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Partnerships, Paradigms, and Social-System Change

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Keywords: Paradigm change, complex systems, partnerships, systems change

Key Points

- Social systems structures stem from underlying paradigms that are made up of beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions. Changing paradigms is a powerful way to change social systems. Such change is difficult and old paradigms keep pulling systems back to their former state.
- This article examines three types of partnerships that focus on these deep structures and paradigms, and that go beyond implementing a project or initiative to create fundamental, lasting change in the underlying beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions on which such systems are grounded.
- The functions of each type – project-focused, formal-systems-focused, and community-grounded partnerships – are identified, along with the ways each partnership maintains attention to paradigms and systems thinking. The configuration suggests ways for funders and initiative and organizational leaders to enrich their capacity to bring about systemic change within communities.

Introduction

Communities frequently confront issues entangled in a web of multiple social systems and underlying assumptions, perspectives, and beliefs. Managing this complexity can seem overwhelming. Consequently, communities often narrow their focus to a few manageable projects in order to make some movement on their issues.

But imagine that there is a way into this complexity, a way to understand and leverage fundamental change in these complex systems to produce more lasting change. In this article,

we invite you to imagine partnerships that go beyond implementing a project or initiative to creating fundamental change in social systems. By fundamental change, we mean a change in the underlying beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions on which the systems are grounded.

System-change expert Donella Meadows (2008) identified paradigm change as one of the highest leverage points for systemic change, a shift that influences entangled problems in a fundamental and lasting way. However, systems have a tendency, as Brenda Zimmerman (2015) phrases it, to “snap back” to their prior state and way of thinking. This happens, Meadows argues, because unrecognized, deeply embedded assumptions pull the system back to its former state. All parts of the system stem from the existing paradigm. Thus, change is needed throughout the system to prevent it being pulled back into the old paradigm.

The Importance of a Partnership Focus

We have been involved in the formation, support, and evaluation of partnerships over several decades. We have seen that partnerships all too often limit their role to implementing a project and declaring success. Thus, partnerships miss their potential to address lasting systemic change.

Over these same years, research and evaluation have repeatedly identified the importance of leadership, shared vision, mutual respect, trust, legitimacy, and representation within partnerships (Fawcett, Foster, & Francisco, 1997; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2004; Pollard, 2005; Varda, 2010). For example, the Wilder Collaboration Factors

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Inventory (Mattessich, et al., 2004) assesses partnerships on these and other elements. Kania & Kramer (2011) have posited five conditions – common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations – necessary for collective impact to gain significant results. As valuable as these conditions and frameworks are, they do not necessarily reach the deep systemic structures that bring about fundamental social-system change.

In this article, we offer a partnership configuration with three types of partnerships that focus on the deep structures and paradigms that shape social systems. The configuration provides funders, initiative leaders, and organizational leaders with ideas on adjusting existing partnerships and creating new ones to enrich their capacity to bring about systemic change within communities. We conclude with concrete actions that funders and leaders can take to stimulate partnerships committed to deep systemic change.

The basic argument for partnerships is well known. Complex issues, such as prevention of child neglect and abuse, involve more than one organization or service system. Typically, each of those (e.g., health, education, social services) is looking at only one piece of the big issue. But for individuals, families, and communities, these issues are not divided into discrete parts – they

are part of a whole and interconnected life. When different organizations address different aspects of an issue in a segmented and segregated way, the issue is not seen as holistic and change efforts are often ineffective. By joining in partnership, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, funders, businesses, and stakeholders can seek to create a synergy where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We recently evaluated a national initiative that sought to address child abuse and neglect by changing the underlying paradigm. The initiative focused on the interaction between service providers and parents and the ways that the structure of social systems supported that interaction at community and state levels. The initiative included partnerships as well as evidence-based practice models. This evaluation, coupled with our past experiences, gave us deeper insight into the significance and challenges of changing the underlying beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions on which social systems are based. To get partnerships to attend to paradigm shifts, we saw that they needed to be designed in a way that keeps the focus on the connection between the paradigm and the structures of the social systems.

