



PHILANTHROPY IN TRANSITION

Moving from discourse to action on systems change

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | OCTOBER 2026

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© Esade Chair for Social Impact

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Our special thanks go to the six foundations whose experiences are central to this report: BBK Foundation, Co-Impact, the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation, IKEA Foundation, Laudes Foundation and Robert Bosch Stiftung. We thank their staff for sharing their time, experiences and challenges with such openness. Their reflections give the report and accompanying case studies their practical depth.

We are equally grateful to the partners and grantees who contributed their perspectives. Their accounts help us understand how foundations' approaches to systems change are experienced in practice, especially in relation to power, partnership and shared learning.

We also thank the experts who shared their knowledge and challenged our thinking, and the members of the Esade Chair for Social Impact Advisory Committee for their guidance and feedback throughout the research. Their contributions helped us place the foundations' experiences within the wider field and sharpen the relevance of the work for practitioners.

We feel privileged to have learned alongside this community. We hope the report gives something back to those working to translate the promise of systemic philanthropy into meaningful practice.

October 2026



Executive summary

SYSTEMS CHANGE HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL AND ELUSIVE IDEAS SHAPING PHILANTHROPY.

It names an ambition to move beyond alleviating symptoms by funding or conducting isolated projects to developing strategies to help shift underlying conditions that hold problems in place. **Yet foundations are still working out what this means on the ground**, what their distinct role might be amongst many other actors, and how their strategies as well as monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes and practices as well as their organizations need to change in response. Whilst the field already has guides and frameworks to help philanthropy understand and implement systems change, we believe it is necessary to continually check in and revisit the ever-evolving field reality.

This research consists of a qualitative deep dive into the work of six philanthropic foundations with an intention to engage in systemic philanthropy although they are at different stages of this journey: BBK Foundation, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Co-Impact, Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation, IKEA Foundation and Laudes Foundation. The initial research question was: *How are European philanthropies approaching systems change MEL?* However, it soon became obvious that it was impossible to isolate MEL from the systems change strategy and process itself, as well as the organizational readiness of foundations to shift their operating models and organizational structures. Thus, the research expanded to include a more holistic investigation of how foundations were approaching systems change more broadly. The **six participating foundations offer a sample with different characteristics** (size, type of foundation, geography, systems engaged in, stage of maturity etc.) to provide a richer portrait of the field reality.

During late 2025 and early 2026, we **conducted over 50 qualitative interviews** (36 with foundation staff, 8 with their partners and 8 expert interviews) **as well reviewing internal and published foundation documentation and conducting an academic and practitioner literature review.** After completing a thematic analysis, we validated emerging findings with over 60 foundations as well as with our Esade Chair for Social Impact advisory committee. The research output has been co-designed and created alongside the European philanthropic community. It is worth noting that the field of systemic philanthropy is evolving rapidly, and the practices of individual foundations may have developed since our data were collected. Nevertheless, our findings capture broader patterns and challenges that remain relevant across the field.

We believe this research makes key contributions: it develops a shared language for systemic philanthropy and goes into significant qualitative depth through a **case-based approach** related to how systemic philanthropy is working 'on-the-ground'. Another contribution is the **attention to partners' perspectives** and conclusion that partners are often pioneering and leading in the field of systemic change and systemic MEL and that foundations can learn more actively from and alongside them.

We have created several inter-connected outputs as outlined below which serve different purposes for distinct audiences. **Whilst the primary audience will be those working within the philanthropic sector, we imagine that others involved in systems change may be interested by this work as well.** A caveat to the research is that it does lead with a philanthropic perspective which might unintentionally reinforce a central vision of philanthropy in systems change. This is far from our aim and in talking to foundations partners we hope to rebalance the philanthropic-centric view at least partially, and we aim to conduct future research which includes more and varied voices on systems change beyond philanthropy. The **interconnected outputs of the research** include:

- **Executive summary:** for an overview of key findings
- **Full report:** for those willing to go into more detail or who are interested in specific areas of our research **with short case studies** of the participating foundations
- **Full case studies** (Bosch Stiftung, Co-Impact, Laudes Foundation): for those who would like to get into the nitty-gritty of individual foundation stories and to have greater detail on these
- **Systemic philanthropy spectrum:** a tool designed for reflection on how to embed systemic philanthropy in your foundation and diagnose where you are on this journey

