Tweaks and Twists: Learning how to bend the logic of a systems change grant application towards the arc of justice.

November 2020

Acknowledgement

We, the authors, would like to start by acknowledging the learning we have to do. As settlers on unceded lands, as partners with a philanthropic community foundation, and as seekers of justice and equity, we share the responsibility to learn and unlearn. Though we may be children of our current systems, we are committed to the active pursuit of a British Columbia that is proudly and thoughtfully reflective of the philosophies, beliefs, and attitudes of the Indigenous peoples for whom this land is home. That includes 34 language groups and 198 First Nations, many of whom have never surrendered their land or signed treaties with the Government of Canada. We are part of a culture, economy, and society that fails to reckon with overwhelming past and ongoing wrongs. All our work must seek to grapple with the continuing implications of colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, from which other forms of oppression are derived.
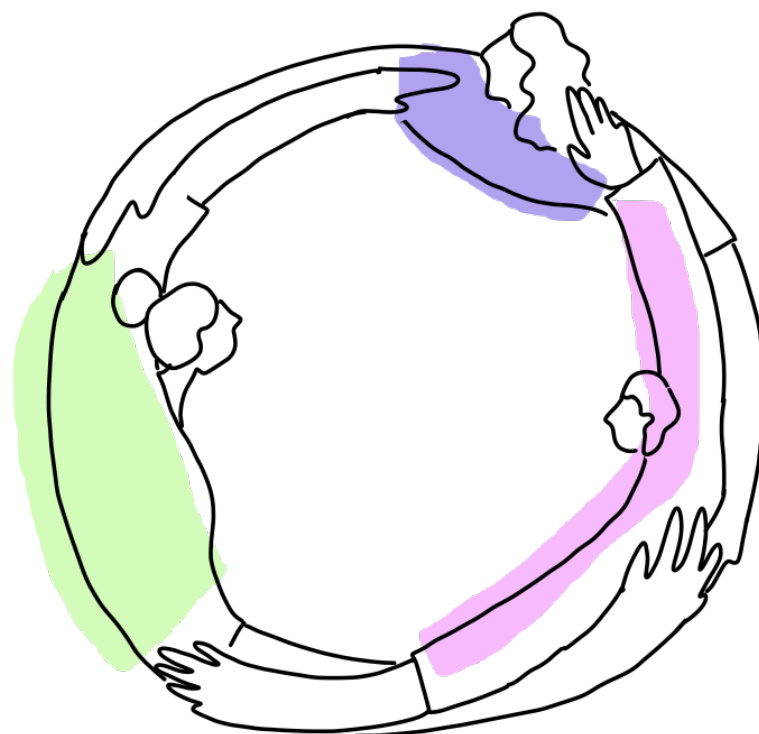
At this point, our understanding of what this commitment means for us, in our daily work, could be described in five principles for our journey:

We are our relationships. Indigenous teachings tell us we need to make relationships central to how we learn, understand our role, and hold responsibility. At present, our relationships are not where they need to be. Vancouver Foundation serves all of British Columbia and disproportionately funds non-Indigenous led organizations. At InWithForward, our team is entirely composed of settlers. On our own, our blind spots are too great. We must invest ourselves in relationships with Indigenous peoples to move forward in a good way.

We must wear our learning and our failures out in public. We aren't going to 'get this right' out of the gate but we have a duty to be transparent about how we are learning and making sense as we go. That will mean sharing our failures and missteps. So part of achieving justice and equity will be embracing the vulnerability and uncertainty of learning out loud.

Justice must encompass the non-human world. There are 50,000 species that make their home in British Columbia, glaciers dating back 240,000 years and mountains that are 55-80 million years old. Part of dismantling colonial systems means de-centring humans as the sole beneficiaries of those systems.

Though the work is urgent, the scale of time under consideration must be long. We want to see change happening yesterday, and that change has to honour the rights of people, and all creation, in the generations to come. Sometimes long term work is harder to measure and value in the present. We will need to find better ways to make the experiences of people in the future feel more real and pressing to interrupt short-sighted mindsets and decision-making today.

