

COMMUNITY- DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE



The power of grassroots-led change for long-term impact and how funders can nurture it

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community-driven systems change is an approach to development and social transformation that emphasizes the insight, leadership, and ownership of the people who are living and experiencing issues at the community level, and their work to create lasting change in the systems and root causes that underlie the critical issues they seek to address.

In this era of philanthropy, greater investment is being made in grassroots efforts to effect long-term change, especially when it comes to some of our world's greatest social challenges. However, we have a long way to go in understanding how to effectively support and catalyze, rather than hinder, lasting impact at the community level.

At Firelight, we conducted a three-year process (2017-2020) of inquiry, learning, co-creation, and validation with community-based organizations (CBOs) who are current or past grantee-partners of Firelight, to develop a clearer and deeper understanding of how change comes about at the community level, and how funders can more effectively support it. In this report, we share the findings and recommendations around community-driven systems change that emerged from this learning and reflection process. These learnings have also informed a substantial re-formulation of our own practices.

KEY FINDINGS

Lasting impact at the community level happens through community-driven systems change

Through our discussion with CBO leaders and practitioners a clear understanding emerged around how lasting impact at the community level happens:

Relevant, impactful, and sustainable change at the community level comes when:

- Community members determine, own, and drive the change process; and
- Focus actions on addressing the underlying systems and root causes of concern – rather than only reacting to symptoms.

This is community-driven systems change.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) hold a particularly important role in fostering community-driven systems change

CBO leaders describe effective or empowered communities as those that actively identify, discuss, prioritize, and respond to both immediate needs and long-term systems dynamics affecting their members, particularly the most vulnerable. Effective CBOs are those that are able to empower and catalyze such community analysis and action in thoughtful, impactful, and sustainable ways.

One of the most valuable powers of CBOs is their capacity to develop, value, respect, invest in, and nurture relationships and agency within their own communities as well as with a wide range of other stakeholders. CBOs are also effective in intentionally and constantly collaborating with these stakeholders to facilitate deep and lasting change at the full community or system level. The familiarity, trust, and collaboration that CBOs nurture with communities enables them to participatory engage communities and to work together with them towards meaningful and sustainable change in structures, norms, dynamics, and other root causes that are inherent in any system.

We recognize that CBOs are not the only community-led actors important for systemic development; other important groups include organized but unregistered village or community structures (such as savings and loans groups) and grassroots movements. But CBOs are particularly important in the unique value, place, and role they already play in their local systems, and are key agents for community-driven systems change.

Funders are struggling to achieve high impact relationships with CBOs

Many funders — and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) — seek to work with CBOs in order to reach the most vulnerable communities. But CBOs describe important and distinct challenges with those relationships that limit them in achieving the outcomes they seek.

A recent survey by the Rights CoLab and the West African Civil Society Institute¹ of 609 Global South civil society organizations found that –

- 84% of Global South civil society organizations (CSOs) said that they collaborate with INGOs
- **85% of those who collaborate with INGOs said that the relationship is not mutually beneficial.**

The most consistent and important internal constraints that surfaced in our research were insufficient, restricted, and unpredictable funding, and – relatedly – insufficient qualified human resources – both of which make it difficult for CBOs to respond effectively and consistently to the needs in their community. Insufficient resourcing and thus reliance on donors also make CBOs susceptible to donor agendas, demands, and shifting priorities, oftentimes necessitating CBOs to change strategies and/or shift programming to a particular focus area due to donor interests rather than the communities' most pressing needs. Furthermore, by instrumentalizing CBOs to achieve organizational goals instead of community goals, funders and INGOs end up co-opting the CBOs' relationships and trust, and can even risk harming a CBO's connection and responsiveness to their communities.

We must reconceptualize our approach to funding CBOs to achieve long-lasting, systemic impact

A community-driven systems change approach is about recognizing, supporting, and liberating communities' leadership, analysis, and action for long-term change.

In order to effectively support community-driven systems change, we need a fundamental reconceptualization and re-valuing of the role played by CBOs and communities in facilitating and effecting lasting change in root causes and systems at the grassroots level. It also requires a re-definition of indicators of organizational capacity and effectiveness to encompass community approaches and structures that may not conform to Global North standards but are deeply effective in their own systems. Finally, we must reimagine donor-CBO relationships where power, resources, and decision-making are moved closer to the communities directly affected by different social issues.

GUIDELINES AND TOOLS TO SUPPORT FUNDERS TO MEANINGFULLY SUPPORT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

A community-driven systems change approach requires important shifts in funders' (and INGOs') perspectives and practices as they engage with, support, trust, and shift power to community leaders and institutions such as CBOs. And, this can be done without giving up on rigour, accountability, and measurement of results.

In this resource, we present community-driven systems change as a paradigm and approach, as well as a set of powerful and diverse strategies and tools that can be used by funders to support CBOs to catalyze community-driven approaches and systems change outcomes.

FUNDERS AND INGOs WHO ARE COMMITTED TO LASTING, TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE WILL FIND THAT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE IS POWERFUL, EFFECTIVE, MANAGEABLE, AND LIBERATING AS IT SHIFTS POWER TO THOSE WHO ARE MOST AFFECTED BY THE ISSUES, OPERATES ON PREMISES OF TRUST, REFRAMES SUCCESS AND IMPACT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THOSE LIVING THE ISSUES, AND OFFERS A SET OF GUIDELINES AND TOOLS TO OPERATIONALIZE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY WITH COMMUNITIES.

