

# DESIGNING A NEW INITIATIVE THAT SUPPORTS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

So, you're planning a new initiative, and want your initiative to support community-driven systems change? That is wonderful. It also may not be easy – especially if it's different from the way you've done things thus far.

Community-driven systems change will require a substantial shift in how you think about and understand issues, the systems and processes you establish and use, and the amount of thinking, work, and investment you will need to put in up front. However, a genuine community-driven system change approach is more likely to result in transformative grassroots impact that lasts over the long-term – which is the ultimate goal of any development effort.

Here are some guidelines and questions to help guide your thinking and planning.

## 1. TAKE A JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY APPROACH

Community-driven systems change is rooted in principles of justice and solidarity. What does a justice and solidarity approach look like, compared to a charity approach, in supporting people and communities to address the issue(s) at hand?



A justice approach to global development is about fairness, rights, and the equitable distribution of money, opportunities, and power among all members of society. With a justice approach, symptomatic and reactive fixes are inadequate – it is necessary to expose and redress that which is unfair and inequitable. Justice approaches often go hand in hand with a commitment of solidarity – the sense that we are all responsible to fight injustice towards ourselves and others.

Justice and solidarity mean that power is more equitably distributed. Redressing imbalances in power means shifting power towards those who are marginalized, harmed, and oppressed, and being guided by their experience, expertise, and leadership on addressing the issues that are harming them.

How have you taken a stance of justice and solidarity as you conceptualize and design a new initiative?

Taking a justice and solidarity approach to conceptualizing and designing a new initiative means –

- We deepen and nuance our understanding of the local and global systems (that we are all part of) that are reinforcing power and wealth imbalances, and resulting in a myriad of challenges.
- We work hand in hand with people and communities, with humility, flexibility, transparency, trust, and accountability, to disrupt, dismantle, and rebuild these systems, at the same time as engaging in immediate mutual aid and support.
- Issues are identified and prioritized by the people and communities themselves, as are strategies and actions to address them; agendas are not imposed externally in a top-down manner.
- The work is guided by the expertise and advice of the people and communities who are experiencing the issues themselves.

## 2. REFLECT ON HISTORIC AND CURRENT LOCAL AND GLOBAL DYNAMICS AND SYSTEMS

Community-driven systems change, embedded with principles of justice and solidarity, requires an understanding of the micro and macro systems shaping not just a specific issue, but even our own day-to-day realities and the ways in which we interact with and work with one another in international development.

Have you researched and reflected on how historic and current global and local dynamics such as colonization, capitalism, racism, globalization, and climate change affect you and your country, the people in the countries in which you are seeking to work, and the interactions and relationships between them?

Why is it important to reflect on systems? It's important because most issues that affect communities in significant ways have deep-rooted underlying causes, including the local and global systems and norms that perpetuate and reinforce certain power and resource imbalances. We are all part of these systems, and it is important to reflect on how we may be reinforcing or perpetuating these inequities and injustices even as we seek to help address them. Indeed, local and global experiences of colonization, slavery, capitalism, racism, white supremacy, Global North imperialism, globalization, and climate change affect and/or interact with –

- The historic and present-day circumstances that have led to the wealth and power held by people in the Global North;
- The role and power wielded by the Global North – especially white, wealthy people – in the philanthropic and development sectors;
- The instability and resource-scarceness experienced by many Global South countries, including the countries in which you are seeking to work;
- The historic relationships between your ancestors and the ancestors of those in the communities and countries in which you are seeking to work;
- The historic and current day relationships between the country/ies where you have citizenship and/or residency, and the country/ies in which you are seeking to work;
- Social and cultural norms around what is considered good and right;
- What kind of knowledge is considered valid, valuable, and universally applicable;
- And much, much more.

Learning from the work of others, and taking the time to think and reflect internally – as an individual and as an organization, is a critical step before designing and launching any new initiative.

### 3. CONSULT WITH COMMUNITY AND OTHER SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS TO DETERMINE THE FOCUS AND PARAMETERS OF THE INITIATIVE

Community-driven systems change means being guided by communities and other system stakeholders in the identification of, analysis of, and response to the issues that are affecting them.

What consultation and learning has informed your identification of the issue areas you are choosing to focus on? What consultation and learning has informed your definition of the parameters of your initiative? How, and how much, have you been guided and informed by consultations with local leaders, organizations, practitioners, activists, and community members?

Determining issue focus areas –

- How did you determine that this particular problem needed solving? Is this driven by personal passion, or by the priorities of the people and communities experiencing it? How relevant is your investment/ intervention in mitigating needs prioritized by the communities?
- What other problem(s) also need addressing in these countries? What led to your decision to invest in this particular problem? Why is this particular issue deemed a greater priority at this time?
- What are the risks and benefits in deciding to focus on this particular issue area? What other issues may be indirectly (and possibly adversely) affected by your decision to focus on this particular issue area?
- For all of the above, who has been involved in discussions and decision-making?

