

SCALABLE CHANGE **A Framework for Practitioners**

*Findings of the Rockefeller Foundation Meeting
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Background:

In December 2008, twenty-two people from around the world met at Bellagio to explore the critical role of leadership in addressing global food security issues. This group comprised people from 17 different countries in 5 continents, all with roles related to the food system. They came from government, civil society, industry, and academia. A clear consensus emerged that:

- Food security issues are serious and will likely increase in severity in the coming years
- Food security issues must be viewed from a broad and holistic 'one health' perspective that considers animal, human and environmental health simultaneously
- Leadership is a critical factor in addressing these issues effectively
- There is a common set of competencies that leaders need to possess to be able to deal effectively with food security issues
- There is an urgent and widespread need to further develop these competencies

Given the above, the group tackled the question of how to develop these kinds of competencies at a sufficient scale so as to precipitate transformational change. The conclusion, after this exercise, was that significantly more effort needed to be undertaken to understand:

- What is the nature of scalable change?
- What conditions need to be present to enable scalable change?
- What are the barriers to enabling scalable change, and how can they be addressed?

Rockefeller Meeting:

In September 2009, a group of 10 people gathered together in New York City with the goal of creating a framework for implementing scalable change. The group included people with significant experience in implementing social change programs, academics, corporate executives, organizational change consultants, and international governmental organization professionals. The session was organized into three basic sections:

- Sharing of personal experiences with scalable change
- Development of a framework that addressed:
 - What is large scale transformational change
 - What are the success conditions for scalable change
 - What are the barriers and how can they be addressed
- Testing the framework using leadership competency development as a case study

The session resulted in the general framework presented below. This framework emerged from exploration of scalable change in a wide variety of contexts, so it is broadly applicable to food security, public health, economic development, ecological security, and other critical areas of social change.

FRAMEWORK FOR SCALABILITY

Definition of Scalable Change

The group agreed that in order for an effort to be considered large scale transformational change it must:

1. Focus on a Positive Vision

The target of change is a transformation of the current state to achieve a better future. The vision represents a conscious choice about improving the state of the target population that represents a significant enough level of change to surmount competing interests. The change produces effects that are intrinsically motivating and self-reinforcing to the individuals affected. While there may be a need for external supports and incentives—either initially or ongoing—sustainability is fueled by the individuals' sense of fulfillment or satisfaction from the change itself. The perceived value of the change must exceed the perceived costs.

2. Have widespread impact

The foundation for large scale transformation change rests on a critical mass of empowered individuals who come together to undertake collective action, and the change impacts a large number of people. While the discussion began with a target of at least 1 million people affected, there is no magic number. Nevertheless, it is clearly not about efforts affecting only hundreds or even a few thousand people. The notion of “large” is dictated by the particular issue and context.

3. Result in systemic change

Large scale transformational change is systemic change—i.e., a change affecting a whole system. Whole Systems thinking involves consideration of all the components (regulatory, social, economic, etc.) that have a significant impact on issue of concern. Therefore, transformational change involves fundamental change in the whole system that underpins the issue of concern.

Success Conditions:

There are a number of conditions that will significantly enable a scalable strategy to succeed:

1. Engage and empower the target population from the beginning

The target population should be front-and-center in the design of the change strategy. This not only helps ensure that the effort is well-focused and planned, but also contributes to their sense of ownership and commitment.

Community engagement and ‘ownership’ of the effort is essential to capacity building and empowerment to accomplish fundamental change that is sustainable. An important and fundamental assumption is that the target population will have a greater understanding of the solution that will effectively drive sustainable change. Clearly in many scalable change efforts, the target population is a group that has been historically dis-empowered; therefore, designing an intervention that engages and involves them in the definition of the issues and design of the solution is essential to achieving the goal of empowerment.

2. Design for sustainability

The genuine success of change efforts will be indicated when the culture and systems have incorporated and reinforced these changes. Consequently, there must be sufficient community commitment to sustain the effort, recognizing both the inherent demands and time requirements for start-up as well as the level of ongoing attention that will be required to maintain the effort. In general, the design for sustainability should be community-driven, and built upon core principles such as economic viability and equity. The design must account for all systemic factors that are essential to success. Cost-sharing must reflect the capacity of each relevant sector (e.g., government, private, NGO, community) to contribute.

3. Build trust/credibility of change agents

Scalable change efforts are most often catalyzed by change agents who are external to the target population. These change agents must be perceived—by the target population especially, but also by other stakeholders—as credible and trustworthy. Trust and credibility are a function of the change agents' perceived empathy, competence and commitment. Over time, the intention should be to transfer capacity and responsibility onto the target population to act as change agents.