ABOUT FIRELIGHT

Firelight is a multi-donor public charity fund that raises money from foundations, individuals, and institutions to support community-driven systems change for children and youth in eastern and southern Africa. We believe lasting change comes when communities create safe, strong, and nurturing environments where children and youth thrive and are able to realize their extraordinary potential. We believe that lasting systemic change for children's rights and development needs to value and involve community and indigenous institutions such as community-based organizations (CBOs). Firelight has been working with CBOs in sub-Saharan Africa for over two decades.

Firelight receives contributions and grants from large and small foundations and donors, and facilitates a flexible, participatory, and thorough system of grants, mentoring, convening, learning and reflection for CBOs in Africa so that they can work with their own communities to build and realize their shared visions of sustainable change and true potential for children and youth. Firelight also gathers evidence, leverages networks, and seeks to influence a global practice of valuing and funding local agency and community-driven systems change for children and youth.

Read more about us at www.firelightfoundation.org.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Between 2017 and 2020, Firelight embarked upon a learning journey to listen deeply to our CBO grantee-partners to understand how better to support them in creating lasting change at the community level for children, youth, and families, and to share CBO leaders' insights with the wider sector as a rich and valuable source of guidance to funders, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), practitioners, and scholars. Both objectives were driven by a realization that there was limited, if any, documented and published evidence on how to strengthen the capacity and success of CBOs, especially from the perspectives of CBOs themselves.

We carried out an emergent, multi-phase, and mixed methods process for inquiry, learning, co-creation, and validation as follows –

In 2017, Firelight commissioned Dalberg Global Development Advisors (Dalberg) as an independent consultant team to conduct a mixed methods inquiry with past and current CBO grantee-partners of Firelight in nine African countries: Lesotho, Rwanda, Malawi, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, and Zambia. Surveys and key informant interviews captured the perspectives of CBO leaders and practitioners on the role of CBOs in social change by addressing our key questions around (1) the role played by CBOs in social change at the community level; (2) how CBOs define success, effectiveness, and impact; (3) the challenges and enablers they face in achieving long-term change; (4) the capacity and skills that are helpful to them in achieving long-term change; and (5) how funders and other organizations can better support them in their efforts.

- Surveys were completed by representatives from a diverse range of 49 CBOs across the nine African countries. Most respondents filled out the survey online; however, a couple opted for a phone survey which was administered by Dalberg consultants.
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 18 CBO leaders and practitioners. These CBOs were purposefully selected to ensure a representative range across country location, programming focus, the perceived success of the funding partnership, organization size, and capacity.

Over 2018 and 2019, Firelight staff validated and deepened the findings and analyses with current CBO grantee-partners. This validation process included:

- In-person workshops which included work to co-create concepts and frameworks;
- Virtual group discussions on learnings and implications;
- One-on-one in-depth conversations to dive deep on specific issues;
- Visits with CBO grantee-partners' programs and communities, along with in-depth discussion with CBOs and communities, to further develop and refine our understanding;
- Co-creating and co-presenting to other stakeholders, and reflecting on feedback received; and
- Review and feedback by CBO partners of drafted papers, concepts, frameworks, and tools.

One key milestone in the validation process was a Lead Partner Convening in February of 2019 in which 14 CBO leaders were brought together in a three-day workshop to further explore and define what success and sustainable impact mean in the CBO context and how funders and other organizations can more effectively partner with and support CBOs to achieve lasting impact. During this convening, different methods were used including large and small group discussions; presentation and analysis of case studies from different organizations; and idea generation, analysis, and prioritization. The detailed notes from these processes were further reviewed and analyzed to refine and strengthen the findings, interpretations, and applications.

In 2020, Firelight contracted an academic researcher, Dr. Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, specialist in qualitative analysis, to conduct more systematic coding and rigorous analysis as well as triangulation on both the original data and the qualitative notes from the validation processes such as the Lead Partner Convening, to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings and to prepare a paper for publication. The interpretation of findings was additionally informed by feedback from a group of CBO advisors, four of whom actively engaged in a peer review process on the paper and contributed significantly to the discussion of the results.

Finally, all of the concepts, papers, guidelines, and tools shared in this report and resource kit were informed by, co-created with, and/or reviewed and validated with different groups of CBO advisors.

WHY DO WE NEED TO INVEST IN COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

ENDURING, TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE REQUIRES AN APPROACH OF JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY

Fundamentally, we believe that transformative change in global development necessitates stances of justice and solidarity, in contrast to the current models of charity and aid.²

Philanthropy has long been considered a form of charity or aid, in which those with wealth and resources identify worthy causes and donate to them. Often these funds are given with considerable restrictions around how they may be spent, and are accompanied by a long list of requirements for monitoring, reporting, and evidence of results.

This charity approach to global development is deeply flawed. Despite good intentions and generally thoughtful implementation, charity approaches often involve symptomatic and short-term fixes, and usually do not address underlying systemic issues or root causes. Moreover, power tends to lie with the donor who determines who is worthy of receiving funds, how the funds may be used, and how success is defined. This results in initiatives, approaches, strategies, and actions that are deemed appropriate by usually Global North, white, wealthy people – whose perspectives and lenses are at best limited and narrow, but at worst biased and even self-interested in maintaining underlying social and economic structures.

A justice approach to global development, on the other hand, is about fairness, rights, and the equitable distribution of money, opportunities, and power among all members of society. With a justice approach, symptomatic and reactive fixes are inadequate – it is necessary to expose and redress that which is unfair and inequitable. Justice approaches often go hand in hand with a commitment of solidarity – the sense that we are all responsible to fight injustice towards ourselves and others. This sense of solidarity is more in line with the original meaning of the word ‘philanthropy’ – that is, love of one’s fellow humanity.