KEY FINDINGS AND FRAMEWORKS

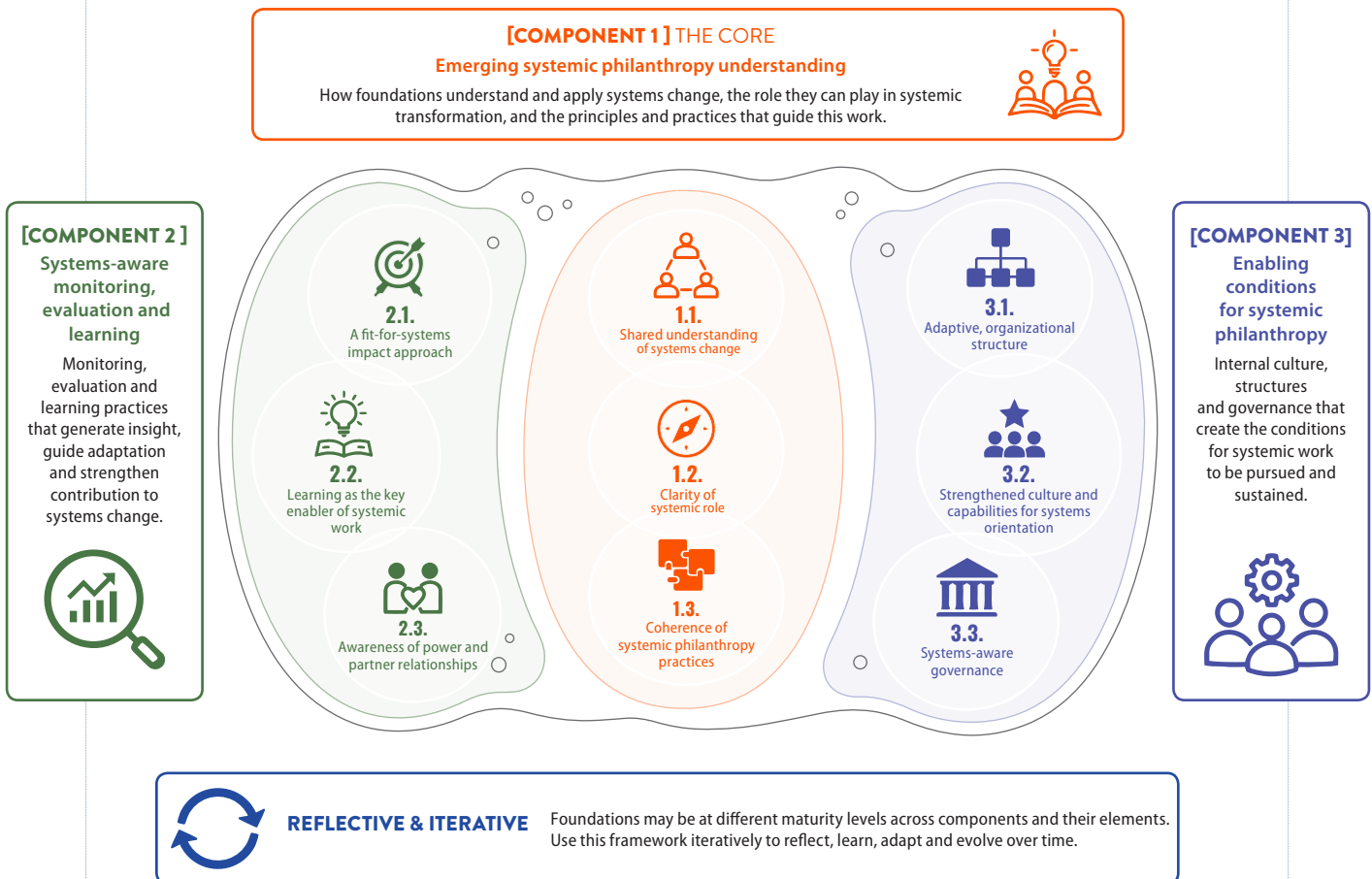
We have developed a key framework which provides the overall architecture of our findings. We propose three core components for engaging in systemic philanthropy.

- **Component One (The Core): Emerging systemic philanthropy understanding.** This explores how foundations understand and apply the concept of systems change, including the principles and practices associated with it. It considers the extent to which foundations make an explicit and formal commitment to systems change, how clearly, they understand the role they can play in systemic transformation, and the degree to which systemic practices are embedded in their ways of funding, operating and collaborating. We consider this the nucleus of systemic philanthropy since like the nucleus of the cell, it holds the master plans (DNA) and is at the heart of decision making,
- **Component Two (The Cell Membrane): Systems-aware monitoring, evaluation and learning.** This investigates how foundations understand, monitor, evaluate and learn about impact and change in systemic contexts. It considers whether change is understood primarily through a lens of attribution or contribution; the purpose of MEL; the approaches and methods used; how learning takes place; and how foundations recognize and respond to power imbalances in their relationships with their partners. We consider this the cell membrane because like the cell membrane, it serves a filtering role, in this case deciding what evidence flows up and down within the organization and more broadly.
- **Component Three (The Cell Fluid): Enabling conditions for systemic philanthropy.** This considers the extent to which the foundations' internal structure, culture, mindsets and capabilities enable systemic practice. It looks at whether the organizational structure supports adaptive, collaborative, and long-term ways of working, whether staff have the confidence and skills to engage with systems change, how HR supports systemic capabilities, and whether the Board and other governance bodies apply a systems lens when making decisions. It is like the cell fluid (cytoplasm) as it holds all parts in place.

We outline a further nine elements related to these components. These are the components and elements that we encourage foundations to consider and take account of in the transition towards embracing systems change. This **framework and tool provides a starting map of the systemic philanthropy terrain as well as trajectory to a desired future** as seen in Figure 1. The tool offers criteria and guidance for beginning a process of reflection and discussion related to where a foundation might be on each of the key elements related to systemic philanthropy.