4. Create and implement an effective design

The design of the effort must be sufficient to produce the change. For example, if knowledge/skills need to be developed, the change efforts needs to provide education and training of sufficient quality and quantity delivered through formats and venues that are appropriate for the target population. Any large scale transformational change project must be designed to include:

- A sufficient level of depth
- A sufficient level of reinforcement
- An appropriate delivery strategy

Where possible, the design should build upon appropriate pilot projects that have demonstrated potential for success and sustainability.

5. Leverage key partnerships

Large scale transformational change efforts must capture a significant coalition of relevant groups, organizations, institutions, and individuals who can contribute to the effort and/or whose exclusion could inhibit the change. This includes government, civil society, international organizations, private industry, academia, and others. Further, each of these entities must play a role appropriate to them—for example, government may be best equipped to provide sustainable funding and regulatory support, civil society may be a source of best practices, industry may be best able to provide implementation expertise, and so forth. Collaboration and trust are critical success factors in this context. The project plan should explicitly build in a relationship building phase to enable this trust to occur.

6. Effectively manage the project

Ultimately the implementation of a scalable effort needs to have a well-designed project management plan including: goal setting, resource allocation, action planning, monitoring, communication, and budgeting. The project plan must allow for ongoing monitoring and course correction. The ability to effectively create and manage the change as a project will be crucial to establishing and maintaining focus. Further, the plan should transfer capacity for project management to the target population over time to add to the sense of empowerment and self-destiny. Ultimately the intention should be to shift from project mode to program mode, as the effort becomes institutionalized and built into the culture.

7. Learn from experience

No scalable strategy is totally unique and no strategy is likely to be perfectly executed. Therefore, the experience and history of other efforts must be garnered to help inform and shape the formulation and execution of scalable strategies. Benchmarking and other analogous efforts can help anticipate challenges and success approaches. Furthermore, successful large scale transformational change requires a feedback mechanism for ongoing reflection and adaptation of the strategy.

Barriers and Solutions:

Several major barriers that seem to occur frequently when attempting scalable projects:

1. Failure to create a sense of urgency

A sense of urgency is necessary in order to marshal sufficient interest and commitment to accomplish the change. Without urgency, there is little imperative to act.

2. Failure to anticipate and address negative consequences

Major efforts will produce unintended consequences, some negative. For example, lifting one part of an economy will impact on other parts; and training and uplifting of one part of the community will affect the social structure within that community. Therefore, a realistic effort must be made—both in advance as well as in an ongoing manner—to anticipate and/or identify the full range of impacts of the intervention and plan for or attend to them as they occur.

3. Over-emphasis on action and short term gains

A bias for action—though it may be useful for establishing momentum—can divert attention from the planning and piloting needed to establish a sustainable effort. A related barrier is the focus on short term gains without longer term, larger goals. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that the pressure to produce results doesn't lead to premature action or action solely for the sake of action.

4. Underestimate the importance of communications and public relations

Individuals and organizations routinely overestimate the effectiveness of their communication efforts both internally and externally. Goals and activities are not communicated sufficiently to maintain engagement and recognize contributions and progress.

5. Failure to accept a level of risk

Virtually all scalable change efforts require a ‘trial and error’ process of experimentation and learning. Therefore, all concerned—the target population, funders, partners, etc.—must accept that not all efforts will yield immediately demonstrable results. Scaling up an effort is likely to “waste” a certain level of resources through this experiential learning process. The notion of ‘trial and error’ should not be allowed to become an excuse for under-performance; clearly a balance needs to be struck between accepting an appropriate level of risk and demanding more in terms of results or efficiencies.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

Serious issues face our planet and its population—issues that are complex, inter-related, and of a wide magnitude. Many of these issues need to be solved at a large scale—and many of them beg to be solved in compressed time frames. Incremental, short-term solutions will only postpone or even preclude effective action or perpetuate the negative conditions (e.g., poverty, ill health, hunger, etc.) that are increasingly untenable.

We must therefore frame our strategies to address these problems in scalable terms. An ample body of experience with failed scalable interventions exists to identify barriers to success. There is a smaller but growing body of experience with successful large scale transformational change from which we can learn. At this point, however, there is little compiled about the principles and practices of effective scalable change.

Many aspects of the framework developed through this effort are relevant for change efforts in general—not just those that are scalable. However, as the scope of the effort and the level of commitment broaden, the elements in this framework become more consequential. Therefore, a greater level of effort must be paid to the decision to go forward on proposed projects and to planning and managing their execution.

This meeting adds to the existing literature by creating a framework for scalability. However, even more importantly, this small group has expressed the unanimous support for a larger gathering where this conversation can be significantly widened to include greater diversity of people and a broader base of experience. If done well—and there exist now highly effective and dynamic methods for doing so—a larger convening can generate a positive force for significantly increasing the amount and effectiveness of scalable change.