Partnerships alone are unlikely to create a paradigm shift. If intentionally designed to support a paradigm shift, however, they can be a powerful component of the change process. Partnerships that use systems thinking and recognize the importance of changing an underlying paradigm:

- Provide a place for collective, critical reflection on the often-unstated beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions that underlie individual and organizational actions.
- Consider concretely how these beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions play out in language, interactions, and relationships.
- Recognize the interconnections and the need for coherence across the social domains of individuals, families, organizations, agencies, and the community.

- Reground communities in their core values.
- Take action to reconfigure social systems to align with and support the desired values of the community.

These partnerships are structured with careful attention to both their position within the local web of system structures and the systemic implications of a paradigm shift. Failing to so structure the partnership can result in one that is locked in the past or stuck with superficial changes, rather than one engaged in addressing the consequences of changes in demographic, technological, environmental, and economic conditions. Many of these social changes call into question the boundaries of formal systems such as health, education, and criminal justice. Existing boundaries can limit interactions among people involved in these systems. Accommodating the existing boundaries may cause partnerships to focus on immediate symptoms rather than dealing with underlying fundamental beliefs, perspectives, or assumptions that perpetuate the issues.

Three Types of Partnerships Focused on a Paradigm Shift

We suggest that partnerships that contribute to changing underlying paradigms be attuned to the desires of those partners that will be central actors in the paradigm shift. These members need to be guiding the partnership: they lead the changes with support and assistance from other partners.

Our experiences led us to distinguish three types of partnerships, based on their focus: project-focused partnerships, formal-systems-focused partnerships, and community-grounded partnerships. The makeup of each type differs according to the structures or interconnections the partnership aims to address. The type of stakeholders may be the same in each partnership, but different concentrations of stakeholders or different people (e.g., service providers, clients, executives) represent the same organization. Any of these partnerships may be functioning at a given time.

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Just as organizations work together in a partnership, partnerships engage in networking. They leverage one another's work to affect the complex web of social systems. One evaluation referred to these partnership networks as a "partnet" (Parsons, Hammond, & Lupe, 1998). Working together to bring about change, partnerships adapt to one another; to their varying focuses, roles, and functions; and to the changing conditions in the community. The three types of partnerships help provide a balance between the formal and informal structures of the community. In its own way, each type can help keep the focus on the deep values of the paradigm.

For each type of partnership, we identify the functions and roles of the partnership and the ways the partnership maintains attention to paradigms and systems thinking. We will use examples from the child-abuse initiative for which we served as cross-site evaluators.¹ In that initiative, three national organizations focused on the well-being of children and families were funded by the federal Children's Bureau to develop and oversee an initiative in four locations across the U.S.² We draw from this experience to illustrate how partnerships with different emphases take action that strengthens the paradigm shift in their locations.

¹ See Parsons, Jessup, & Moore, 2014.

² See *The Journal of Zero to Three*, September 2014, for additional information on this initiative. The theme of the issue is "Exploring New Paradigms for Evaluation and Service Delivery: The National Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood."

Each site implemented a carefully designed research project in which service providers worked with individual parents and carried out an evaluation structured to assess changes for the parents. Each site's project was based on the Protective Factors Framework (see sidebar) and was implemented with a different population: parents with low incomes served by a major hospital in a large city in the Northeast; parents of children with disabilities across a state in the South; pregnant women in substance-abuse treatment centers in the Midwest; and new parents involved in a home visitation program within a community-based support structure in the Northwest.

Protective Factors Framework

The Protective Factors Framework, developed by Strengthening Families at the Center for the Study of Social Policy (Brown, 2014), is an approach that expresses a paradigm shift. The shift is from service providers focusing on problems – risk factors – that families are facing to providing services to help support a family around specific protective factors that position them to address the problems in their own lives and to move through stressful times and circumstances with greater resilience. The five interconnected factors are:

- parental resilience,
- social connections,
- knowledge of parenting and child development,
- concrete support in times of need, and
- social-emotional competence of children.