COMPONENT ONE (THE CORE) – EMERGING SYSTEMIC PHILANTHROPY UNDERSTANDING

FIGURE 1: Core Components and Key Elements of Systemic Philanthropy



SOURCE: authors own elaboration

Element 1.1: shared understanding of systems change

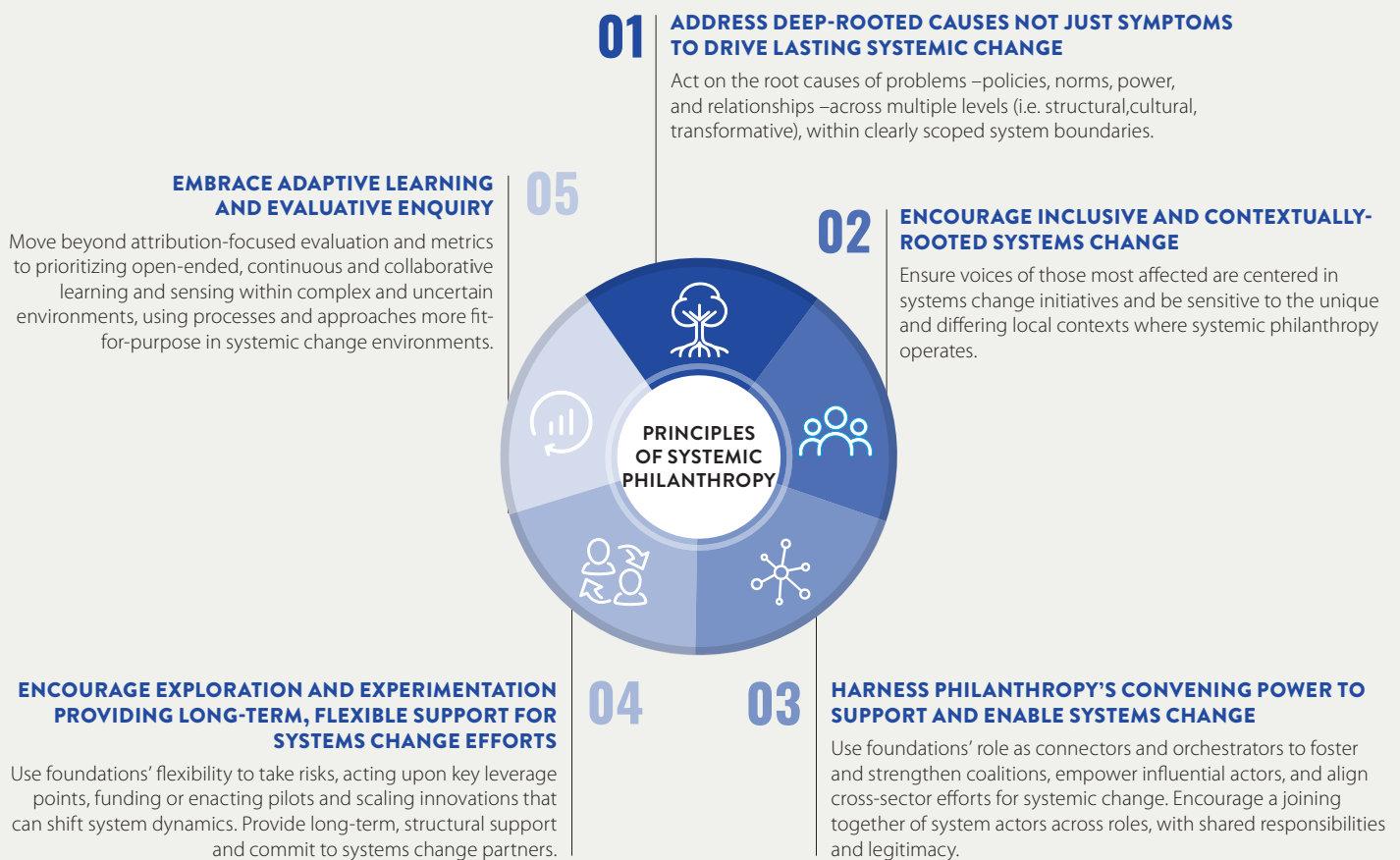
This study defines systems change as ‘the sustainable and long-term transformation of the underlying conditions, relationships and patterns of interaction within a system.’ The systems change field is characterized by overlapping concepts and multiple entry points rather than a single coherent definition. In this context, foundations construct their own bricolage of meanings and tend to be somewhat flexible in how they define systems change. **Systems change may be** a mindset or a lens, an approach to complex problems, a destination in which institutions, policies, markets or norms within a given system have shifted or some combination of these. Alternative language is sometimes used, and meanings may differ within the same foundation. **Partners caution that funder-defined and Global North language can become detached from community realities**, yet they see value in retaining the systems change concept to capture ambitions beyond service delivery.

“For me, systemic change is both what you achieve (what system you are changing) – which would be the impact – and how you approach it (the systemic lens)”

Foundation interviewee, program team

A central finding is **that systemic practice in foundations often develops faster than shared language**. Our hypothesis is that prolonged ambiguity at individual organization and at field level may create confusion. **Whilst not arguing for perfect definitional consensus, we found across our interviews common principles foundations used to describe systemic philanthropy as shown in Figure 2.** These hallmark principles of systemic philanthropy offer an orientation and not a checklist – foundations may relate more strongly to some, the principles may be primarily enacted through partners and none assumes that philanthropy is the leading or dominant actor in a system.

Foundations may find it difficult in practice to ‘walk the talk’ in terms of implementing these shared principles, with perceived reputational risks when they engage in advocacy, practical difficulties remaining close enough to the ground and a long way to go to genuinely embrace divergent voices and change power dynamics. Moreover, foundations can struggle to sustain investments over the time horizons required as governors and staff may lose focus and conviction if they are not seeing systemic change develop. Many of these challenges are associated with continuing doubts over what the role of individual foundation as well as the philanthropic sector could (and should) be within systems change.

FIGURE 2: Hallmark systemic philanthropy principles**[PRINCIPLE 1] ADDRESS DEEP-ROOTED CAUSES NOT JUST SYMPTOMS TO DRIVE LASTING SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

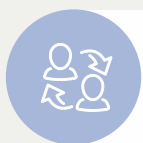
This is the core, foundational principle mentioned by the majority of those involved in the research. The foundations in our study are acting on multiple layers and underlying issues in any given system.

**[PRINCIPLE 2] ENCOURAGE INCLUSIVE AND CONTEXTUALLY-ROOTED SYSTEMS CHANGE**

Foundations are aware that those closest to the ground are the ones with most understanding and agency in addressing the system.

**[PRINCIPLE 3] HARNESS PHILANTHROPY'S CONVENING POWER TO SUPPORT AND ENABLE SYSTEMS CHANGE**

Foundations play an important role as connectors and orchestrators to foster and strengthen coalitions, empower influential actors, and align cross-sector efforts for systems change.

**[PRINCIPLE 4] ENCOURAGE EXPLORATION AND EXPERIMENTATION**

A key feature of systemic philanthropy is the provision of long-term, flexible funds often used for structural support. This is aligned with trust-based philanthropy, where partners are given the space to experiment and grow.