The work is to love. It's a constant struggle not to reduce people, or other living things, to a set of characteristics, demographic terms, risks, or needs, but it's a struggle worth engaging in everyday. Instead, we seek to imbue our work with a love that expands our image of people to the fullness of their being, to appreciate their difference, and find our common humanity. Only with love can we see the glimmers of possibility and avoid reproducing the systems of oppression that characterize today's world.

We recognize that the same systems of logic that have been destructive to settler-Indigenous relationships have fueled deep inequalities in our communities by systemically devaluing people with diverse gender and sexual expression, racialized people, and those with diverse abilities. Honouring all of our fellow British Columbians means rejecting and replacing these systems of logic wherever we encounter them, starting with ourselves and our environments.
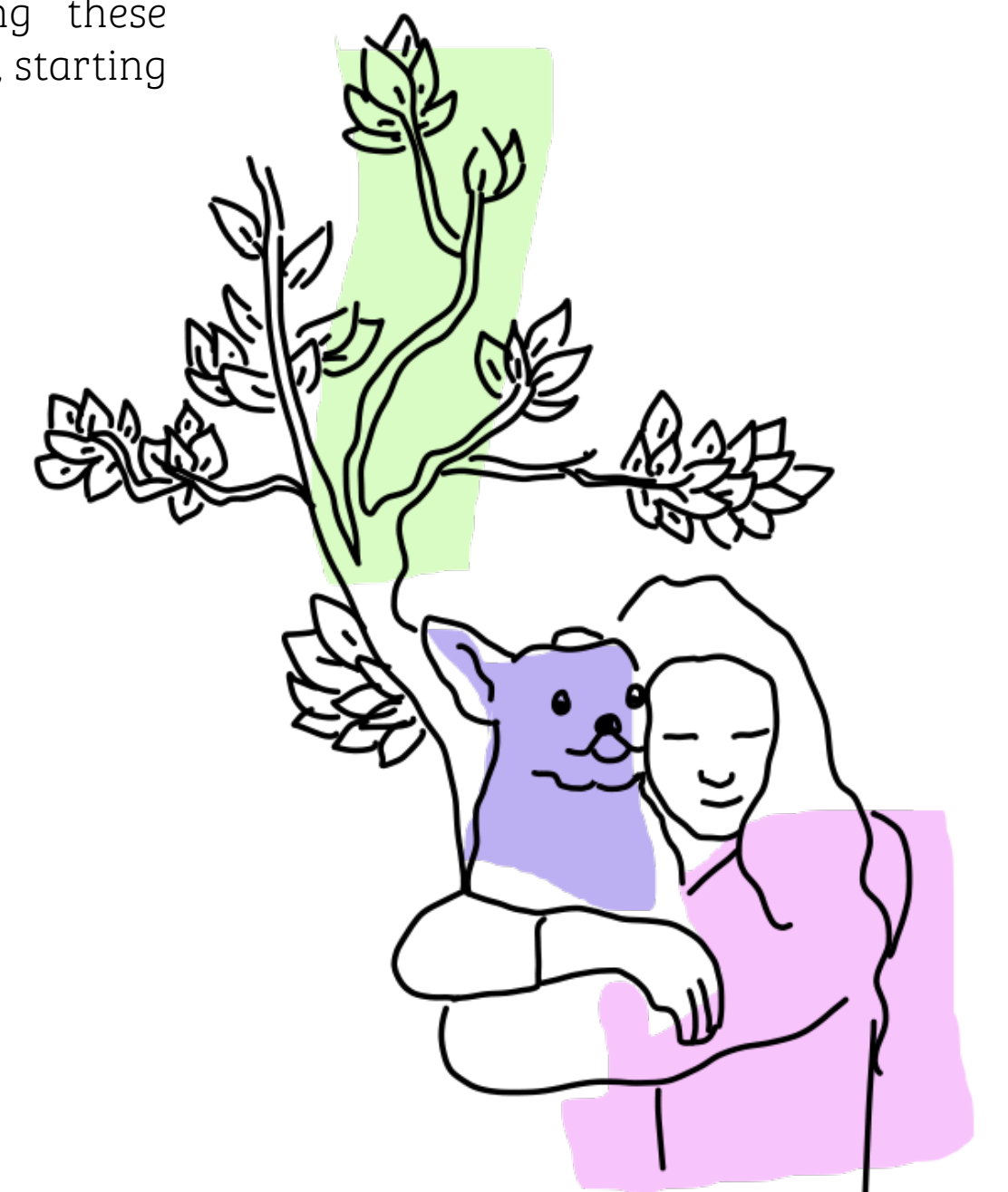
Hello!

