



REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Applying a Systems Change Lens

THE UPSIDE: A LEADERSHIP FORUM FOR THE FUTURE OF FAIRFIELD
COUNTY | JUNE 6, 2025

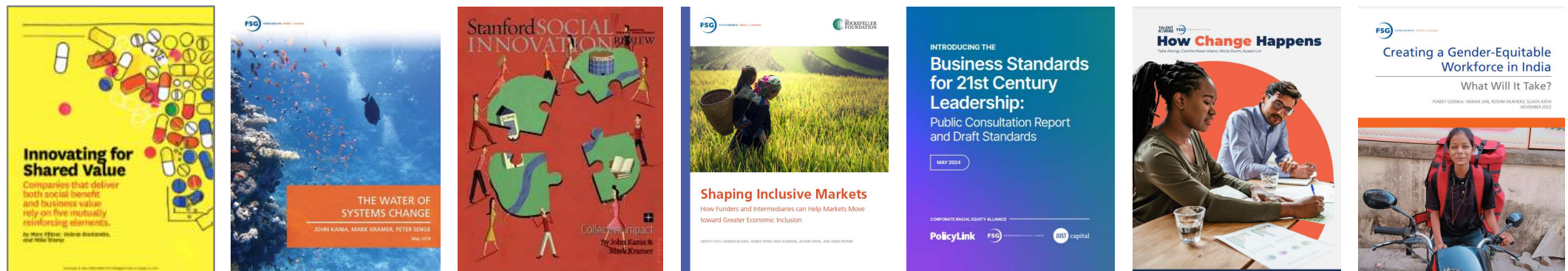
[FSG.ORG](https://fsg.org)



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



John Harper
Chief Executive Officer



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

Learning objectives

- Introduce shared definitions of **systems and systems thinking**
- Explore how addressing the **conditions of systems change** can help solve our region's challenges
- Highlight **why and how** business leaders engage in this work



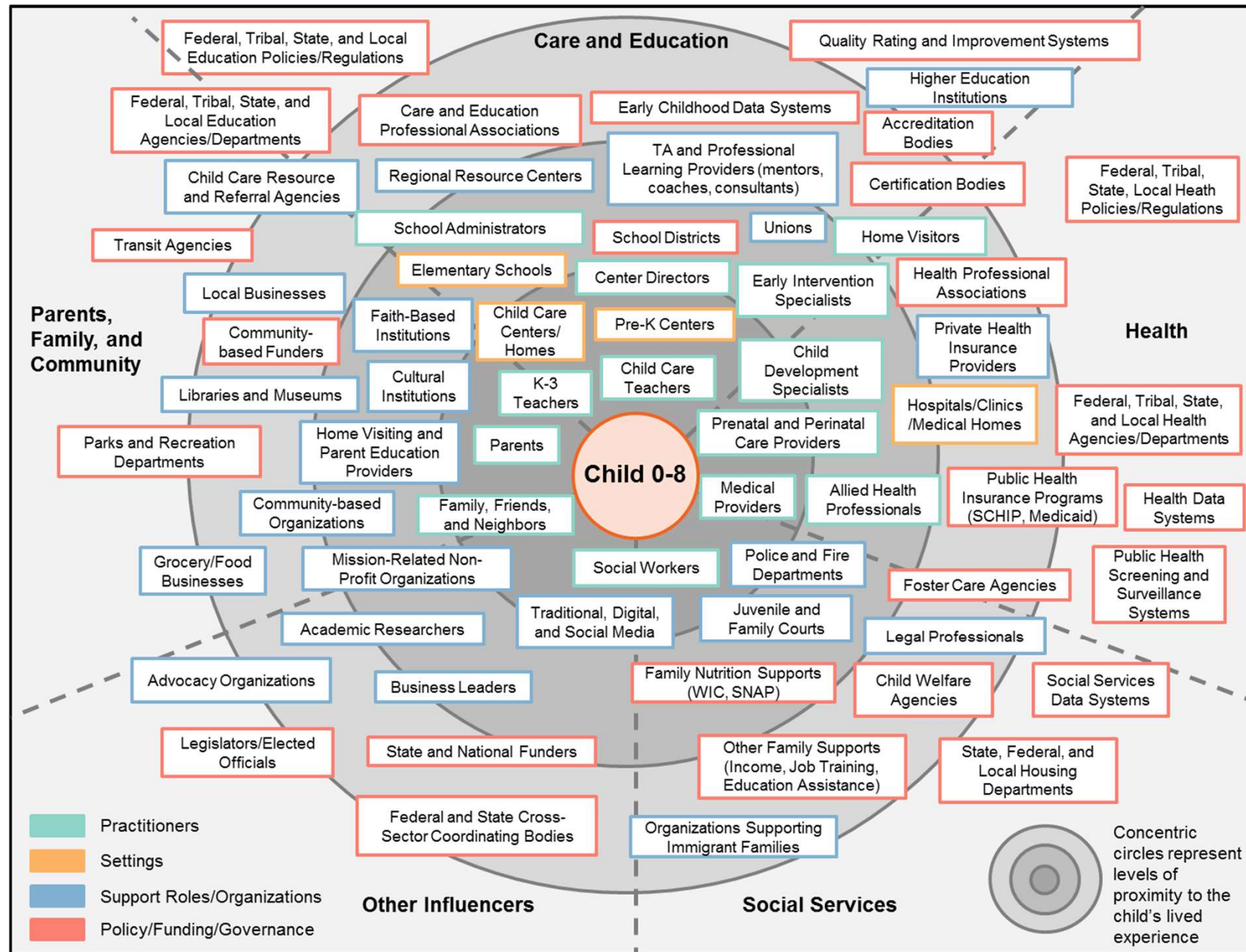
What is a system?