**[PRINCIPLE 5] EMBRACE ADAPTIVE LEARNING AND EVALUATIVE ENQUIRY**

Requires a prioritization of open-ended, continuous and collaborative learning across the system.

SOURCE: authors own elaboration

Element 1.2: clarity of systemic role

“It resonates and at the same time, a lot of us have great doubts as to whether we can do it. Whether it is a task for philanthropy and whether it is feasible. Systems are extremely large, so many powers and different actors: is it possible to make a difference at that level, meanwhile having an ambition to do it? What is it that we can contribute?”

SMT, Foundation interviewee

If systems change requires the collective efforts of multiple actors, the question emerges about what the distinct role of philanthropy is. There is sometimes ambiguity within philanthropy about their role, given the problematic power dynamics as funders within a system. How do they work in the most equitable way, acknowledging the power and history of power imbalances whilst using their unique resources and role? Across foundations, their partners and systems change experts, there was **strong agreement that philanthropy’s contribution extends beyond the provision of financial resources.** While funding remains essential, foundations added value in systemic work also lies in how they use their relationships, legitimacy and flexibility to support systemic impact. In developing their systems strategies, there were **three broad pathways we identified with different foundation roles:**

- **Bottom-up emergence strategy:** partners and those within the system lead on the diagnosis of systemic problems and identify pathways for change. Foundations see themselves primarily as enablers and supporters.
- **Top-down orchestration strategy:** foundations identify key leverage points and actively shape interventions aimed at influencing broader systems.
- **Hybrid strategy:** combining support for system actors with foundation-led initiatives to address system gaps.

Element 1.3: coherence of systemic philanthropy practices

Across the foundations studied, a wide range of systemic practices emerged as outlined in the table below. While approaches differ considerably depending on organizational culture, strategic priorities, and operational models, **a common pattern is evident: systemic philanthropy involves combining multiple interventions and adapting them over time as learning emerges.**

Systemic philanthropy practices in the future need to focus more on the deeper and more hidden parts of systems change (for example, changing narratives and addressing power dynamics). Partners and experts identified that a more ‘social-justice’ oriented systems change lens is needed to engage local communities and co-create solutions with them through more participatory grant-making.

TABLE 1 Systemic practices across foundations

SYSTEMIC LEVER (PRACTICE)		EXPLANATION
 Policy change and regulation reform		Changing laws, rules, standards to shape system behaviour. Philanthropy can support or engage in advocacy, policy design, evidence generation, and policy implementation capacity.
 Solution experimentation / innovation		Help to experiment and test immature solutions that can prevent / address the systemic challenge
 Solution scaling		Help to scale proven solutions that can prevent / address the systemic challenge
 Knowledge and evidence		Foundations can invest in research, learning infrastructures, community knowledge, data systems, and sensemaking processes that inform action and challenge assumptions.
 Human capital development		Build human capital (professionals, leaders) to advance the field
 Orchestration and network		Foster collaboration and bring together actors in the field. This can happen through an orchestrator or an activator role.
 Power dynamics		Change system intervention design and evaluation processes to more equitably include final beneficiaries as co-creators and decision-makers.
 Narrative development		Shift social norms, public awareness and narrative change within the system. Target the problematic mindsets key stakeholders have.

COMPONENT TWO – SYSTEMS-AWARE MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL)

Aspects of conventional evaluation can and should be expanded, adapted and tailored for systemic change.

MEL in philanthropy is in a phase of disruption, with partners asking for more participatory and equitable designs and AI re-shaping data collection and evidence generation possibilities. On top of these broader shifts, systemic philanthropy practitioners are having to navigate what it means to do MEL within a systems change context. The conclusion is that systems-aware MEL is difficult, fragmented and still in its relative infancy. **Foundations are in a constant state of negotiation as they move towards MEL approaches more fitting for systemic philanthropy:** between the intuitive, dispersed ways of sensemaking and evidence generation that systems-aware MEL calls for and the quantitative-indicator heavy data that many boards are still requesting; between lightening the reporting load and handing over agency to partners and their desire to be able to aggregate and tell a coherent story of their systemic contribution; between the oversimplicity of log frames and indicators and the perceived over-complexity of some newer systems-aware methodologies.

There is not necessarily a contradiction between these tensions, and they are creatively and inspirationally being managed by participating foundations in our sample as we illustrate, but not

without a form of collective anxiety. We believe that **there is substantial innovation and many green shoots already showing how this transition towards systems MEL is being pioneered.** Many of the partners they fund and work with are illuminating the way, and in their rich discussions with partners, foundations' impact management ideas and approaches are being transformed. **Rather than MEL being perceived as an accountability burden, we see that systems MEL can become a beacon of hope, enabling real-time sensemaking and adaptation among system actors and driving the field further forward.** A systems-aware MEL invites more hopeful and joyful ways of thinking about impact measurement.

Element 2.1: a fit-for-systems impact approach

In complex systems, cause and effect behave non-linearly, outcomes emerge in unpredictable ways across system actors, and then sometimes at a whistlestop pace. In this context, **the more conventional approach to MEL which tries to understand whether projects 'worked' is reframed to understand systemic initiatives as part of a more dynamic ecosystem of actors and influences.** A contribution perspective therefore becomes essential, asking how the foundation, partners, and other actors collectively influence change, each from their respective role. **Systems-aware MEL creates spaces for diverse actors to discuss evidence, interpret progress, and revise strategies collectively.** It means allowing MEL to become more collective and distributed, with the main purpose to learn and collectively make decisions.

Foundations are experimenting with a variety of methods, tools and approaches as they mix the old and familiar with the new and the innovative. They are using methodologies such as: systems mapping; systemic theories of change; developmental evaluation; evaluative rubrics; contribution analysis and outcome harvesting; foresight; and collaborative sensemaking. There are greater use of qualitative evidence, observation and intuition and knowledge of program teams and system actors. Goals and indicators become more provisional – scaffolding for co-ordination and renegotiation within the system.

