to **foster long-term solutions and infrastructure** in service of systems change

Bridge

Efforts **to strengthen relationships and connections with others** in the ecosystem to identify and advance shared objectives

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
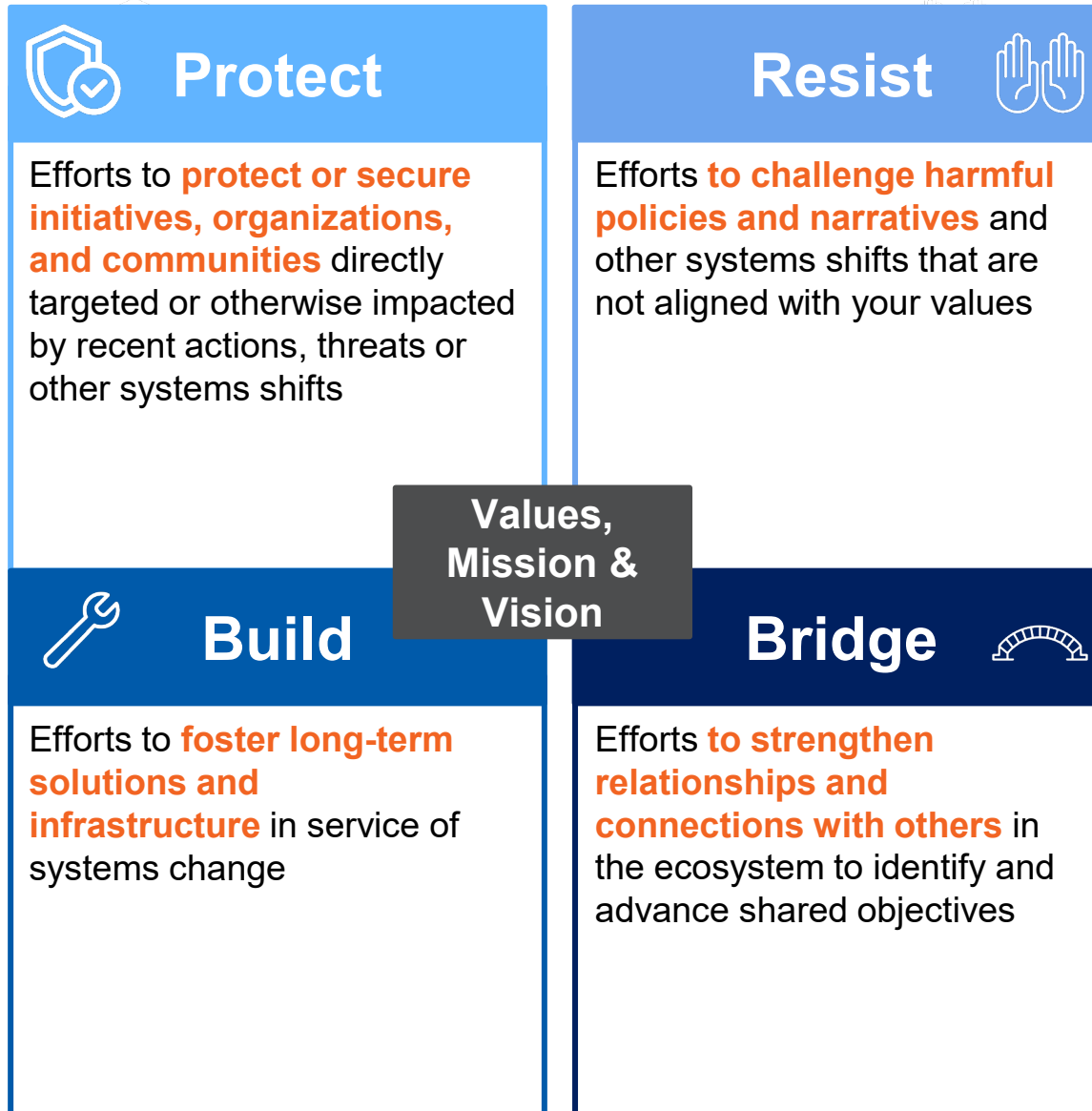
Moving Forward During Uncertainty

- **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

Protect

Efforts to **protect or secure initiatives, organizations, and communities** directly targeted or otherwise impacted by recent actions, threats or other systems shifts

Resist

Efforts **to challenge harmful policies and narratives** and other systems shifts that are not aligned with your values

Build

Efforts to **foster long-term solutions and infrastructure** in service of systems change

Bridge

Efforts **to strengthen relationships and connections with others** in the ecosystem to identify and advance shared objectives

Values, Mission & Vision

REFLECT

5 MIN

In our economic mobility work:

1. Which of the 4 responses are we **putting effort and resources into**, and why?

2. Which of the 4 responses should we be **putting more effort and resources into**, and why?

3. What **might we do differently** when considering this framing?

TABLE DISCUSSION

15 MIN

Share **reflections** at your table.

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!

John Harper
Chief Executive Officer
john.harper@fsg.org

Courtney W. Robertson
Director of Programs and Partnerships
Collective Impact Forum
courtney.robertson@fsg.org

Stay Connected and Learn More

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