Community-driven systems change as an approach is a clear way to operationalize justice and solidarity. It requires donors and other holders of power and wealth to walk with, and even be guided by, people and communities, in the messy, gradual, difficult, and long-term work of creating both small and large shifts in underlying systems and norms. This is what it means to be in solidarity with others towards a more just and equitable world.

CURRENT GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS AND APPROACHES HAVE HAD LIMITED SUCCESS

Despite substantial investments over many years in development efforts, many of the large projects initiated by traditional, top-down Global North donors and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have not resulted in meaningful and lasting change at the community level. In many cases, there has even been unintentional harm incurred to communities and local civil society by the disruption of local economic and social systems. Often, this has been directly a result of top-down and externally defined agendas and priorities being imposed on local communities. Indeed, very little development funding actually reaches community-based organizations (CBOs) and other local organizations³. Moreover, those funds or projects that do reach the community level have sometimes been critiqued for treating CBOs as vehicles to carry out predetermined donor agendas or INGO programs – the effects of which often fade away soon after external funding is withdrawn.



SOCIAL CHANGE IS COMPLEX AND SYSTEMIC

Social issues are complex and systemic, and effecting change in them often requires similar systemic and complex responses. Many current development interventions take the form of band-aid approaches in that they focus on single issues that are usually just symptoms of underlying root causes and systems. These approaches have limited success, if any, and in some cases can even be detrimental to the overall system and to the wellbeing of the population that was intended to be supported. Similarly, focusing on policy change at national and regional levels is important, but it is also critical to take systemic and contextual approaches at the grassroots levels where the implementation and enforcement of these policies and guidelines actually takes place.

For effective social change processes, there is growing agreement that systems approaches are necessary, in which different root causes, stakeholders, systems, and the interplay between them are considered and acted upon to create lasting change. This kind of change process takes time, is complex and messy, is often nonlinear, and involves many processes and outcomes that are not tangible or easily quantifiable.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS, LEADERS, PRACTITIONERS, AND ACTIVISTS ARE CRITICAL AGENTS OF GRASSROOTS CHANGE

There is increasing recognition that in order for change in the Global South to be relevant, impactful, and sustained in the long term, it must be led by those who are affected by the issues at hand — people, families, communities, local leaders, practitioners, activists, and grassroots community organizations — in the Global South.

In order to support long-term change at the community level, the philanthropy and global development sectors must learn from and support Global South community leaders' analyses of the issues, their determined strategies, their visions of success, their indicators of effectiveness, and what they need in terms of help and support.

Indeed, as has become clear in our learning from community leaders and practitioners, genuine success in development, especially at the grassroots level, is about systemic change that is conceptualized, led, and owned by communities.



WHAT IS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

Community-driven systems change is an approach to development and social transformation that emphasizes the insight, leadership, and ownership of the people who are living and experiencing issues at the community level, and their work to create lasting change in the systems and root causes that underlie the critical issues they seek to address.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE IS...	COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE IS NOT...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with community and government stakeholders to surface key issues, share indigenous knowledge, map out systems and stakeholders, understand root causes, prioritize issues, and develop a shared action plan – in which the CBO is one of many actors. • Together implementing, evaluating/reflecting on, and adapting that shared action plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a proposal without the input of community and government stakeholders, submitting it to a funder for approval, and then delivering the proposed program to the target community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing actions or interventions, with community stakeholders, in response to the issues and root causes identified in the community – drawing on available experiences, indigenous knowledge and practices, and internal and external tools and resources as appropriate to respond to the need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting with the premise of replicating/ scaling a program or rolling out a pre-packaged model or tool.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being open and sensitive to both expected and unexpected outcomes, and looking for intermediate indicators of progress. • Using data and evidence to learn and improve action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting with and being guided by a static linear log-frame or logic model. • Being evaluated according to a predetermined set of outcomes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking about the whole system, the context, different stakeholders, relationships, and dynamics. Different stakeholders recognizing and acting on different entry points. • Investing time and resources into convenings and exchanges that build community cohesion, shared analysis and learning, and collaborative action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing an isolated intervention.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions that aim to create lasting changes in systems –such as advocacy, normative change, strengthening existing community or government structures. (May also include some responsive service provision if the CBO and community deem it an urgent priority.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only service provision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing that it takes time and investment to create true shifts in systems that will last, that this change may not be immediately visible. • Recognizing that beneficiary numbers in a given year are not an indicator of systemic change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to reach a large number of direct beneficiaries during a short funding/project cycle without creating meaningful long-term change.

WHY ARE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS CRITICAL FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION (CBO)?

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are grassroots nonprofit groups made up of people who live in and have relationships with the community they are supporting. CBOs arise from the local community and in direct response to the needs of the local community – and they operate at a local level to improve life for residents. They are accountable to their communities, traditional leaders, and local government. CBOs are often participatory and consultative with their community members, and act as a bridge or forum for discussion, planning, advocacy, and coordination. They mobilize and leverage both community resources (including volunteer time, in-kind contributions, and money) and outside investments such as funding from funders and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).

Note: While some INGOs and national non-governmental organizations may set up offices in local communities, and consider themselves to be “based” in the community, we would not include these set-ups in our definition of community-based organizations, as they did not arise from the community and they are not led by and accountable to the community.

WHY ARE CBOs IMPORTANT FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

Community institutions such as CBOs are critical actors and leaders in the development ecosystem and especially in grassroots change processes.