Efforts to link foundation activities with broad systems change is a complex task with a strong risk of over-claiming and problems aggregating across portfolios. Despite these challenges, foundations such as Laudes Foundation and Co-Impact have developed consistent MEL frameworks to help them to roll up findings from partner to system-level and foundations such as Bosch Stiftung and IKEA Foundation are building greater coherence in their MEL as they transition more to systems strategies. Foundations that are systems-born and have it within their DNA are pioneers and field leaders, whereas foundations which are on the journey of systems change and developing their approach, are in a phase of strong design and development, but may carry legacy ways-of-working, capacities and approaches which can be hard to disentangle and move beyond. They are more in the in-between zone of old and new. However, the process of developing a MEL framework to match their systemic ambitions may enable staff and the Board to get a better understanding of how different initiatives to contribute to broader systemic outcomes.

Element 2.2: learning as the key-enabler of systemic work and Element 2.3: Awareness of power and navigating MEL and partner relationships

“Learning for who is always an interesting question. Are we learning for us as a foundation or are we learning for those who are doing the work? Also, who defines the learning questions? Should we define the learning questions, or should organizations we work with define the learning questions? Or people that are being affected define the learning questions?”

Program Team, Foundation Interviewee

These two elements connect. **A central shift in systems-aware MEL is away from prescriptive reporting and towards joint learning with partners and the system.** This comes back to the key question by who and how impact is defined. In a more traditional approach, the foundation often defines what success looks like, key indicators and reporting formats. This should be flipped in a systems MEL approach: impact and learning questions are shaped by partners, local and system actors and affected communities. Accountability is therefore not only upwards to Boards or funders, but also to communities. Partners are often at the forefront of MEL experimentation, although their capacity and investment is uneven and the legacy of donor-driven reporting remains strong. **The central dance foundations are managing is between structure and flexibility: enough shared architecture to support learning within and outside the foundation walls but enough partner ownership to avoid extractive, burdensome and foundation-centered MEL.** Learning itself must be resourced through time, spaces, incentives, responsibilities and feedback loops; otherwise knowledge remains dispersed in people’s heads and organizational siloes.

COMPONENT THREE – ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS TO ENABLE SYSTEMS WORK

Throughout our research, we have heard that foundations underestimate the structural and cultural change as well as the specific capacity-building that is required for systems work. Assuming they can ‘bolt on’ a systems strategy without changing their operating models and mindsets is a classic flaw of philanthropies navigating this transition.

Element 3.1. Adaptive, non-siloed organizational structure close to work on the ground

An adaptive organizational structure fits collaborative, unpredictable and emergent work better, while proximity to the ground matters for understanding local actors and dynamics. **Foundations are at different stages of organizational readiness in terms of adapting their organizational structure to their systemic ambitions.** Some are still relatively siloed, with little co-ordination or sharing between program teams. Others are facing a certain degree of structural uncertainty that can accompany the transition from more traditional philanthropic programmatic organizational structures towards new teams more fit for systems-change work. The more systems-born funders have shaped and re-shaped their organizations to work at a more cross-program level, investing heavily in coordinating structures and processes.

“It’s quite challenging because the roles are going to change. And it’s one thing to have a vision for the future, but you also need to work through the transition. And you need to deal with the legacy.”

SMT, Foundation interviewee

Element 3.2. Strengthened culture, capabilities and mindset for systems orientation

Across interviews conducted for this research, we heard about qualities associated with systems work: a collaborative culture; thinking and acting collectively; humility; letting go of ego; less control; listening; questioning and curiosity; collective knowledge-building; patience; resilience; trust. These are the footprints of organizations orienting towards systemic work.

Engaging with these qualities, the walls between one foundation and another, and between individuals and the system that is being addressed need to be broken down. In this sense it is important for foundations to develop ways that individuals working in their organizations can reach a place of agency, and collaboration can happen between system actors. A key question is how far a foundation can best enhance its organizational culture and staff capabilities for systems change. HR plays an important role in making it possible to develop right-fit teams for systemic work. However, it is not the case that all those working in systems change need to be trained or natural systems thinkers. **The goal is not to become a systems-thinking organization but to become a systems practice organization.** For inspiration on how to create organizations built for systemic work, **foundations need to look no further than the partners that they work with or fund.** Their innovative, collaborative and equity-based cultures and approaches are deeply embedded: it is not only what they do systemically but how they do it that matters.

‘It’s a huge cultural shift. You need leadership. I think you need people who have the ability to interpret themselves and the organization. It’s more about sense-making.’

Element 3.3. Systems-aware governance

Systems-aware governance means that boards and other governance bodies understand and engage with the systems-change agenda. When foundations are in transition towards more systemic practices, staff and teams may begin to work systemically, but governance bodies may not yet share the same understanding. Systems orientation cannot only remain a staff capability. It needs to reach spaces where strategic oversight and decision-making happen. For this, Boards need to be brought along the journey alongside program teams and staff, immersing themselves in what it may mean to practice systems change and having the space and time to discuss concepts and the foundation’s role. For those working in the field of systems change, it is hard to grasp how intangible, confusing and even radical a step it is to embrace a systems change mindset – it is a significant evolution for philanthropy and Boards need to be supported in their own understanding, with staff open to the challenges, uncertainties and resistance that the approach could trigger.