Nine months ago -- before the pandemic and before the murder of George Floyd and Chantel Moore sparked a racial reckoning -- our social design organization, InWithForward, entered into partnership with Vancouver Foundation to co-develop and test ways to deepen impact and strengthen equity within systems change grantmaking.

An independent evaluation of the foundation's Systems Change Grants found that, while the supply of and demand for systems change work increased, not all communities equally benefited. Organizations from rural communities and Indigenous communities seemed to fare worse in the process.

We wanted to understand why, and how grantmaking might be different.

In the Spring of 2020, we observed systems change grantmaking practice: shadowing staff as they read and assessed applications, attending committee meetings where applications were discussed and decided, and interviewing board members, executive leadership and staff. By summer, we compiled our insights into a publicly released report, identifying six barriers and six opportunity areas for change. Some of the opportunity areas were big, like re-imagining community participation in decision-making, and some were small, like revising the written application itself.
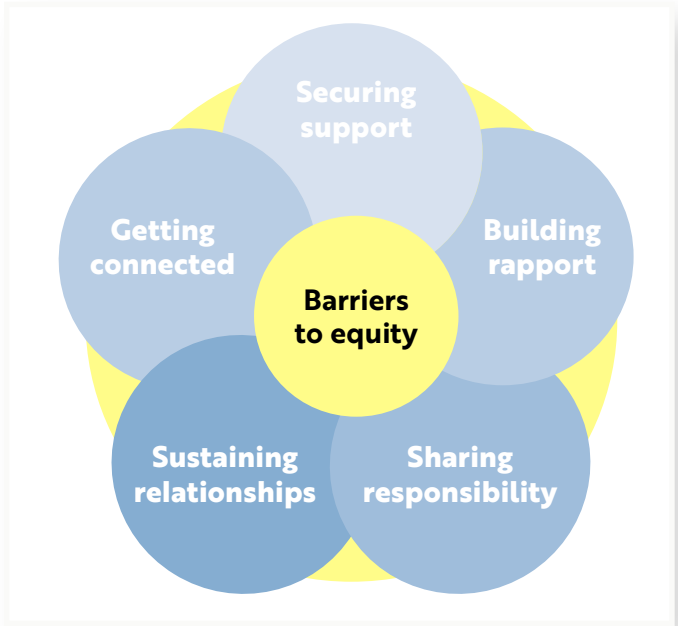
With the fall Systems Change Grant cycle three months away, we chose to start with a modest, but timely opportunity area: the grant application. The idea was that the application might be a window into unearthing dominant logics[1] and biases. By inquiring into what information staff, advisors and community members deem important for determining systemic impact, we might highlight disconnects and redesign the application from the perspectives of equity-denied[2] and equity-seeking communities.

That was the premise under which, this summer, we hosted eleven virtual codesign sessions with community organizations, focusing especially on organizations on the sidelines of Vancouver Foundation: those who have never applied, and those who have unsuccessfully applied, particularly newer, smaller, rural, BIPOC and lived experience-led organizations. Sixty-four folks participated in those eleven codesign sessions. This document shares what we heard and learned.