- They are able to transect, engage with, support, and influence different macro, mezzo, and micro levels of society – from the home to the community to national spaces.
- They hold familiarity, trust, and legitimacy within their communities.
- They can reach the most vulnerable and work with those who hold power in their communities.
- They value and are skilled at building relationships and partnerships with strategic stakeholders.
- They are there for the long-term, working on different dimensions of holistic issues – immediate and responsive service delivery as well as long-term systemic change such as through advocacy and gradually shifting social norms.
- They are proficient at and deeply value participatory processes and dialogue and accountability with their community members – resulting in approaches and projects that are community owned and more likely to be sustained in the long-term.

HOW DO COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS FOSTER COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

CBO leaders describe a number of important ‘ingredients’ for community-driven systems change, including:

- Deep community-based analysis
 - Needs assessment conducted with community members
 - Resource identification with community members
 - Community mapping and other methods to identify root causes, optimal actions, and partners
- Thoughtful and thorough engagement and relationship management
 - Early engagement with important stakeholders and alignment of interests
 - Non-confrontational and constructive relationships inside and outside their community (for example with government, traditional authorities, and the community)
 - Community involvement and participation at all stages
 - Government involvement and participation
 - Working closely with influential community and opinion leaders
 - Networking, learning, and collaboration with other stakeholders and peers
 - Positive relationships with internal and external funders
- Continued development
 - Strengthening the capacity of the community
 - Supporting their own organizational strength and staff capacity
 - Improving programmatic strength and focus

In recognition of this, CBO leaders describe that they use a number of strategies to foster community-driven systems change:

- Establishing, nurturing, and working within relationships of trust and understanding
 - Maintaining and using their connection, familiarity, ‘insider’ status, and understanding of and with the community, local context, local knowledge, values, systems, and stakeholders
 - Establishing and sustaining trust and legitimacy with their community
 - Identifying and fostering strategic partnerships with community, civil society, and government stakeholders and organizations;
 - Establishing and nurturing relationships with many different stakeholders
- Increasing community agency
 - Working directly with community members to strengthen and empower them
 - Creating community awareness and thus demand for their rights including government services, mobilizing community members in collective civic action, and working with stakeholders to improve local government systems
- Being a resilient, proactive, and responsive organization for their community
 - Working to improve the ecosystems in which community members live, study, work, or move through
 - Strengthening their organizational capacities and skills, so that they can be resilient and responsive, be more effective in their impact, and continue to be helpful and enabling resources for their communities
 - Sometimes providing direct services to fill gaps in government programs, though many CBOs do not fundamentally view their role as service providers but rather as responding to immediate needs while also creating community awareness and demand

HOW DO COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS SEE CHANGE DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHER ORGANIZATIONS?

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (CBOs) SEE SUCCESS, IMPACT, AND SUSTAINABILITY DIFFERENTLY

The mainstream global development sector has tended to focus the mainstream global development sector has tended to focus on impact and success through the lenses of program quality, evidence of results, cost-effectiveness, and replicability and scalability.

While CBOs do value program quality, reaching more beneficiaries, and being able to track progress and results, *their definitions of impact and success go both deeper and broader in their emphasis on communities being empowered and driving their own change process, and effecting lasting change in systems and root causes.*

“SUCCESS IS WHEN BENEFICIARIES ARE ENABLED TO EFFECTIVELY RESPOND TO THEIR OWN HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT CONCERNS WAY BEYOND OUR ORGANIZATION’S PROGRAMS AND MANDATE. THEY CAN IDENTIFY PRIORITY NEEDS, IDENTIFY HOW ISSUES IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND THE WEAKER MEMBERS, MOBILIZE RESOURCES, AND MANAGE DESIRED CHANGE.”

– CBO Leader

CBOs’ conceptualizations of *success* recognize that real and meaningful social change involves multiple stakeholders and systems, requires thoughtful engagement with complex dynamics, and is often non-linear and takes time.

When it comes to *replicability and scaling*, while CBOs appreciate being able to learn from programs and interventions in other contexts that they might adapt to their context, they emphasize the importance of

being responsive to communities’ needs and working with community stakeholders to identify and implement actions.

Indeed, there is growing evidence⁴ confirming that the effects of many development interventions fade over time, especially when they do not meaningfully engage communities, effect change in systems such as government policy and service, or address other underlying root causes.

In the community context, there is also a distinction between different types of *sustainability*. Operational sustainability is about a particular program’s – or organization’s – operations being able to continue after funding is no longer available from a particular source. On the other hand, impact sustainability is about the impact of a program or intervention continuing even if the program or intervention itself does not. CBOs – in their focus on lasting change in systems and root causes – give great importance to the sustainability of impact, even as they recognize that their continued operational sustainability allows them to remain strong and resilient resources to their communities.

CBOS DEEPLY VALUE SYSTEMS-BASED RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS

CBOs report that proactively developing and maintaining positive relationships with important stakeholders — government, traditional authorities, and the community at large — is critical for success.

CBO representatives emphasize that is important for them to:

- Map out and identify important organizations, community structures, and stakeholders who are directly or indirectly involved in the issues at hand, with whom it is important to connect and/or collaborate.
- Identify and connect with a range of stakeholders – including leaders, influencers, and officials, as well as communities, families, children and youth, and vulnerable community members.
- Work with and strengthen the capacity of community members and structures to assess needs and analyze underlying issues, identify priorities, surface assets and resources, and develop and implement action plans.
- Engage with stakeholders and structures from the beginning and on an ongoing basis. Understand their interests and see where there is alignment. Identify threats and challenges and work with them to overcome these.
- Respectfully and authentically engage community leaders, those who have influence, and officials so that they can become important supporters, allies, and advocates.
- Network, connect, and collaborate with community, civil society, and government stakeholders.
- Align strategically and collaboratively with local and district government agendas and plans.
- Establish intentional and strategic partnerships with others on specific projects.

