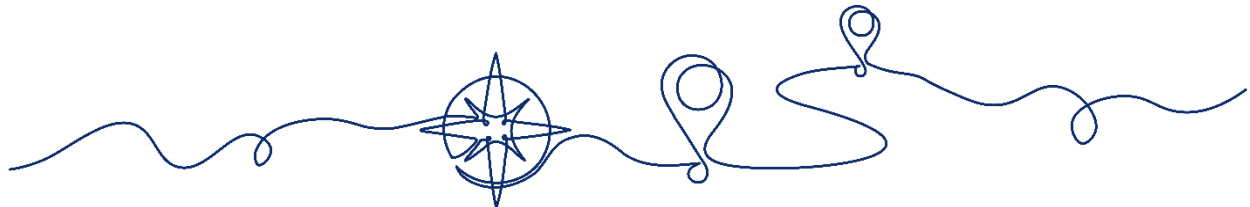# Stories of Change:

How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region

A Reflection & Discussion Guide for Funders

This reflection and discussion guide accompanies the publication *Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region,* written by Jessica Conrad with Rotary Charities of Traverse City. It has been designed for funders who are either actively supporting upstream work on complex community problems or who are interested in getting more upstream. The guide can be used as a prompt for individual reflection and/or a guide for group discussion among staff, board, and partners.

Intro & Using a Systems Change Approach (pp. 1 – 12)

- What social or ecological problem(s) does your organization's grantmaking address? Would you describe these problems as complex (p. 5)? If so, what makes them complex?
- Stories of Change presents the work of Systems Change in four phases (pp. 10-11). What other processes for systems change have you seen or experienced?

Rotary Charities of Traverse City: From Charity to Changemaker (pp. 13 – 24)

- Overall, what role does your organization currently play in improving systems? What role do you want to play? How might you begin closing the gap? What might you need to let go of in order to close the gap?
- In the context of your funding practice, what would it mean for you to *work together differently* with changemakers? What barriers to a different way of working exist? How might you overcome them?
- Stories of Change surfaces the insight that the principles and work of shifting complex community problems also applies to us as individuals and funding organizations (p. 16).
  - o How might you deepen your reflection and learning around the ways you and your team might be both advancing and inhibiting change?

Three Case Studies (pp. 25 - 67)

- Each story follows four phases of systems change (described generally on pp. 10-11). Do you currently provide any funding or support for work like that described in any of the phases? If yes, what? In which phase do you think your involvement is having the greatest impact/leverage? Why?
  - If you're not currently providing funding or support for work in any of the phases, which one would be most aligned with your current goals? Why? Which phase would be least aligned? Why?
- Each story also highlights examples of funders supporting multi-stakeholder initiatives in a variety of ways. What support do you currently offer beyond grants and investments? How might you begin experimenting with providing more forms of support beyond financial resources?
- The stories end with a section called "Signals of Change" that highlights the shifts each initiative noticed in the systems at stake. What stands out to you about these shifts? How might they differ from the outcomes you typically hear about in grant reports?

Insights from Systems Change in Action (pp. 68 - 71)

- **Systems change through trusting relationships and clear roles.** When have you been a part of a trusting space? What value did that space bring to you? What value do these spaces bring to your grantee partners?
- **Systems change when we see them as completely as possible.** How do you currently gather multiple diverse perspectives to inform your own practices?
  - How do you support your grantees in doing the same?
  - What different practices might you like to begin experimenting with?
- **Systems change when we make equitable power shifts.** What support do you currently offer your grantee partners for adopting more equitable practices? What else might you do?
- **Systems change when learning becomes strategy**. How is "learning as strategy" different from how you have viewed learning in the past? What benefits might this framing have?
- **Systems change—bring patience.** Take a moment to reflect on your current mindset about the timeline for creating enduring change. How long do you think it takes (or should take) to make progress on complex social and ecological issues? How long do you typically invest? What types of intermediate results might make you more comfortable with longer grantee relationships?

Did this guide spark any new insights or action? Do you have a question to add or other feedback? We'd love to hear from you! We're eager to connect with and learn from other funders who are engaged in, or interested in, systems change strategies. Please reach out to Freya Bradford, Rotary Charities Director of Systems Change & Learning: fbradfrod@rotarycharities.org, or on LinkedIn.