What do we mean by ...

Dominant logic
When we refer to 'dominant logics' we are talking about the underlying values, beliefs, and ways of knowing that are woven throughout our systems but not made explicit. Dominant logics can feel so 'normal' that they aren't questioned.

Equity denied
We are using the term 'equity-denied' to refer to people and groups who are currently, or have been historically, unable to access the same resources, recognition, status, and public voice.

Who are we?

We are a team whose mission is to redesign social systems from the perspective of people who have been left out, sidelined and marginalized. We are not experts. Our team reflects some range of identities and lived experiences -- many of which are privileged. If we were to make a word cloud to describe our full team, we might use:

What brings us together is a commitment to learning and growing through discomfort: we try to listen, codesign and experiment with practices, policies and narratives that interrupt patterns of exclusion. As much as we seek to disrupt the status quo, we recognize we are also products of dominant and oppressive cultures. We're on a never ending journey to diversify our systems of thought and action.

Intents & purposes

The codesign sessions set out to explore how the systems change grant application might look different if equity and systemic impact were top desired outcomes. What emerged from these sessions both called into question our strategy (why start with the application when the root causes of institutional inequity are so much deeper?) and highlighted what is missing from much of the public conversations around systems change.

Firstly, systems change isn't necessarily good or just. The values behind systems change need to be explicit and inform any process to achieve systems change. Working towards more just systems is substantively different to moving towards more efficient, or safe, or convenient systems.

Secondly, it matters from whose perspective systems are being shaped. Concepts of efficiency, justice, convenience, and safety are culturally defined. Our current systems generally reflect dominant logics and values. Who will get to shape future systems? Who decides if justice will be characterized by retribution or by healing? Who decides if safety is the right to comfort or the more equal distribution of a necessary discomfort? Who decides if efficiency is defined more by quality or quantity?

These are not novel points, but they are underrepresented at decision-making tables. Back in 1984, Black, queer, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde warned that

> *"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."*
> - Audre Lorde, 1984

In our second codesign session, a BIPOC participant commented, *"I feel like I'm being Columbussed here"* in response to the notion that the need for equity & justice in philanthropy is more timely or real when philanthropists are prepared to discuss it. Vancouver Foundation's board member Joe Gallagher first posed the question of *"systems change from whose world view?"* to us, early in this work. As an Indigenous person, he explained that the distinction was crucial.

For all of the growing calls for systems change from funders, decision-makers and citizens, not all systems change efforts move us towards equity and justice. Participants in our sessions rightly asked: systems for what ends, and based on whose ideas and beliefs? Will they be ones that resonate with and are informed by my experience and those of the people I serve?

This report is an imperfect attempt to make visible the experiences and insights of participants from a broad range of groups and organizations that do, or have an aspiration to do, systemic work. Many participants saw themselves as peers in the community they served. Their voices are a needed addition to the privileged discourse on systems change happening in philanthropic, academic, and innovation circles. These are the voices that can help power the shift from charity to justice.