*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

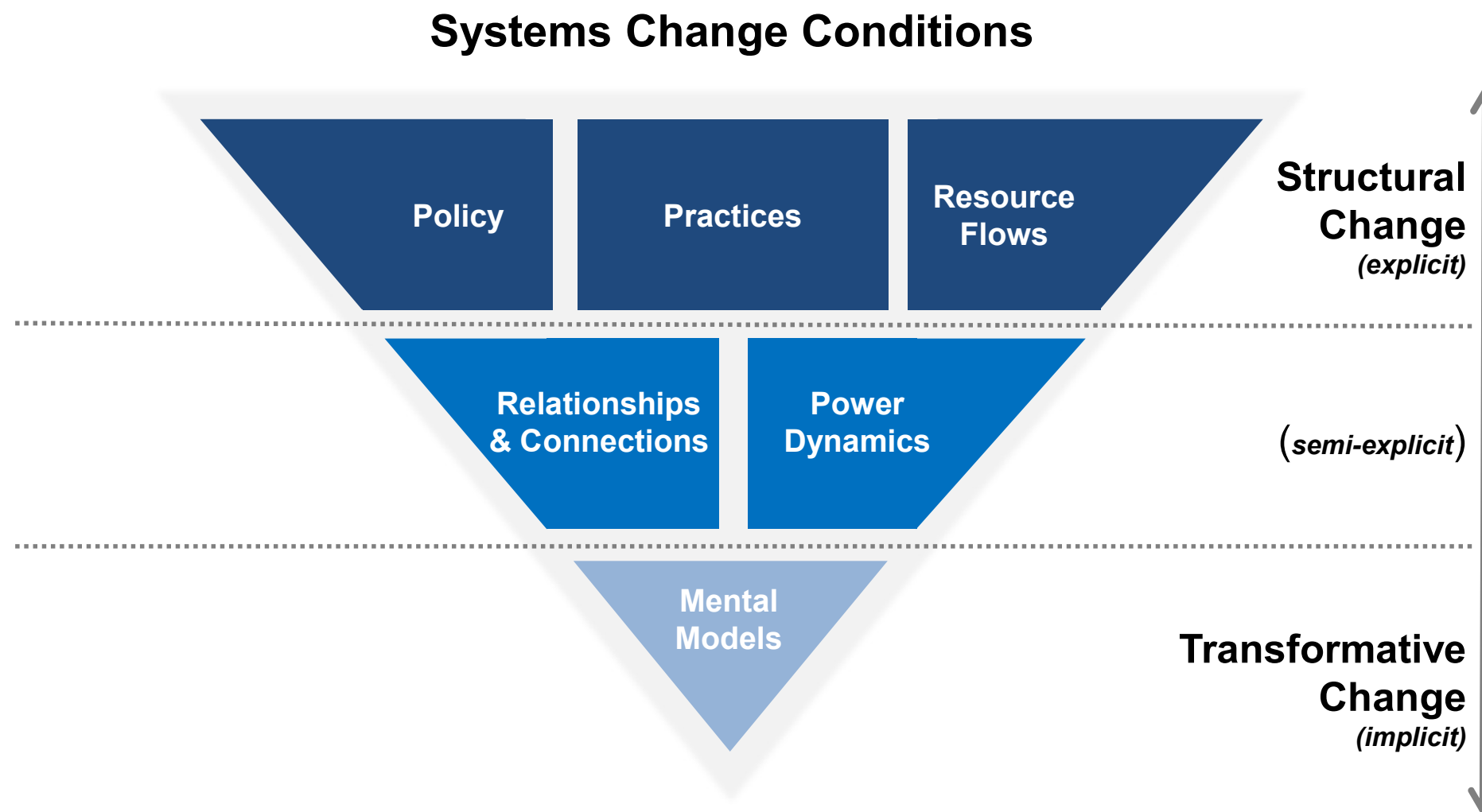


Systems *Thinking* vs Systems *Change*

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

Our case work has also revealed **common pitfalls** associated with applying the systems change triangle

You Don't Need to Do It All

One actor is unlikely to meaningfully impact all six conditions; the triangle can help pinpoint persisting gaps to inform and advance