CONCLUSION

There is a dissonance between systems change language and lofty goals and the messy, disruptive and often deeply uncomfortable work of systems change, which has implications for how foundations reshape and reorient, touching deep cultural issues and sector-wide vulnerabilities. **Philanthropy needs to take stock of where it is and what challenges it is facing in the transition towards embracing a systemic mindset and lens** – to take a reality-check and a hard look in the mirror. It can find its place in the current moment, decentering itself and negotiating power dynamics whilst also recognizing its value and unique potential role within systems change. **The foundations profiled and described in this research have been open and honest, and we celebrate their collective experimentation and intentionality on this journey**, whilst not denying the challenges of their ambitions. Our main message is this: **it can't be business as usual for the philanthropic sector and change from within needs to accelerate**, with appropriate care alongside sector learning to ensure philanthropy can fulfill its systemic change ambitions rather than being seen as a slow-paced sector that likes talking about systems change rather than acting on its possibilities.

We hope to **provide rich stories and useful tools to help many other foundations who are beginning or who are already on this journey towards embracing systems change**. This really is a case of learning together and learning by doing. Throughout this research we aim to be a small piece in unlocking what we see as greater confidence and courage that philanthropy requires – to seize this opportunity, as systems are being disrupted, to engage in this work with humility and seriousness and to continue to learn together and especially from partners and communities with whom they work, who so often are showing the way forward. To dare as a sector to hope that philanthropy can play a role in reshaping systems for future generations.

The Spectrum Tool

Moving from ambition to practice requires foundations to take stock of where they are now, whilst remaining open about where they need and want to go. The findings presented in this executive summary suggest that systemic philanthropy is not a fixed model or destination, but an ongoing journey of reflection, experimentation and adaptation. Foundations may advance unevenly across different dimensions of this journey, and progress depends not only on the strategies and practices they adopt, but also on how they understand their role, learn alongside others and create the organizational conditions needed for systemic work.

The Systemic Philanthropy Spectrum Tool translates these findings into a practical starting point for reflection and discussion. Structured around the three interconnected components and their nine elements, it invites foundations to explore their current situation and consider their desired future direction. The spectrum is not intended as a numeric assessment or a checklist, nor does it assume that every foundation will follow the same pathway. Rather, it offers a shared framework through which foundations can surface different perspectives, identify tensions and priorities, and support learning and decision-making as their systemic practice develops.

[COMPONENT 1] THE NUCLEUS



EMERGING SYSTEMIC PHILANTHROPY UNDERSTANDING:

Exploring how foundations understand and apply the concept of systems change, including the principles and practices associated with it.

[COMPONENT 2] THE CELL MEMBRANE



SYSTEMIC -AWARE MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Considering how foundations understand, monitor, evaluate and learn about impact and change in systemic contexts.

[COMPONENT 3] THE CELL FLUID



ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR SYSTEMIC PHILANTHROPY

The dimension considers the extent to which foundation's internal structure, culture, mindsets and capabilities enable systemic practices.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

Self-reflection tool: where is my organization on the systemic philanthropy spectrum for component 1?

We have developed the following self-reflection tool so that you can diagnose where your organization is on the systemic philanthropy spectrum related to Component One's main elements. We encourage you to use this to generate discussion and dialogue – it is less about a numeric assessment and more about considering the different elements of what it takes to truly embrace and embed systemic philanthropy.

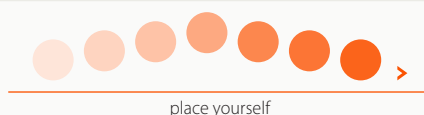
[COMPONENT 1] Understanding systemic philanthropy

This component explores how the foundation understands and applies the concept of systems change, including the principles and practices associated with it. Across its three elements, it considers the extent to which the foundation has made an explicit and formal commitment to systems change, how clearly it understands the role it can play in systemic transformation, and the degree to which systemic practices are embedded in its ways of funding, operating and collaborating.

Score your organization based on its current situation. If useful, complete the worksheet again to reflect where you would like your organization to be in the future

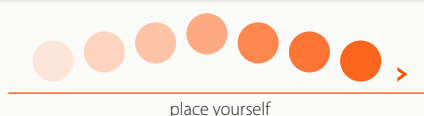
[ELEMENT 1.1] SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Working on a definition of systemic change and a set of principles to guide practice



Sharing a codified definition of systemic change externally and transparent principles to guide practice

Multiple and different understandings of systems change goals and work in different teams, programs or levels of organization



Openly discussed and coherent, although continually evolving understanding of systems change

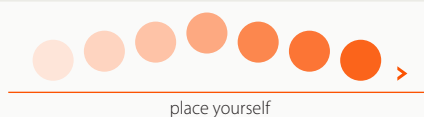
[ELEMENT 1.2] CLARITY OF SYSTEMIC ROLE

There is an informal intention to engage in systemic change



Systemic change is integral to the whole foundation and individual programmatic strategies

The foundation is starting to explore where and how to engage in systemic change



The role of the foundation within systemic transformation is established and negotiated internally and externally with system actors

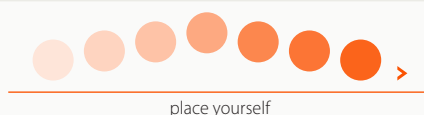
The foundation is starting to define the systems, boundaries of those systems and geographies for its contribution



The systems, boundaries of those systems and geographies where the foundation contributes are clear (subject to responding to the system as it evolves)

[ELEMENT 1.3] SYSTEMIC PHILANTHROPY PRACTICES (“WALKING THE TALK”)

The foundation is exploring changes to existing funding practices and activities in certain projects or programs



Systemic practices are fully integrated in programs/portfolios and across them



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

[COMPONENT 1]

Emerging Systemic Philanthropy Understanding

For a foundation beginning its journey into systemic philanthropy, the three most useful entry points are best approached as a sequence: build shared understanding, clarify the foundation's role, and translate that role into a coherent set of practices.

1



Develop a provisional shared understanding of systemic philanthropy

Discuss what systems change means in the foundation's own context, with the aim of surfacing assumptions rather than establishing a perfect or universal definition. Clarify whether systems change is understood as an approach, a desired outcome, or both; the scale of ambition involved; and whether the foundation is more oriented towards deliberately targeting leverage points or enabling solutions to emerge through experimentation. Use language that is accessible to trustees, staff, partners and communities, and explore it through concrete examples rather than abstract theory. Produce a short, adaptable working statement of what systemic philanthropy means for the foundation, supported by a small number of guiding principles.