EQUITY + IMPACT
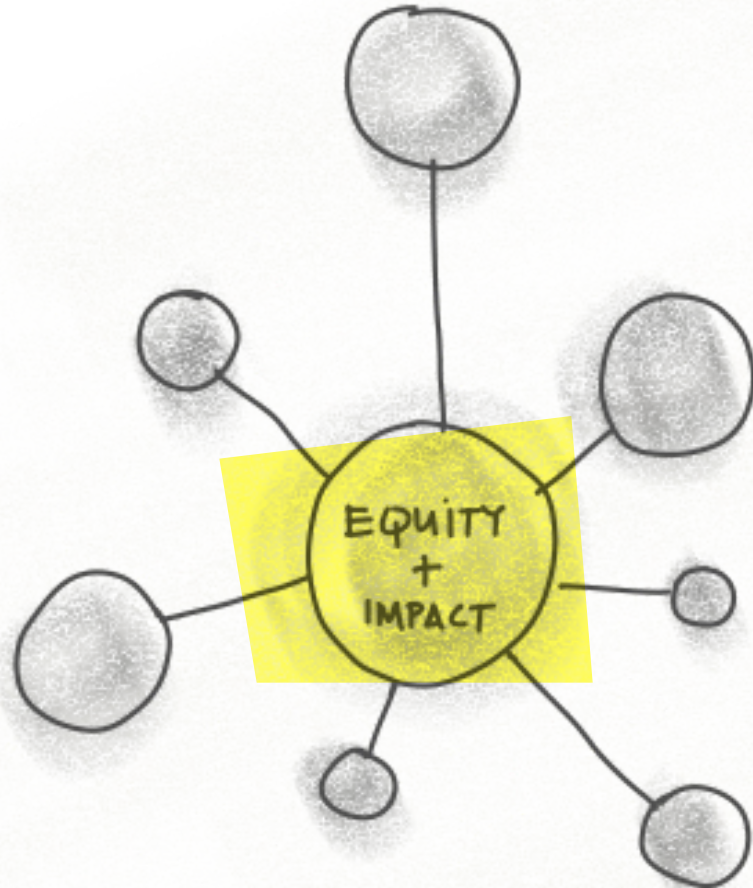
Two starting points

Unpacking the application

While we began with the application, we recognized that this document was but one small piece of a complex puzzle to unlock greater equity and justice within Vancouver Foundation. Still, we liked that it was concrete: so many people interact with the application: they read it, ponder it, attempt to fill it out, and connect with the foundation through it. We also saw an opportunity to iterate quickly: with an upcoming grant cycle launching in September, we had the summer to explore what an application might ask of organizations. We could test small changes through the fall, and that learning could inform subsequent cycles, as Vancouver Foundation readied for deeper changes.

Seeking out unheard voices

We saw Vancouver Foundation as a system in itself. By unpacking the application, we hoped to understand who it privileged, and who it sidelined. In the past, Vancouver Foundation had mostly consulted with current and past grantees, along with volunteer advisors, donors, and other foundations.