new targeted action and/or strengthen the impact of existing activities

Don't Demonize the Top Row

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

Remember that Systems Change Is Nonlinear

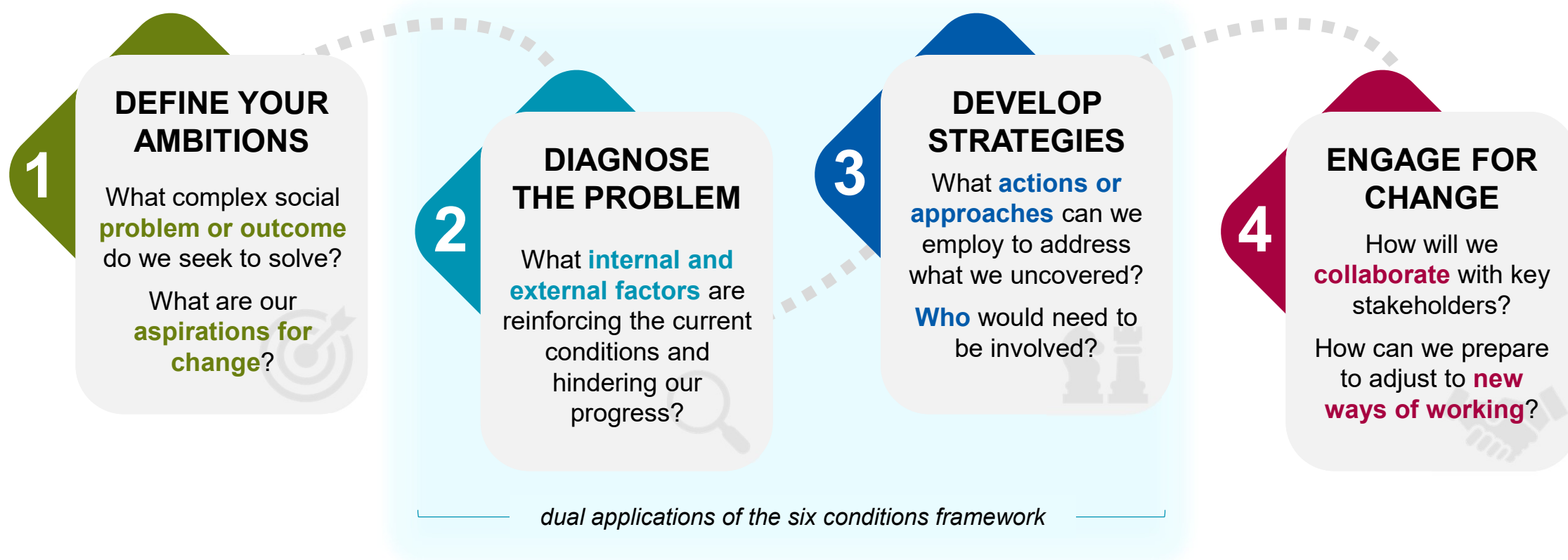
Change does not unfold linearly; the prioritization of efforts to shift systemic conditions should be informed by an external (opportunities/needs) and internal assessment (assets/capabilities) of the current reality