Defining parameters –

- How are you determining the parameters or outer limits of what you will and will not fund? Is this driven by personal preference or comfort, or in consultation with the community and system stakeholders who are being affected by the issues?
- Are your parameters too narrow or focused? Systems are complex and holistic, and affect outcomes in different direct and indirect ways. Community members will also likely have a range of priority

issues that need addressing along with the issues you have identified as important. This means that if your focus area and parameters are too narrow, grantees/implementers will not be able to mobilize true community-driven systems change.

- For all of the above, who has been involved in discussions and decision-making?

## 4. DEVELOP A GROUNDED AND SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE(S)

Community-driven systems change requires an appreciation of and nuanced understanding of how underlying systems, norms, and other root causes affect the manifestation of specific issues – centering the perspectives and analyses of the communities experiencing the issues.

How have you developed a grounded and systemic understanding of the issue(s)?

- In what ways have you sought to understand the underlying systems, norms, and other root causes affecting the issue(s)?
- Have you explored the ways in which local and global systems and norms may be directly or indirectly perpetuating imbalances or inequities that lead to the issue(s)?
- Have you read, listened to, and learned from the existing work of local leaders, scholars, practitioners, and activists?
- Have you read to, listened to, and learned from the existing work Global South leaders, scholars, practitioners, and activists?
- Have you consulted with community, national, and regional leaders, scholars, activists, and practitioners? What efforts have you made to build trust so that they can speak candidly? Also make sure to compensate them for their time and expertise.
- What data or evidence informed your understanding of the scope of the issue? Has your data or evidence come mostly from Global North-driven actors? What data or evidence have you gathered from Global South actors? What data or evidence have you gathered from the people and communities themselves experiencing the issue(s)?
- What is your understanding of these systems and underlying root causes? Have you tested and validated your understanding with the people and communities who are experiencing the issue(s) themselves?

## 5. SEEK CONSENT

In a justice and solidarity approach, one does not independently decide what other people need, and one does not independently decide that one has a right to intervene and a role to play in addressing other people's issues. It is critical to take a stance of humility and solidarity, and consult, learn, and seek informed consent from those we seek to serve and work with.

Have you sought and obtained informed consent from those you are seeking to work with?

- Have you 'applied' to work with potential grantee organizations, like potential grantees usually need to 'apply' to work with you? What information are you providing to potential grantees about your experience, organizational capacity, values, initiative scope and theory of change, budget, etc. that enables potential grantees to determine whether or not they trust you, feel aligned with your values, and wish to partner with you over a period of time? How are you making sure that potential grantees

have this information transparently before they decide to put in the work to apply to you for funding?

- Have you engaged with government officials to share your intentions, get feedback, and ask whether they consent to and welcome your initiative? Have you established how the proposed initiative fits into government policies, strategies, and programs?
- Have you spoken with the leaders, representatives, and gatekeepers of the communities to share your intentions, get feedback, and ask whether they consent to and welcome your initiative, and if it fits into their own community plans/ vision?
- How will you continue to consult with and be accountable to these stakeholders? How will you monitor for possible, unexpected, negative effects of your initiative? How will you respond to these especially in situations where it is uncomfortable to surface and discuss such issues?

## 6. DESIGN YOUR INITIATIVE FOR TRUE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Fundamentally, community-driven systems change requires a theory of change and approach that support community-determined priorities, community-driven action, systems work including advocacy and gradual normative change, and the fostering of a partnership of trust, transparency, and flexibility which creates space for mistakes, learning, and growth.

How are you designing the theory of change and approach of the initiative for true community-driven systems change?

- Have you consulted with community leaders and community-based organizations (CBOs) on the theory of change and approach for the initiative?
- Do your theory of change and strategy reflect a justice and solidarity approach?
- Are your theory of change and strategy flexible and broad enough to enable true community-driven systems change?
- Do your theory of change and strategy support, build on, and catalyze existing local leadership, collaboration, and initiatives?
- Have you developed an understanding of current government and civil society priorities, policies, and actions relating to the issue(s) – at local and national levels? This is essential for a systems approach. Who are the others and what are they doing? How can your initiative support/ complement existing efforts?
- Does your approach include ongoing and deliberate mechanisms for shared learning, reflection, and adaptation?
- Does the scope and length of your initiative provide appropriate resourcing and support for true community-driven systems change? A good starting point would be to plan for 5-7 years of partnership, funding, and other support.
- How are you planning the funding cycle and approach, so that the end of funding is not a major disruption to the CBO and the community?
- How are you ensuring that CBOs and other community systems are stronger, more resilient, more connected, and more sustainable by the end of the initiative?
- How will you discuss all of the above with CBO leaders and integrate their perspective – both at the start and throughout the initiative?