Equity is often framed as a question of who makes it in the door, and who is successful. Just as important is identifying who *isn't* coming through the door, and who hasn't been successful. Such an analysis might tell us about the values built into system change grants. If smaller, rural, and BIPOC-led organizations fare worse, as early data suggests, it raises the question: from whose perspective are systems being changed?
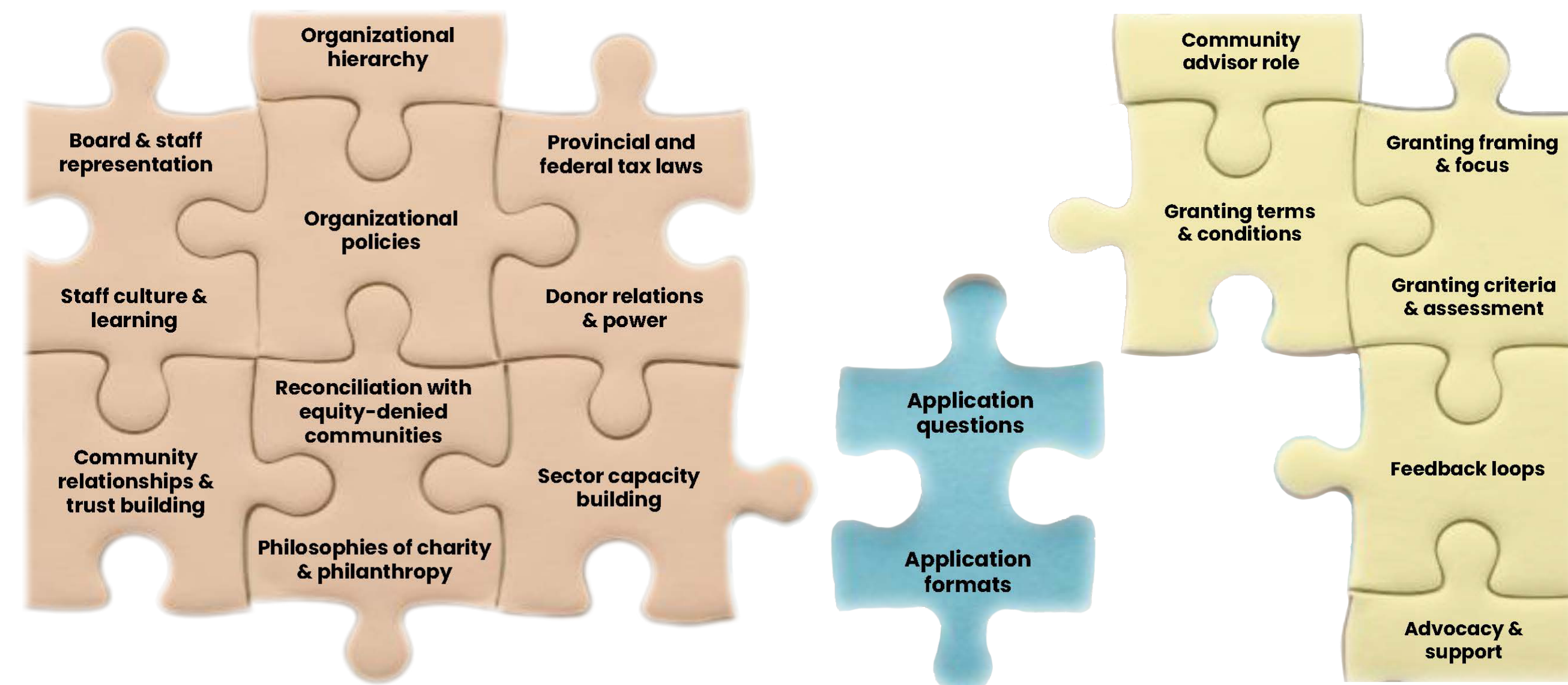
What you can find in this report

This report is both for Vancouver Foundation and the broader community. An early learning was organizations' need to see Vancouver Foundation modelling reflection, vulnerability, and mistake-making in the pursuit of equity. Vancouver Foundation agreed. This report is shared in that spirit. It is another step in a much longer journey of decolonizing ourselves, our work, and our systems.

- In the **What it looked like section**, we share the process and content of our codesign sessions to give a feel for the events that produced these learnings.

- **Who we spoke to** visualizes aggregated data about anonymized participants and attempts to group participants based on what they expressed about the assumptions, aspirations, and frustrations driving, or preventing, their interactions with Vancouver Foundation.

- **Our learning** introduces a series of features of a desired grantmaking process, our attempt to make sense of what we heard from participants. Also in this section, we have included insights about the Community Advisor role, based on a couple of sessions we ran with Community Advisors, who review grants and make funding recommendations.

- In the final section, **Action**, we focus on small changes that have already been made as a result of the codesign sessions, as well as how we are re-scoping the work going forward to take on the weighty questions.

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The codesign process

Over August and early September, we set-up virtual codesign sessions to capture experiences with Vancouver Foundation's system change grants: the good, bad, indifferent and everything in between. Sessions were intentionally small and exploratory, opening up space to vent, inquire, connect, and generate ideas. We asked questions about both the past and desired future: what are the main barriers to applying? What do you think Vancouver Foundation values? What is the story you wish you could share with Vancouver Foundation in an application?

We used a bank of forty alternative application questions as provocations to zoom into the application and drill down to the nuance of what could be different: the kind of information prioritized, the language used, the embedded logics and perspectives, and the formats to respond (e.g written, conversational, video).

Each session unfolded differently, as we continuously revised our approach based on feedback and additions to the question bank. After receiving pointed critique in our second codesign session, we engaged in 1:1 follow-up interviews and re-framed the session: we gave fuller context and acknowledged limitations of the project and of our role. Responding to what emerges is a key attribute of codesign. We enter codesign, not as experts consulting on pre-defined changes, but as community researchers and collaborators, learning from the exchange of perspectives and ideas.