Always Look Around the Table

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

Applying a Systems Change Lens

The six conditions framework can be a powerful tool to **demystify the complex, often unseen dynamics** underpinning societal challenges...



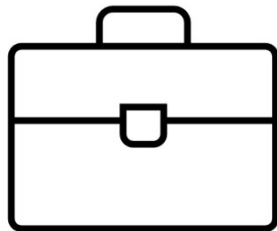
...and **inspire coordinated, actionable ways** for organizations to engage in addressing them

Fairfield County faces complex challenges that require systemic solutions.

Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity

- **3 in 10 employers** report they are unable to fill entry-level postings; 74% report it takes 6 months+ to fill open positions
- An estimated **48,000 new entry-level roles** could be filled with opportunity youth
- A projected **14,400 jobs** could go unfilled without intervention

Simple



Remove nonessential criteria from job descriptions:

Examine hiring practices and eliminate hurdles that discourage applicants (unnecessary degree requirements, erroneous years of experience, etc.).

Complicated



Expand apprenticeships through public-private partnerships:

Partnering with vocational schools to expand alternative pathways to employment with a focus on reskilling and upskilling the workforce.

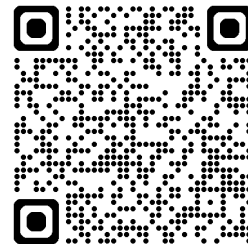
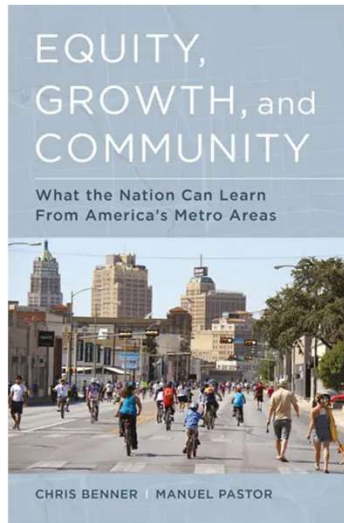
Systemic



Drive economic growth by supporting opportunity youth:

Build inclusive civic infrastructure across sectors, engage marginalized communities, and address underlying mindsets and mental models to sustain collaborative efforts over time.

Fairfield County can drive economic growth by working together to advance equity.



- Inequity is not just a moral challenge; it's a drag on economic growth
- Combining equity and growth requires local and regional action
- Diverse and dynamic knowledge communities drive success
- Data and shared understanding are critical.

Metropolitan Areas Project (MAPS) Oklahoma City, OK

MAPS is a 20+ year initiative to improve the region's quality of life, originally led by the chamber of commerce. It targets time-bound sales tax increases to support investments in both the urban core and regional assets to help attract additional investment and drive economic growth.

- **MAPS for the Future (1993):** 9 capital improvement projects, including new cultural, sports, recreation, and entertainment facilities
- **MAPS for Kids (2001):** \$514 million raised for school facilities, transportation, and technology improvements
- **MAPS 3 (2008):** Multi-year projects aimed at transforming the city's downtown, parks, and regional public transit system
- **MAPS 4 (2019):** Multi-year projects aimed at human infrastructure, addressing housing, mental health and homelessness.

Thank You

Resources for Continued Learning and Staying Connected

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



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