It is also critical to remember that community-driven systems change is about long-term and sustained change, not rapid results that may later fade. It is not only unrealistic but also potentially harmful to expect significant shifts within a short period of time. Focus on longer-term shifts in systems, norms, and other root causes – and indicators of progress towards these longer-term outcomes, rather than immediate results.

## 7. MITIGATE BARRIERS AND REDUCE BURDENS ON POTENTIAL GRANTEEES

Traditional grant application processes such as “requests for proposals” tend to exclude and put most of the heavy lifting on already excluded, marginalized, and under-resourced community-based organizations (CBOs). Alternate approaches involve more work, time, and investment from the funder to go and meet the organizations where they are at (see details below), getting to know them and sharing transparently about yourself, exploring alignment, and seeking mutual consent, even before a grant application is filled out.

What are you doing to dismantle systemic barriers and burdens in your grant application process that are inequitably excluding and encumbering potential grantees – especially those CBOs that may be closest to their communities, but end up being marginalized the most by traditional Global North funding practices? How are you reaching more marginalized communities and organizations? How can you move the burden and work of ‘scoping’ and ‘getting to know you’ from the community organization to you as the funder?

A suggested pathway for connecting with and getting to know potential grantees –

1. Find and meet CBOs where they are – both geographically and in terms of the ways in which they interact and work, and get to know one another without placing undue and premature burden on potential grantees.
  - (a) Connect with national and district ministry officials, share your intentions, learn what is already being done, describe your scope and strategy, and seek consent. Learn about the needs and priorities of different communities, as well as the CBOs and other stakeholders that are present and active in different communities.
  - (b) Ask the leaders of CBOs if you may visit them to get to know them and their work. Be aware of and proactively provide compensation for the time and other costs incurred by staff, volunteers, and community members. Use this opportunity for mutual and transparent sharing of values, intentions, approach, and desires or expectations, so that both parties can make informed decisions about any interest in partnering.
  - (c) When “assessing” CBOs for their potential alignment, focus more on the qualities and characteristics that enable them to catalyze and support community-driven systems change (such as rootedness and legitimacy in the community, level of community engagement, participatory processes, culture of learning and adaptation, and organizational resilience), and less (or not at all) on the technocratic competencies that enable them to fill out forms and provide numbers for funder reporting requirements.
2. Establish relationships with organizations with whom you see alignment, and begin to build transparency, trust, and mutual learning, before you ask for any detailed proposals. Provide capacity support for any required paperwork.
3. Support a 6-12 month period of learning and planning, during which the funder-grantee partnership is further established and CBOs are provided time, financial resources, and capacity support to dive

deep into working with their community to: map out systems and stakeholders, understand issues and root causes, and prioritize and plan actions. This can then form the foundation of a proposal for implementation.

4. Provide capacity support for the development of proposals, including any workplans and budgets. This may include skills development in computer use, virtual communication applications, data collection and analysis, proposal and workplan development, and budget development and management. Ensure that proposal and reporting formats and processes are useful to community stakeholders and not just to the funder.

## 8. FACILITATE LINKAGES AND CONNECTIONS

Systems change requires connections and engagement across different system stakeholders. Networks and connections also provide mutual support, opportunities for collaboration, and strength in numbers. Moreover, some of the most valuable learning, sharing, and growth comes from connections among community-based organizations (CBOs) working on similar issues in similar geographic areas, as well as linkages with other important stakeholders in the system. Community-driven systems change is strengthened by connections, mutual learning, capacity strengthening, and collaborations that happen organically and intentionally between community organizations, local leaders, and other stakeholders. These connections, when meaningful and helpful to the organizations, can be sustained and continue to provide support and strength to CBOs over the long-term.

How are you supporting, but not imposing, connections among community-based organizations (CBOs)?

- Have you planned for CBO grantees to have opportunities to connect, share, learn, discuss, influence, and collaborate with one another and with other important stakeholders in the system?
- How will CBO grantees have ownership and say in the nature of their relationships with one another and with external actors such as technical consultants?
- Is financial resourcing available for peer-to-peer capacity support and learning visits?
- How will CBO grantees collectively determine whether or not, and if yes then how, their networks and connections might be sustained over the long term?

## 9. ESTABLISH MECHANISMS FOR FEEDBACK AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A funder-grantee partnership that is rooted in justice and solidarity and supports true community-driven systems change requires mutual respect and accountability.