IT'S CRITICAL TO INVOLVE EVERY STAKEHOLDER FROM THE VERY START. GIVE THEM ALL THE INFORMATION THEY NEED. GET FEEDBACK FROM THE COMMUNITY, LEARN LESSONS FROM THEM, FROM THE START. ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS — NOT JUST FOR FEEDBACK, BUT AS OWNERS OF THE PROJECT.

– CBO staff at Foundation for Community Livelihood and Development, Malawi

CBOS LOOK AT ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAMMING EFFECTIVENESS DIFFERENTLY

According to CBO leaders, an effective CBO is one that is able to facilitate long-term positive change at the community level, described by a set of characteristics relating to how it interacts with its community and engages in programming, as well as its organizational capacity and structures.

CBO LEADERS BELIEVE THAT AN ORGANIZATION'S <u>PROGRAMMING</u> IS EFFECTIVE IF...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO is connected with, grounded in, and intimately understands its community. • The CBO develops and implements actions or programs that are grounded in context, are responsive to community needs, and build on community knowledge and strengths. • The CBO's actions/programs reach and include vulnerable and excluded groups in their community. 	<p>Groundedness and responsiveness in the community</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO understands, works with, and seeks to engage with and influence local stakeholders and systems. • The CBO facilitates participatory processes in planning and implementing actions or programs. • The CBO works with and mobilizes community-driven action. • The CBO is accountable to the community and other relevant stakeholders. 	<p>Community ownership and action</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO's actions/programs are aligned with its goals, and it has effective program planning and management skills and systems. • The CBO is able to capture data and document and use learnings to assess progress and improve actions/programs. • The CBO has a sustainability plan and strategies to exit or transition if appropriate or necessary. 	<p>Effective program management</p>

CBO LEADERS BELIEVE THAT AN ORGANIZATION IS EFFECTIVE IF...

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO has an organizational culture of honesty, humility, learning, and adaptation. • The CBO shares power, voice, and decision-making. • The CBO values children’s rights and participation, and protects them from harm.⁵ 	<p style="text-align: center;">Organizational values and culture</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO’s leadership is effective and has integrity, shares power, and plans for transition. • The CBO has an active and effective board. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Effective leadership and governance</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO has a clear vision/agenda and strategies towards this vision. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Identity and mission</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO is resilient (able to manage change and strengthen systems) and sustainable (able to mobilize resources and not completely reliant on a single external source of funding). 	<p style="text-align: center;">Resilience and sustainability</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO has the technical capacity, skills, and knowledge it needs for its work. • The CBO has sufficient and qualified staff according to its work. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Organizational capacity</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CBO is legally registered and in compliance with legal requirements. • The CBO has necessary policies and procedures in place and in use. • The CBO has checks and balances, systems and structures. • The CBO has effective and prudent financial management. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Effective systems and procedures</p>

HOW CAN FUNDERS SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS TO CATALYZE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

RECONCEPTUALIZE THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (CBOs) IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Community-based organizations (CBOs) have familiarity and trust with their communities that enables them, more than other actors, to work effectively with communities to identify and prioritize pressing issues, to surface and make use of assets and opportunities, and to develop and carry out community-led actions that can create change in systems and root causes. This means that CBOs are not just one possible actor among many others in the development ecosystem, but rather they are grassroots change agents that are essential for development.

The traditional global development sector has tended to treat CBOs as lacking in capacity and risky investments, because it has framed success according to funders' and international non-governmental organizations' (INGOs) approaches. On the other hand, if success is defined as deep and lasting systemic change at the grassroots level, and effectiveness is seen as the capacity to build and use relationships with local stakeholders towards systemic change, the critical and strategic role of CBOs becomes clear.

However, if CBOs are instrumentalized as implementers of agendas set by funders, INGOs, or other actors, these opportunities may be lost, and in fact there may be harm if CBOs' own capacities to be responsive and accountable to their communities are compromised.

CBOs must be recognized as trusted leaders and partners; holders of knowledge, experience, and expertise; and strategic activists and practitioners – not just at the local level but also in national, regional, and global discussions and decisions about sustainable grassroots development.

REDEFINE SUCCESS, IMPACT, SUSTAINABILITY, AND EFFECTIVENESS

In order to reframe development narratives according to values, goals, and agendas that are aligned with community-driven systems change, we need to fundamentally redefine our understanding of concepts of success, impact, sustainability, and effectiveness.

In the table below, we contrast the lenses and assumptions of the traditional global development sector with those of CBOs with regards to success, impact, sustainability, and effectiveness. We recognize that we are simplifying and generalizing in some ways, but we believe this is helpful in demonstrating where there seems to be significant misalignment in what we pursue and how we pursue it when it comes to grassroots change.

As this table demonstrates, while there are some overlaps, there are considerable disconnects between how traditional Global North funders and INGOs conceptualize and evaluate success and impact, and how CBOs and communities (in sub-Saharan Africa at least) consider and operationalize these notions. If funders and INGOs continue to use only their own lenses, important dimensions and understandings of success, impact, sustainability, and effectiveness are missed. Moreover, this has critical implications for whether and to what extent CBOs are viewed by funders and INGOs as effective, strategic, impactful, and worthy and respected partners. Broadening and deepening our understanding of these concepts enables both local and global actors alike to get closer to alignment, to mutual respect and more equitable partnership models, and to change efforts that are more likely to be successful and sustainable for all.