There are multiple implications of this paradigm shift:

- All families need these protective factors in their lives, not just those presenting with problems.
- Families “own” the resources to face their difficulties.
- Both risk and protective factors are embedded into complex, interconnected systems that families navigate across all aspects of their lives.

The Protective Factors Framework points to five conditions that, when present in a family, provide protection against the risks and stresses that are considered to increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. The framework shifts the focus of social systems from reducing risk factors related to child abuse and neglect as its underlying paradigm to one of supporting parents in building protective factors to encourage optimal child development even when families live in risky situations. This paradigm shift alters how service providers view families and how parents approach problems in their lives. This shift ripples through the complex landscape of multiple formal systems and the community as a whole.

Because the Protective Factors Framework is an approach to working with parents based on a paradigm shift, and not a specific intervention, it can be implemented in conjunction with a variety of interventions. Each site was using an evidence-based practice (e.g., the High Fidelity Wraparound process) that had been previously tested in other situations.

Each site was required to involve an existing partnership to support the work and to address changes needed in the larger social systems relevant to their work. The partnerships varied in structure, focus, and membership. The national initiative leaders required an existing partnership because they were well aware of the time it takes to develop a new partnership. And, partners that worked together previously had established the trusting relationships that would provide a foundation for more in-depth attention to the paradigm, and were in a position to connect to larger ways in which the Protective Factors Framework might be used to support the underlying paradigm change in their organizations and community.

Each site's evaluators focused on parental-outcome data and project implementation at the parent and service-provider level. For the cross-site evaluation, we focused on the work of the partnerships, did secondary analysis of the parental-outcomes data, and drew on theories of complex systems to look for patterns across sites.

Throughout the remainder of this article, we draw on our findings and experiences with the partnerships within the initiative. The partnerships did not specifically have each of the three types of partnerships that we describe here; rather, the configuration of these three types represents our interpretation of how to increase systemic change in support of a shift in an underlying paradigm.

Project-Focused Partnerships

Functions and Roles

Many initiatives funded by foundations involve implementing new ways of providing services and/or interacting with those being served to see if and how a particular project works in a given location. When a project involves more than one organization, a partnership is often needed to ensure that it can actually be carried out as designed. Too often, there is limited focus on the paradigm underlying the project; usually the project is assumed to be congruent with the underlying paradigm or system structure. However, if a project is based on a shift in the underlying system paradigm, it is important to intentionally attend to the paradigm shift.

Attention to Paradigms and Systems Thinking

A project-focused partnership that is grounded in systems thinking and contributing to a paradigm shift has the following characteristics:

It supports project implementation while reinforcing the paradigm being addressed. Partners individually and collectively assist in ensuring that the project is implemented in a way that reinforces the fundamental change that the project is intended to address. In the work with pregnant women in substance-abuse treatment, a systemic shift away from the old paradigm of risk factors and toward the new paradigm of protective factors became possible as substance-abuse treatment workers and the state-level program director realized that reports to the state could be structured around the Protective Factors Framework. By using the framework, treatment providers would maintain a focus on protective factors and state leadership would tie accountability to protective factors.

Because the Protective Factors Framework is an approach to working with parents based on a paradigm shift, and not a specific intervention, it can be implemented in conjunction with a variety of interventions. Each site was using an evidence-based practice (e.g., the High Fidelity Wraparound process) that had been previously tested in other situations.

It helps project implementers adapt the work to their particular situations. The systemic context of the project cannot be ignored. In each of the four projects in our example, the partnership was attentive to the child welfare system and other systems in which their work was embedded. Partners in two sites needed a strong familiarity with the Early Intervention system that provides services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities. One of these sites also needed knowledge of the substance-abuse treatment system represented among the partners. Another site needed familiarity with the local systems in place to help families deal with income and food insecurity. Understanding the project within these larger social systems helped partners consider which existing systems and structures that are close to the service providers – and, in our example, parents – might be influenced by the new paradigm. It also helped them consider whether they needed additional partners or access to additional perspectives.