How are you planning for transparency, feedback, and accountability?

- To what extent are you ready, willing, and able to share transparently with grantee-partners information about your organization, similar to what they are expected to share with you about their organization? For example, your organizational mandate, leadership and organizational structure, governance, organizational capacity assessment, overall operating budget, funding sources, recent audits, etc.?
- To what extent are you ready, willing, and able to share transparently with grantee-partners information about the initiative, similar to what they are expected to share with you about their



program? For example, initiative goals, theory of change, staff involved, budget, funding sources, how success will be evaluated, findings from recent evaluations, etc.

- What will you do to establish and nurture a relationship of trust, learning, and mutual sharing between you and grantees?
- What mechanisms will you have in place for grantees to share anonymous and confidential feedback? For example, ombudsman, annual anonymous survey of grantees for feedback, third-party consultant who they can speak to in confidence, etc.
- How will grantees be protected from potential negative repercussions of giving feedback?
- How will you be accountable to this feedback? E.g., all feedback shared in aggregate form as part of a report, all feedback shared with your board, response to specific concerns to be addressed within a certain number of months, etc.

Transparency, feedback, and accountability help us to be in genuine solidarity and trust with one another as we work together towards community-driven systems change.

## **IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE CAPACITY TO FUND CBOS DIRECTLY, AND YOU HAVE TO GO THROUGH INTERMEDIARIES...**

If you are looking at the above guidelines and thinking that your foundation just doesn't have the capacity to make grants and provide support in ways that genuinely support community-driven systems change, you may be wondering what your options are.

Many funders simply choose not to fund CBOs because they believe it is too demanding to work with small organizations, or if they fund them, they maintain their existing grantmaking practices. This is extremely problematic for a number of reasons, including the following –

- Very little money in the development sector ever trickles down to community and local organizations;
- When traditional grantmaking practices are sustained, the majority of CBOs that are actually rooted in and responsive to their communities are excluded from these processes because they don't have computers, don't have internet access, don't communicate in English, and so on; and
- Those CBOs that do somehow receive grant funding often end up being coopted as implementors in service of the goals of Global North funders and INGOs – and this can end up compromising their capacity to be responsive and accountable to their communities and local stakeholders.

Given the incredible potential CBOs hold in their capacity to mobilize and support community-driven systems change, it is imperative for more funders to fund CBOs, and to fund them in ways that are supportive and enabling.

If you can't fund CBOs directly, another option is to fund CBOs through an intermediary, such as a local community foundation, an indigenous and local grantmaker, or an international regranting organization. With thoughtful planning, engagement, and investment, this can be a helpful mechanism through which to support community-driven systems change. It is imperative to select an intermediary, however, who holds and lives out the values and practices that are critical for community-driven systems change.



To support CBOs in catalyzing community-driven systems change, look for and work with intermediaries who –

- value CBOs for their critical value, unique positioning, and essential skills in grassroots development efforts;
- respect CBOs' expertise and leadership in facilitating community-driven systems change;
- consider CBOs to be equals and share power with them;
- treat CBOs as equal partners and not just recipients of aid;
- collaborate with CBOs as equals and respect and integrate their input from the very initial conceptualization of the initiative, through the development, planning, implementation, evaluation, and transition (or end/exit) of the initiative;
- are transparent and accountable in all directions – to CBOs, communities, local and national governments, other civil society organizations, and funders;
- collaborate and consult with a variety of stakeholders in the system to identify and support CBOs;
- demonstrate an understanding of a systems approach;
- foster learning, reflection, and adaptation;
- have flexible, supportive, and trust-based methods (and not burdensome, complex, and suspicion-based methods) to work with CBOs in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of actions/programs; and
- most importantly – are genuinely engaging with and addressing issues of inequitable power and systemic injustice, and seek to engage in equal, mutually respectful, and justice- and solidarity-based partnerships with CBOs.

It is important to recognize and be sensitive to the ways in which power dynamics and role confusion can play out in the different layers of the funder-intermediary-CBO relationship. We recommend fostering a culture of learning and growth, encouraging and participating in transparency and open communication, supporting clarity on roles and responsibilities, and establishing multidirectional feedback loops. With these considerations, funding through a carefully-identified and thoughtfully-supported intermediary can be a valuable mechanism to support community-driven systems change.

Note: For funders seeking intermediaries in Africa, Firelight maintains a running list of African indigenous grantmakers and community foundations on our website.

*We hope these guidelines and questions have supported your thinking and planning as you develop a new initiative to support community-driven systems change. Please feel free to contact us at [learning@firelightfoundation.org](mailto:learning@firelightfoundation.org) to discuss further.*