It is important to note that community-driven systems change still benefits from thoughtfulness and rigour, in the forms of clear goals, alignment of actions towards those goals, articulation of desired outcomes, and tracking and measurement towards those goals – though this may look different from how it is has tended to be carried out under traditional Global North paradigms.

CONCEPT	HOW THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT SECTOR HAS TENDED TO CONCEPTUALIZE THESE (FROM OUR EXPERIENCE)	HOW CBOS FROM SUB SAHARAN CONCEPTUALIZE THESE (FROM OUR LEARNING PROCESS)
Impact and Success	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program quality, evidence of results, reach/scale, cost-effectiveness, and replicability and scalability. <p>Underlying assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality interventions have a linear and causal relationship to a specific positive outcome in the beneficiary within a specific period of time – and that both the inputs and results can be quantified or otherwise assigned a value within this time period. 	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowered communities, community-driven action. <p>Underlying assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities that self-determine and own their own change process will carry out actions that are more relevant, appropriate, meaningful, impactful (in creating the desired change) and more likely to be sustained in the long-term.
	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach/scale, cost-effectiveness <p>Underlying assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is better to reach more beneficiaries for less money (regardless of the depth or sustainability of impact on specific people). 	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaningful improvement in community members' lives, and reaching more people in need. <p>Underlying assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth and sustainability of impact are as important if not more important than reach/scale – it's not just about reaching as many beneficiaries as possible, but about supporting meaningful improvement in people's lives that are sustained. • There is high need in the community, and it is important to reach more people to respond to their critical needs.
	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replicability and scalability. <p>Underlying assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singular solutions can and should be implemented widely in multiple contexts. 	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lasting change in systems and root causes. <p>Underlying assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems change that lasts at the grassroots level requires deliberate and genuine.

CONCEPT	HOW THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT SECTOR HAS TENDED TO CONCEPTUALIZE THESE (FROM OUR EXPERIENCE)	HOW CBOS FROM SUB SAHARAN CONCEPTUALIZE THESE (FROM OUR LEARNING PROCESS)
Sustainability	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program (operational) sustainability. <p>Underlying assumption:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The program should continue but with resourcing from sources other than the funder. <p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization (operational) sustainability <p>Underlying assumption:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization should have sources of funding other than the funder so that they are not reliant on the funder 	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability of impact. <p>Underlying assumption:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions/ interventions should foster real and lasting change in systems, social norms, and other root causes – change that will last even if the “program” doesn’t. <p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational sustainability. <p>Underlying assumption:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization should have sources of funding other than the funder so that they can be responsive to the community’s agenda rather than funders’ agendas.
Organizational capacity and effectiveness	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership and governance, strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, financial management, staffing, human resource systems, program implementation capacity, and systems and policies along with checks and balances. <p>These characteristics reflect –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The capacities valued by Global North funders and INGOs – and the kinds of characteristics that make an organization seem more credible and trustworthy to funders. 	<p>Focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the CBO understands and engages with local stakeholders and systems; how it is connected with and understands its community; the participatory processes it facilitates to include communities in identifying issues and solutions; and how programs or actions are grounded in context, responsive to community needs, build on community knowledge and strengths, and create positive change in the lives of community members. • Internal organizational capacity – prioritizing an organizational culture of humility, learning, adaptation, and accountability; resilience and financial sustainability; a clear vision and set of strategies; ethical leadership; and sufficient and qualified staff. <p>These characteristics reflect –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The capacities that enable the CBO to be a trusted and reliable partner and ally to its community; mobilize and support community-driven action; and create gradual and lasting change in systems, stakeholders, norms, and other root causes.

REIMAGINE FUNDER-CBO RELATIONSHIPS

Funders and INGOs are increasingly partnering with CBOs because they recognize their capacity to facilitate grassroots change. However, the existing system and many current partnerships with CBOs today can actually limit or hold back the power of CBOs' skills and capacities. Funders and INGOs risk co-opting CBOs by using them to implement their own external (often Global North) agendas. This risks instrumentalizing and even compromising CBOs' capacities to respond effectively to community priorities and their relationships of trust and collaboration with community members and local government stakeholders.

CBOs are leaders and critical agents of change in their communities. Their potential is maximized when they are trusted and supported to meaningfully collaborate with their communities and other stakeholders. This requires a shift in power in funder-CBO relationships, where funders and CBOs enter into partnerships recognizing and valuing the CBO's agenda, not only the funder's agenda, and funders support and respond to the CBO's needs and priorities, not only what the funder thinks the CBO needs and should prioritize.

WHEN A CBO IS (TREATED AS) JUST AN IMPLEMENTER, THEIR POWER IS NOT HARNESSSED.

– Moses Zulu, Luapula Foundation, Zambia

Funders and INGOs can more effectively support CBOs by establishing and nurturing respectful, trust-based, less restricted, and more enabling systems and processes that support CBOs with space, time, and resources to work with their communities and local stakeholders to identify and prioritize issues, decide and carry out actions to effect immediate and lasting change, and evaluate progress and learn. Power sharing along with mutual learning can support the solidarity needed for long-term transformative change.

Our guidelines for funder-CBO relationships aim to operationalize this necessary shift in power in funder-CBO relationships – resulting in genuine partnerships in which CBOs can feel secure that they can respond to the realities and priorities of their communities without putting their funding at risk, and funders listen and support with humility, trust, and the desire to learn.