It increases support for the paradigm shift. The partnership provides insight into ways that project implementers can increase support for the paradigm shift and adapt to changes being created by the project. By requiring training related to

Throughout the project, the partnership formally reflects on both implementation and the paradigm that it is expected to support. It is important both to zoom in for a close look at the project and its implementation and to zoom out for a wider view of how the project work is fitting with the larger shift.

the Protective Factors Framework for the Early Interventionists who worked with parents of children with disabilities, a key partner helped ensure that the focus on the framework would continue. Partners worked through this important issue during, rather than after, project implementation, and agreed on adjustments in implementation and evaluation that increased the likelihood of a lasting change in Early Intervention training, a key system structure.

It periodically reflects on the bigger purpose of the project. Throughout the project, the partnership formally reflects on both implementation and the paradigm that it is expected to support. It is important both to zoom in for a close look at the project and its implementation and to zoom out for a wider view of how the project work is fitting with the larger shift. In the annual site visits, the cross-site evaluation team and project director met with each partnership and asked questions to stimulate this reflection, such as: Are front-line workers adequately supported and trained to make the paradigm shift? What emerging issues must be addressed to support the shift? As change occurs, what is needed to sustain the paradigm shift for families, service providers, and their agencies? Each partnership also had other ways of doing such reflection.

It thinks in new ways about sustainability. The partnership considers how the work fits into the community and the larger system. It also considers different approaches to adhering to the paradigm, such as embedding the principles of the project in other work. For example, one of the three national organizations refocused its training emphasis from the prevention of child abuse and neglect to the nurturing of child well-being. For one of the project sites, sustainability involved making the Protective Factors Framework the organizing framework around the partners' collective work as well as much of the individual organization's work. Thus, even though the funded initiative ended, the commitment to embed the framework into its collective service work in the community continued.

Formal-Systems-Focused Partnerships

Functions and Roles

In our discussion of formal-systems-focused partnerships, we are referring to partnerships that focus on making changes in extant norms, infrastructures, policies, and habitual practices within member organizations and within and across formal social agencies and organizations.

Such partnerships focus on making changes in formal social systems, such as child welfare, education, and health, to support the new paradigm. The partners recognize that key organizational norms, infrastructures, policies, and habitual practices are not in tune with the new paradigm. Partners attend to changes in both their own organizations and the boundaries between and interconnections among organizations.

Formal-systems-focused partnerships are often the hardest type to keep focused on the paradigm shift, because making the shift is likely to alter the power dynamics in and among organizations. If the paradigm is indeed fundamental, there are multiple places and ways in which the existing paradigm has been woven into the fabric and infrastructure within and across organizations. Shifting a paradigm can make both obvious and subtle changes in how – and by whom – power is wielded. Certain systems, groups, or roles are privileged; changes can affect which

ones are privileged. Also, shifting to a new paradigm may involve changes in organizational boundaries – certain activities, for example, may need to be shifted to or from organizations. Rules, practices, and roles shape people’s sense of identity. Sometimes rules and regulations have been in place for so long that people don’t realize change is an option. The new paradigm may require shifts in ways that may be surprisingly hard for people to recognize and adjust to because of the link to their sense of identity.

Attention to Paradigms and Systems Thinking

A formal-systems-focused partnership that is grounded in systemic thinking and contributing to the paradigm shift has the following characteristics:

It includes members with influence in their own organizations and their partner organizations. Partnership members are politically positioned to help apply the paradigm shift to their organizations. The partnership includes a combination of formal leaders and informal opinion leaders who are well regarded in their own organizations (although not necessarily at the highest level of the organization) and know how to influence and use both informal and formal connections within their organizations. These partners maintain conversations with essential parties from within their own organization – not only top leaders or service providers, but also those in the middle of the organization, where infrastructure gridlock is most likely to occur.

It pays attention to partners’ home organizations and the larger system. Members are included in the partnership because of their own or their organization’s connection to the paradigm shift and the possible role they or their organization can play. As partners deepen their understanding of the paradigm shift, they bring it back to their home organizations and deepen the understanding of the new paradigm there and what it means to operate from it, including the implications of the shift for organizational personnel and policies. For example, additional training or a reallocation of resources may be needed. Partners also recognize that the partnership is bigger than the individual organizations. They zoom out to the

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larger system and consider what changes (e.g., in policy) are needed to support the new paradigm across their organizations.