2



Define a bounded system and the foundation's role within it

Choose a sufficiently focused area in which to begin, defined by a societal challenge, geography, sector, community, or a combination of these. Examine the deeper causes, actors, relationships, policies, incentives, power structures and narratives shaping current outcomes, and use that diagnosis to clarify the foundation's contribution relative to communities, civil society, government, business and other funders. The research suggests positioning philanthropy primarily as an enabler rather than a driver. The foundation might adopt a bottom-up emergence strategy, a top-down orchestration strategy, or a hybrid approach, while stating clearly what it will not lead or attempt to control.

3



Begin with a focused, learning-oriented portfolio of practices

Avoid trying to implement every systemic principle at once. Select a small number of mutually reinforcing practices aligned with the foundation's diagnosis and role. The material identifies flexible multi-year funding, support for locally-rooted organizations, coalition or network building, experimentation, evidence generation, policy influence and narrative change as possible practices. The portfolio should address root causes, be inclusive and contextually grounded, and allow adaptation over time. Treat learning and evaluation as collaborative enquiry rather than an attempt to attribute system-level change solely to the foundation.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

The Systemic Philanthropy Spectrum Tool – Component Two

We have developed the following self-reflection tool so that you can diagnose where your organization is on the systemic philanthropy spectrum related to Component One's main elements. We encourage you to use this to generate discussion and dialogue – it is less about a numeric assessment and more about considering the different elements of what it takes to truly embrace and embed systemic philanthropy.

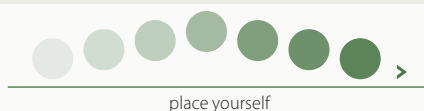
[COMPONENT 2] Systemic monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)

This component explores how the foundation understands, monitors, evaluates and learns about impact and change in systemic contexts. It considers whether change is understood primarily through a lens of attribution or contribution; the purpose of MEL for the foundation, including accountability, learning and decision-making; the approaches and evaluation methods used; how learning takes place; and how the foundation recognizes and responds to the power it holds in relationships with partners.

Score your organization based on its current situation. If useful, complete the worksheet again to reflect where you would like your organization to be in the future

[ELEMENT 2.1] IMPACT APPROACH AND THE PURPOSE OF ITS MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Change/impact is perceived more in terms of attribution



Change/impact is perceived more in terms of contribution

MEL is used mainly for accountability at project level, with impact assessed retrospectively



MEL is used for accountability, learning and decision-making at foundation level, with impact assessed retrospectively as well as prospectively through foresight tools

The foundation has a fragmented variety of MEL approaches, more or less suited to systems change work



The foundation has a common MEL approach across programs/portfolios within a systems change context, flexible enough to adapt to domains, geographies partners and systems needs

Primarily linear evaluation methods are used and mainly output data are collected, with a focus on quantitative data



Systems-aware evaluation methods investigate complexity and multiple causal pathways through adapted MEL tools and practices. Foundation works within/engages in whole system sense-making, moving away from top-down analysis

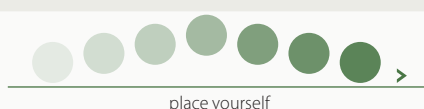
[ELEMENT 2.2] HOW LEARNING HAPPENS

Limited learning mechanisms in place



Multiple concrete learning mechanisms in place within foundation and within the system with attached budget

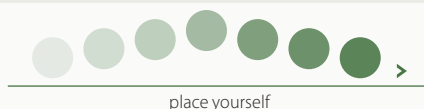
Learning happens internally at project and program/portfolio level and may not be synthesized upwards or outwards



Learning happens at program/portfolio level and across systems, enabling field-level conversations and collective wisdom

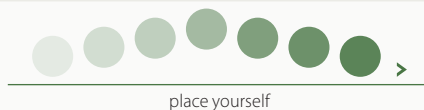
[ELEMENT 2.3] POWER AWARENESS AND PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

The foundation is aware of the power it holds



The foundation has strong mitigating mechanisms in place to address power imbalances and embed plural perspectives in its systems work

Impact is mostly predefined by the foundation, which requests standardised data from partners



Impact is mostly defined by partners; the foundation supports them to understand, learn from and adapt their work

Significant reporting is requested, mainly to understand the foundation's aggregate impact



Reporting is fit-for-purpose and learning conversations are prioritized



KEY TAKE AWAYS

[COMPONENT 2]

on Systems-aware Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning



Systems MEL remains difficult, fragmented and still evolving, without a settled field-level model

- Systems MEL is widely seen by participating foundations and partners as complex. It remains an open question whether familiar tools, including theories of change and mixed-method indicators, should be adapted or more fundamentally reshaped.
- Foundations are negotiating several tensions: intuitive and dispersed sensemaking versus some Boards continue demand for quantitative indicators; lighter, partner-led reporting versus the need to aggregate and tell a coherent story of contribution; and the simplicity of log frames versus the perceived complexity of newer methods.
- Foundations are at different stages of sophistication. Systems-born foundations have developed more consistent overarching approaches, while foundations in transition continue to work through legacy systems, capabilities, practices and organizational siloes.



The purpose of MEL shifts from proving attribution towards understanding contribution, learning, adaptation and collective decision-making

- In complex systems, change is non-linear, emergent and influenced by many actors. A contribution perspective asks how foundations, partners and other system actors collectively influence change from their respective roles, rather than seeking to prove isolated causality.
- Systems MEL is becoming a continuous process rather than an exercise undertaken only at the beginning and end of an intervention. Its purpose is seen as to support learning, sharing, adaptation and collective decision-making as the system changes.