FUNDERS CAN SUPPORT CBOs TO EFFECT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE BY PROVIDING OR FACILITATING —

- 1 Meaningful funding over a longer period of time that enables the CBO to take sustainable and community-driven approaches to programming, build and nurture relationships with stakeholders, and strengthen their own organizational capacity and resilience;
- 2 Simpler and more supportive grantmaking systems and practices that are more guided by what CBOs need to achieve success than by what the funder wants to know;
- 3 Trust in CBOs and their communities to be able to identify, prioritize, analyze, and address their pressing issues and root causes, as well as determine their own indicators of success and learning agenda;
- 4 Flexibility that recognizes the complex and non-linear nature of systemic change work and enables learning and adaptation at the community level;
- 5 Mutual transparency and accountability for openness, understanding, trust, and more equality of power in the funder-CBO relationship;
- 6 Mutual capacity strengthening – which responds to CBOs' own identified capacity needs and recognizes the capacities that many funders lack that CBOs can help build; and
- 7 Investment in and the normalization CBO leaders' presence and voice in national, regional, and global development discourses.

WHY NOT KEEP FUNDING THE WAY WE ALWAYS HAVE? WHY SHOULD FUNDING CBOs BE DIFFERENT?

Funders and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have long sought to work with CBOs in order to reach the most vulnerable communities – taking advantage of CBOs’ geographic reach as well as the relationships and trust that CBOs hold with their communities. However, there are three key harms funders and INGOs often risk in their partnerships with CBOs.

First, traditional, top-down funders and INGOs often instrumentalize CBOs to achieve the funders’ or INGOs’ own goals, rather than support CBOs to respond to the actual needs, priorities, and goals of their community. This can co-opt CBOs’ relationships and trust with their communities, and it jeopardizes their connections and responsiveness to their communities. The true power of CBOs lies in supporting them as leaders to work with their community to identify, analyze, and respond to the key issues facing them.

CBOs ARE NOT JUST “BAREFOOT SOLDIERS” (FOR FUNDERS AND INGOs). THEIR MANDATE AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL IS MUCH MORE COMPLEX, MORE CHALLENGING. JUST DELIVERING PROGRAMS AND COLLECTING DATA IS EASIER — THIS CAN BE DONE IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME, AND THE RESULTS WILL ALSO BE SHORT-LIVED.

– Wairimu Mungai,
WEMIHS, Kenya

Second, many traditional funders and INGOs want to fund CBOs and other grassroots organizations, but perceive them as lacking in capacity and risky investments. This view is rooted in a biased lens, where funders and INGOs define success and capacity according to the ways in which they function, not necessarily in the ways success and capacity are operationalized at the grassroots level, and not often in the ways that are most relevant to achieving community-driven systems change. Unfortunately, because of these desires and biases, funding to CBOs ends up being given in restricted and directed manners – i.e., to carry out specific implementation pieces relating to the funder’s or INGO’s agenda. This limits the CBO’s capacity to be responsive to and grounded in their community, and risks

compromising their capacity to engage in ongoing participatory and consultative processes with community stakeholders that result in long-term change.

Third, CBOs are often given ‘capacity building’ by funders and INGOs that serves to equip them with the skills that those funders and INGOs need them to have – to satisfy reporting requirements, risk management, and evidence of results in certain ways as defined by the funder or INGO. Often, CBOs’ likelihood of successfully obtaining more funding depends on their acquisition of these capacities. To improve the relevance, success, and sustainability of any capacity strengthening process, topics and methods should be determined in collaboration with CBOs, and guided by their realities, needs, priorities, and ways of working. Moreover, and fundamentally, capacity strengthening is actually a two-way process – CBOs provide a great deal of insight and, in fact, strengthen the knowledge and capacities of funders, INGOs, and other actors – around community realities and priorities, relationship and partnership building, participatory planning and implementation, indigenous knowledge and practices, and much more.

If we keep doing things the way we always have, we continue to instrumentalize CBOs and communities in service of the agendas of the Global North funders and INGOs, and define their success and effectiveness in relation to the goals of those Global North actors. This is an inherently flawed narrative and perspective, as it continues to centre and frame everything from the perspective and priorities of the Global North funders and INGOs rather than those of Global South community-based leaders and practitioners. This results in Global North values, priorities, agendas, and approaches continuing to be imposed on Global South communities, and risks important lost opportunity and potentially great harm to these communities and their civil society institutions.

GUIDELINES AND TOOLS FOR FUNDERS TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Supporting community-based organizations (CBOs) in community-driven systems change requires substantial shifts in — and in some cases dismantling and rebuilding of — our ways of thinking and doing things. We have developed a number of guidelines and tools that can be used by funders and intermediaries who seek to fund and support CBOs to implement community-driven systems change.

Please visit the **Community-Driven Systems Change** section of our website to access these materials:
<http://firelightfoundation.org/cdsc>.

In this resource base, we provide specific tools that can be used by funders — and to some extent international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) — who are seeking to better support CBOs particularly towards community-driven systems change.

CONCEPTUAL RESOURCES

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS?

This document describes what to look for in a community-based organization in terms of its rootedness in its community. Considerations include the origin or genesis of the organization, its leadership, its organizational power structure, its approach to action and programming, and the key actors involved in change processes.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE?

There are important risks in calling something community-driven, or a systems approach, when it actually may not be truly supporting community leadership and ownership and long-term systemic change. This document explicitly clarifies what is, and what isn't, community-driven systems change. Considerations include the way projects or initiatives are conceptualized, the models and approaches used in programming, the short-term and long-term outcomes desired, and the ways in which results and impact are understood and measured. (Note – this resource is also embedded as a table within this document.)