It stays connected to practice. The partnership stays connected with those who are experiencing the changes in practice based on the new paradigm (e.g., providers and parents). The partnership attends to what actually is changing and what is not, how easy or difficult the changes are to make, what the consequences of these changes are, and what organizational conditions they and their partners can address to support rather than interfere with the desired paradigm shifts. At one site, service providers involved in the project talked in depth with the formal-systems-focused partners about the amount of help they needed from the specially trained supervisors. The service providers wanted help in recognizing when they were using their habitual ways of interacting with parents rather than the new approaches embedded in the Protective Factors Framework.

It practices applying the paradigm shift to system structures. In dialogue, partners look at the interconnections of actions – a beginning aspect of deeper systems thinking – to understand the impact across the organizations or systems. Partners play out how shifts in the paradigm connect to other aspects of the partnership, organizations, and broader situation. For example, they hypothesize what changes in partner organizations would be needed to support the new paradigm in a particular situation. Partnership members consider places to make changes in their own organizations in support

The partnership continually learns about system dynamics and conditions of social systems in order to be able to expand ways of influencing social systems. It attends to local dynamics and conditions as well as occurrences in the larger system (e.g., state or federal policies) that support or undermine the paradigm.

of the paradigm shift in manageable ways that minimize disruptions but don't compromise on the necessary changes. Because the changes in complex systems are embedded within a web of connections, it helped for partners to engage with other members who were often in similar roles in different social systems and had a depth of understanding of the type of changes each faced. These conversations helped partners identify interconnections and work through practical issues.

It addresses the power shifts embedded in the paradigm shift. Partners consider current power conditions within and across organizations, including who may be threatened by long-standing practices and what changes might bolster trust. For example, a key organization in a partnership in our example served as an intermediary for service funding in early childhood. The organization also received direct-service money. In the next funding cycle, the organization decided not to compete with its partner organizations for the direct-service money. Instead, the organization chose to focus on its intermediary role, which it saw as especially important in the new configuration of relationships that was forming through the partnership in support of the new paradigm

in the community. The organization's decisions increased confidence within the partnership that serious systemic change was underway.

It continually develops knowledge about the dynamics and conditions of social systems. The partnership continually learns about system dynamics and conditions of social systems in order to be able to expand ways of influencing social systems. It attends to local dynamics and conditions as well as occurrences in the larger system (e.g., state or federal policies) that support or undermine the paradigm. The partnership finds its place in the system by mapping the partnership and its organizations – zooming in for a close look at the partnership and existing interconnections, and zooming out to see where the partnership sits in the bigger picture. Partners become familiar with relationships, boundaries, and the history of organizations in the social system and how these are changing as a consequence of the paradigm shift. For example, the project located in the medical center had to consider how the work of the service provider in facilitating access to services could be sustained in light of health insurance limitations.

It reflects, systemically. Ongoing reflection is essential. The partnership members reflect on practical areas (e.g., policies) where they can create support for or dampen interference within organizations for moving into the new paradigm. At the site addressing families with children with disabilities, for example, the state agency responsible for disability services amended its memorandum of understanding with private Early Intervention agencies to require training in the Protective Factors Framework. This relatively small change increased the likelihood that all Early Interventionists would be familiar with the framework and be able to work with families from this perspective. To ensure that this change was sustained, however, it was important to formalize it in organizational policies. Additionally, the partners needed to trace the ramifications of this change to see what else it was connected to in their organizations.

It reframes. The partnership uses the knowledge gained to reframe and imagine other actions as potential next steps in operating from the new paradigm. As work moves forward, partners also reconsider the partnership in light of the bigger purpose, including what other voices need to be heard as the project proceeds. Reframing can also include taking on different roles, such as advocacy and capacity building. One site in our example began to use the Protective Factors Framework as a way to organize their responses to requests for proposals. As another site considered concrete needs in the community, the partners recognized that housing was not being addressed. They had to determine the feasibility of bringing housing representatives into the current partnership.