Foundations are reshaping rather than discarding the MEL toolbox to make it fit for systems change contexts

- Participating foundations are assembling a 'bricolage' of familiar and newer approaches, including systems mapping, context and political economy analysis, systemic theories of change, developmental evaluation, evaluative rubrics, contribution analysis, outcome harvesting, process tracing, foresight and collaborative sensemaking.
- Mixed methods continue to be used, but qualitative evidence, stories, relationships, contextual knowledge, staff observations and intuition have greater prominence. Quantitative evidence is interpreted alongside these other forms of knowledge.

- Goals and indicators can still support co-ordination when they are provisional, multi-stakeholder informed and open to renegotiation. System signals, progress markers and proxy indicators can connect short-term accountability with longer-term, emergent change.
- Impact management may operate at grant, program, portfolio, ecosystem and broader system levels. Linking and aggregating evidence across these levels remains a critical challenge, particularly across different geographies, domains and systems.



Learning is the key enabler of systemic work, but it requires deliberate infrastructure, resources and incentives

- Systems MEL can support learning at project or grant, program or portfolio, organizational, and field or ecosystem levels, from adapting activities to identifying broader patterns and building collective knowledge.
- Effective learning requires feedback loops among program teams, MEL staff, senior leadership, the Board, partners and other field actors, as well as clarity about who the learning is for and who defines the questions.
- Learning does not happen automatically. It requires dedicated time, spaces, responsibilities, incentives, formats, budgets and, in some cases, external facilitation.
- Organizational siloes, blind spots, uneven capacity and insufficient resources constrain learning. Knowledge also needs to be documented so that it does not remain dispersed in staff members' heads, partner conversations, observations and intuition.



Power-aware MEL changes who defines impact and requires a balance between partner ownership and shared structure

- A systems approach shifts towards joint learning in which partners, local actors, affected communities and other system actors help define success, learning questions, indicators and evidence needs.
- Accountability is therefore not only upwards to Boards and funders, but also to communities. Evidence should reflect diverse perspectives, ways of knowing and sources of knowledge.
- Partners are at the forefront of developing systems MEL, but their capacity and resources are uneven, and reporting can still be burdensome or detract from action.
- Common guidance, tools and shared architecture can support learning and synthesis, but partners also need ownership of outcomes, indicators and methods.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

The Systemic Philanthropy Spectrum Tool – Component Three

We have developed the following self-reflection tool so that you can diagnose where your organization is on the systemic philanthropy spectrum related to Component One's main elements. We encourage you to use this to generate discussion and dialogue – it is less about a numeric assessment and more about considering the different elements of what it takes to truly embrace and embed systemic philanthropy.

[COMPONENT 3] Organizational conditions for systemic work

This component considers the extent to which the foundation's internal structures, culture, mindsets and capabilities enable systemic practice. It looks at whether the organizational structure supports adaptive, collaborative and long-term ways of working, whether staff have the confidence and skills needed to engage with systems change, how HR supports systemic capabilities, and whether the Board and other strategic governance bodies apply a systems lens when advising and making decisions.

Score your organization based on its current situation. If useful, complete the worksheet again to reflect where you would like your organization to be in the future

[ELEMENT 3.1] ADAPTIVE, UN-SILOED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Programmatic silos, lack of proximity to on-the-ground systems and an inward-looking culture are barriers to a fluid, adaptive organizational structure suitable for systems work



The foundation has optimized its organizational structure for its systemic practices through its transversal teams and/or cross-programmatic processes and fluid ways of working

[ELEMENT 3.2] STRENGTHENED CULTURE AND CAPABILITIES FOR SYSTEMS ORIENTATION

There is some skepticism around systems change internally and staff may feel uncomfortable or under-prepared



Board, management, program teams and MEL staff advocate for systemic change and feel prepared to engage

Organizational culture is mainly defined by a preference for secure, known environments



Organizational culture is defined by humility, listening, collaboration, learning, adaptability and comfort with uncertainty

HR is not proactively involved in systems change work



HR has embedded systemic capability needs in recruitment, capacity-building, performance assessment and incentives

[ELEMENT 3.3] SYSTEMS-AWARE GOVERNANCE

There are a few emerging champions within governance bodies who understand and advocate for systems change



The Board and governance bodies make decisions with a systems lens and a clear understanding and buy-in for the foundation's systemic work



RECOMMENDATIONS

[COMPONENT 3]

Organizational Conditions for Systemic Work

For a foundation seeking to strengthen the organizational conditions for systemic work, the material supports three initial priorities: review whether structures enable cross-team learning and proximity to context; consider what might be a right-fit mix of capabilities; and have deeper and longer conversations with trustees about systemic work and its requirements.

1



Conduct a review of your organizational structure against systemic ambitions

Examine whether program and MEL arrangements allow staff to learn, coordinate and collaborate across teams and with system actors. Consider where transversal roles or cross-program connections are needed, whether the foundation is sufficiently close to local contexts, and how roles, budgets and responsibilities could change as work becomes more collective. Because participating foundations use different models, the material does not support prescribing a single structure. Any redesign should be grounded in the foundation's own ambitions and operating context, while drawing on relevant partner and field experience. Consider the appetite of the foundation for organizational change and what might be the best place to start.

2



Reflect on what the current culture and capabilities are for systems change

Identify the qualities and systems change capabilities required for the foundation's work, then clarify which roles need a strong systems mindset and which need enough understanding to apply systemic practices at program or project level. Consider whether staff require additional capacity-building, organizational culture development or new staff hires.

3



Start to engage governance bodies more deeply in resetting expectations for systemic work

Assign a task to senior management or MEL staff to help boards and other governance bodies understand systemic work and its implications. In a board meeting, discuss and review reporting expectations. The evidence supports sustained dialogue and expectation management, but it does not provide a tested Board-engagement model.