TOP FIVE INDICATORS OF A COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION'S EFFECTIVENESS

This document provides a high-level summary of the most important indicators of CBO effectiveness from the perspectives of CBO leaders themselves. These qualities are important to a CBO's capacity to engage community participation and ownership, facilitate community-driven action for system change, and function effectively as a trusted organization in their community.

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES AND TOOLS

DESIGNING A NEW INITIATIVE THAT SUPPORTS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Community-driven systems change requires a substantial shift in how we conceptualize and design initiatives – including the ways in which we think about and understand issues, the systems and processes we establish and use, and the amount of planful investment and work we need to put in up front. There are a number of critical considerations to think about in the development of any new initiative that seeks to create transformative grassroots impact that lasts over the long-term. This document provides guidelines and questions to help guide your thinking and planning.

GRANTMAKING FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Community-driven systems change involves communities and community-based organizations having both the resources and the power to identify and address issues affecting them in immediate and long-term, systemic ways. Their specific skills, strategies, and impacts are also often misaligned with traditional grantmaking approaches. This document describes important implications for the ways in which funders can (re)build and implement grantmaking systems and processes in order to support communities to engage in community-driven systemic change. We also offer sample templates for grant proposals and reports that are simple, easy, and useful for CBOs to use especially when working towards community-driven systems change.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTIONS WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION GRANTEEES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Community-driven systems change is rooted in principles of justice and solidarity. These principles require trust, sharing of power, mutual respect, collaborative decision-making, two-way accountability, sensitivity to burdens and risks, and flexibility and patience, all within a relationship of support. This document describes specific guidelines for funders to consider around their relationships and interactions with CBO grantees and their communities – including how site visits are carried out.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Community-driven systems change recognizes the inherent capacities, skills, and expertise held by community-based organizations (CBOs) and community stakeholders in building and nurturing relationships and collaborations with communities and other stakeholders, identifying issues, analyzing systems and root causes, and effecting long-term systemic change. This document describes important implications for how funders think about and strengthen CBOs' capacities.

LEARNING AND EVALUATION FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

In community-driven systems change, learning and evaluation are about genuinely learning, reflecting, and adapting, within the security of a trust-based partnership. Evaluation is also important to assess progress or impact for the purpose of understanding what's working well and what we might do differently to strengthen the initiative, while appreciating that any lack of success doesn't mean failure or wrongdoing – recognizing that systemic change takes time, can be nonlinear, and may not be immediately or easily measurable or tangible. Most importantly, in community-driven systems change, learning and evaluation is focused on what is useful to the CBO and to the community in their pursuit of systems change, and for the CBO and community to be able to track their work and progress towards creating lasting change in systems and root causes, in ways that are meaningful and useful to the CBO and community. This document outlines important implications for funders seeking to develop learning agendas and evaluation frameworks within a community-driven systems change approach.

PARTICIPATORY REFLECTION TOOL ON COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION CAPACITY TO FACILITATE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

This tool is intended to be used by CBOs to stimulate and facilitate dialogue and reflection among their team about their capacities to facilitate community-driven systems change. Section A is about how the CBO interacts with the community and engages in programming, exploring aspects such as responsiveness to the community, engagement with different systems and stakeholders, participatory processes, program implementation and learning, and accountability to community and other stakeholders. Section B is about the CBO's organizational capacities and processes, such as an organizational culture of learning and adaptation, organizational sustainability and resilience, organizational vision and goals, governance structures, leadership and management, staffing, systems and procedures, financial management. Section C involves reviewing reflections and observations from Sections A and B, and prioritizing and planning capacity strengthening goals for the coming year.

TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS TO CATALYZE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Many CBOs already have methods and tools to engage with their communities in different ways. Nonetheless, we have found that it can be helpful to facilitate mutual sharing and learning, where different approaches, skill sets, and tools can be shared, discussed, and reviewed for appropriateness and usefulness in their context. We provide an overview of the skill sets and approaches that may be useful to CBOs such as systems thinking, facilitating effectively with empathy, and note-taking and analysis skills. We also provide specific tools that CBOs can use to surface stakeholders' perspectives on issues facing their community, collaboratively analyze root causes and map out systems, and facilitate participatory prioritization and action planning. All of the tools provided have been suggested by, developed with, informed by, and/or tested by Firelight's CBO partners in the last few years.

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<http://firelightfoundation.org/cdsc>

ENDNOTES

¹ Rights CoLab and West African Civil Society Institute (2021). Fostering Equitable North-South Civil Society Partnerships - Voices from The South. Available online at <https://rightscolab.org/ringo-projects-first-research-report-voices-from-the-south/>

² Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation (2016). Transforming Charity into Solidarity and Justice – Global Citizenship Education: Module 1. Available online at https://www.saskcic.org/education_modules

³ OECD Development Assistance Committee (January 2019). Aid for Civil Society Organisations Statistics based on DAC Members' reporting to the Creditor Reporting System database (CRS), 2016-2017. Available online at <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-topics/Aid-for-CSOs-2019.pdf>

⁴ Michael Hobbes summarizes some of this evidence in his 2014 article in The New Republic - Stop Trying to Save the World: Big ideas are destroying international development <https://newrepublic.com/article/120178/problem-international-development-and-plan-fix-it>

⁵ All the CBOs that were part of this inquiry and co-creation process work with children and youth, and they thus prioritized the protection of children's rights and wellbeing in their discussions.