Community-Grounded Partnerships

Functions and Roles

Partnerships all too often are made up of people from formal agencies and organizations, with few representatives of the community being “served.” The third type of partnership turns this on its head. A community-grounded partnership is largely made up of residents who represent the range of a community’s cultural groups. The partnership emerges from the present activism of residents who see a better way for their community, who are committed to rethinking the way it functions, and who want the systems within the community grounded in what the community values most – not what professionals think is best. The momentum for change comes from residents organizing and drawing on their culturally grounded community assets and collective wisdom to address community concerns.

Formal agencies and organizations do have a place in the partnership. Residents enter into strategic alliances with agencies and organizations that respect community perspectives, support community organizing, and provide resources and expertise that they view as genuinely of service to the community. At any point in time the focus of the partnership might be on a particular issue (e.g., housing), but the partnership perspective is one that respects and values all segments of the community in all of its complexity.

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Attention to Paradigms and Systems Thinking

A community-grounded partnership ensures that the interpretation of the paradigm shift is centrally congruent with the values and perspectives of the community. It is often facilitated by a largely resident-based organization, such as a neighborhood association or a group of faith-based organizations.

It understands, articulates, and represents the diverse values, needs, and interests of the community. The partnership develops with community leadership and ensures involvement of the full range of

Avoid seeing the partnership as the end goal. The survivability of the partnership sometimes becomes the end goal. Instead, funders and leaders can help ensure a continuing focus on how the partnership supports the paradigm shift.

stakeholders in ways that keep central the community's interpretation of the paradigm. Rather than aiming for consensus and compromise, the partnership uses the community's diversity to stimulate creativity and engagement as well as new ways to take action. The partnership seeks to determine how best to enhance the well-being of the community through appreciating the values, needs, and interests of all groups for the common good. The partnership includes people who have an understanding of and respect for all within the community. The membership is not necessarily proportionate to the number of people in a given group. For example, there may be few of a particular ethnicity or few with disabilities, but those in the partnership value diverse perspectives and ensure their inclusion. The partnership also seeks understanding of the different cultures and norms that exist in the community. The partnership looks for where values and interests are and are not shared, and works to find common interests on which to build (e.g., the well-being of children). Taking the perspective of the residents, the partners seek to identify where specific actions by agencies and organizations align or stray from community values and the desired paradigm. The partnership maintains a commitment to the diversity of the community; it rejects "one size fits all" approaches.

It is responsive to the cultural groups within the community. The partnership recognizes the different and shared norms and values among cultural groups and focuses on building relationships

among them. The partnership is deeply grounded in the complexity of the community's cultures and regularly engages with people across the larger community. It recognizes the importance of community events that bring people of multiple perspectives together to interact, person to person, in a trusting, caring environment. At one site, for example, a faith-based organization positioned people within the communities to help support, catalyze, consolidate, and give voice to community concerns, ideas, and efforts at change. These people were given the apt name of "community lightning rods." The partnership is aware of and attempts to mitigate or change institutional policies and practices that routinely produce cumulative adverse results for people of color while routinely advantaging whites. At another site, the involvement of a Hispanic-serving organization helped ensure that the partnership integrated cultural considerations in its planning and interventions.

It operates from the stance of working "with" one another or alongside one another, not doing "to" or "for" others. The partnership rejects terms such as "gaining input" from the community, "getting buy-in," or "building support for the new orientation." It might even reject the concept of the community "owning" the partnership. Rather, the partnership is seen as emerging from the essence of the community as a whole. The partnership draws on tools such as community and parent cafés to involve the community. For example, one site used parent cafés, in which parents came together for structured, small-group conversations to discuss their concerns and consider how to use the Protective Factors Framework to address these concerns.³

It maintains an awareness of the balance of power within the community. The partnership has representation that ensures that the balance of power is acknowledged and that power imbalances are addressed in the way discussions unfold and decisions are made. Some communities have organizations that focus on supporting community organizing and community-based action. These organizations can help support these partnerships without taking power away from the

³ See http://www.ctfalliance.org/initiative_parents-2.htm.

residents. For example, a site that had multiple faith-based organizations working together benefited from their connections with each other and with residents, so any power imbalances that emerged could be addressed.

It reflects on projects or changes being implemented in the community. The partnership engages in dialogue with people from across the community, particularly those most likely to be affected by the new paradigm. The partnership listens to the community to find out how neighborhoods and communities are already addressing issues related to the paradigm shift and how it can build on desired actions that are already taking place. The partnership regularly reflects on activities and how these do or do not align with community values. It provides concrete feedback regarding changes that agencies or organizations are making to ensure that the core values of the community are supported.

Implications for Funders and Partnership Leaders

Both funders and community leaders play an important part in stimulating partnerships that are committed to deep systemic change. Here are seven practical actions for funders and community leaders.

- *Avoid seeing a project as the end goal.* Rather than focusing on how the project contributes to the paradigm shift, partners too often begin to see a particular project as the end goal. The partners might begin searching for additional funding to continue the project rather than focusing on the knowledge gained from the project and how to fund efforts related to that new knowledge and the fundamental shift.
- *Avoid seeing the partnership as the end goal.* The survivability of the partnership sometimes becomes the end goal. Instead, funders and leaders can help ensure a continuing focus on how the partnership supports the paradigm shift.
- *Keep tenaciously focused on needed infrastructure changes.* The power of the current system structures to create snap back is a constant threat. By tenaciously focusing on needed infrastructure changes, funders and leaders can recognize how the infrastructure of organizations may be undermining efforts to make and maintain the desired paradigm shift.
- *Balance depth and breadth in partnership focus.* Funders can play an important role in helping partnerships remain cognizant of the larger system, related areas of that system, and on all segments of the community. Partners can focus too much on the part of the social system they are trying to change and lose touch with other partnerships and related areas of the system. When a partnership focuses on integrating a particular practice into or across organizations, for example, the partnership may overlook contradictory practices, such as practitioners being incentivized to take actions contrary to the new practice. Additionally, the partnership might begin to focus on one or a few segments of the community without connecting them to the larger picture or seeing ways in which broader community change can occur. An associated sign is that the partnership begins to believe that community change is the same for all groups within the community. A funder can help to keep this larger perspective in mind.
- *Recognize how language can reinforce a paradigm.* Language can serve to either reinforce the old paradigm or advance a paradigm shift. For example, when issues arise that are of concern to the partners, using terms such as “troubleshooting” implies that something is wrong and that issues must be resolved in order to maintain some specific approach. The issues might not be “trouble,” but may be the result of changing conditions stemming from project implementation. Talking about “adaptation” to these changing conditions would be more in keeping with the paradigm of system change.
- *Talk about power and the importance of the power shifts embedded in the paradigm shift.* Partners avoid addressing power shifts

We believe that each type of partnership has a reasonable scope to take the actions needed to make long-lasting change. As the partnerships connect with one another, they can reflect deeply on all parts of the social systems in the community to truly address the issues of our day.

because they seem too big or politically sensitive. Conversations regularly need to address fundamental issues of power.

- **Participate.** Avoid sitting outside or alongside the community rather than being a part of it. When partnerships or partner members see themselves as separate from the community, they might not engage with the community or seek to understand the values of the community. Just as partnerships need to be part of the community, so too do funders need to see themselves as part of the partnership.

In this article, we have shared our current thinking about the interplay between the purpose, focus, and scope of three types of partnerships and their attention to systemic changes. We believe that each type of partnership has a reasonable scope to take the actions needed to make long-lasting change. As the partnerships connect with one another, they can reflect deeply on all parts of the social systems in the community to truly address the issues of our day.

We are grateful for the role philanthropy has played in helping us explore these ideas and share them with you. We hope the ideas presented in this article help you imagine partnerships as going beyond implementation of a project or initiative to creating fundamental change in social systems.

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