What do we mean by ...

Codesign
Engaging stakeholders in an exploratory and creative way, using visual prompts to garner feedback and spark brainstorming.

Codesign is meant to be both emergent and tangible: it invites participants to steer the conversation and to add, edit, and discard ideas.

How & what did we invite people into?

Who was invited to take part?

While sessions were open to all, we advertised and reached out to organizations and grassroots groups who are
- working to tackle the root causes of inequity
- guided by people with lived experience of marginalization because of race, class, religion, nationality, social or ethnic origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other status reflective of the diversity of our community
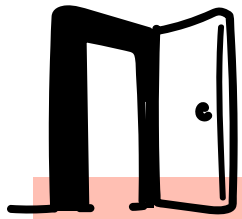
We encouraged the folks responsible for developing and writing grant applications to attend.

Recruitment strategies

We set out to engage a plurality of voices: current grantees, unsuccessful past applicants, and organizations & groups who have never before applied, but whose work challenges the status quo. We used Vancouver Foundation's website and social media to promote the events, and an Eventbrite page to facilitate sign-up.

To spread the word to groups or organizations without an existing relationship to Vancouver Foundation, we engaged in targeted outreach. We looked to newspaper articles, podcasts, Indigenous and Black twitter, and Facebook groups for names of leaders and grassroots groups working on issues of marginalization and oppression. And we encouraged those we were in touch with to spread the word.

open call
sign-up was first come, first serve

2 hours
the length of codesign sessions

11 people in a session
was the largest session, split into 3 smaller groups

$ paid
individuals could receive $125 for their time

Invited to explore

How to enable applicants to be honest, uncertain and a little less performative

Ways to make power, privilege and world views visible

What makes for a good application

Alternative application questions and formats

Eventbrite & digital invitation

In English, Spanish, Chinese, and Punjabi

Anatomy of a codesign session

1st Setting the space for sharing experience

Zoom codesign sessions started with a land acknowledgment, a brief introduction to the facilitators and project, setting ground rules for a respectful and honest conversation, and a round robin to meet everyone in the (virtual) room. We tried to set boundaries and expectations: all comments would be anonymized and have no bearing on current or future applications to Vancouver Foundation.

We really don't know the answers. So we're taking an experimental approach, one that embraces emergence and learning by reaching out and developing options together.

Context for the session: applications as one piece of the equity puzzle

Approach to the session: embracing emergence & learning

Let's get to know each other!

1. Your name & if you represent an organization or group
2. Why are you here?
3. What systems you're trying to change?

Introductions

Our communication agreements for courageous conversations
(Drawn from Cultures Connecting)
- Let's listen for understanding
- Let's share the floor within the time frames allocated, using the chat or hand function to indicate you'd like to say something
- Let's speak from our own experiences and recognize varied histories of marginalization & oppression
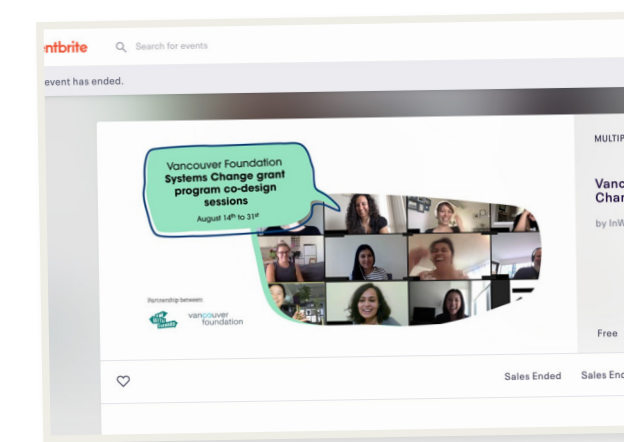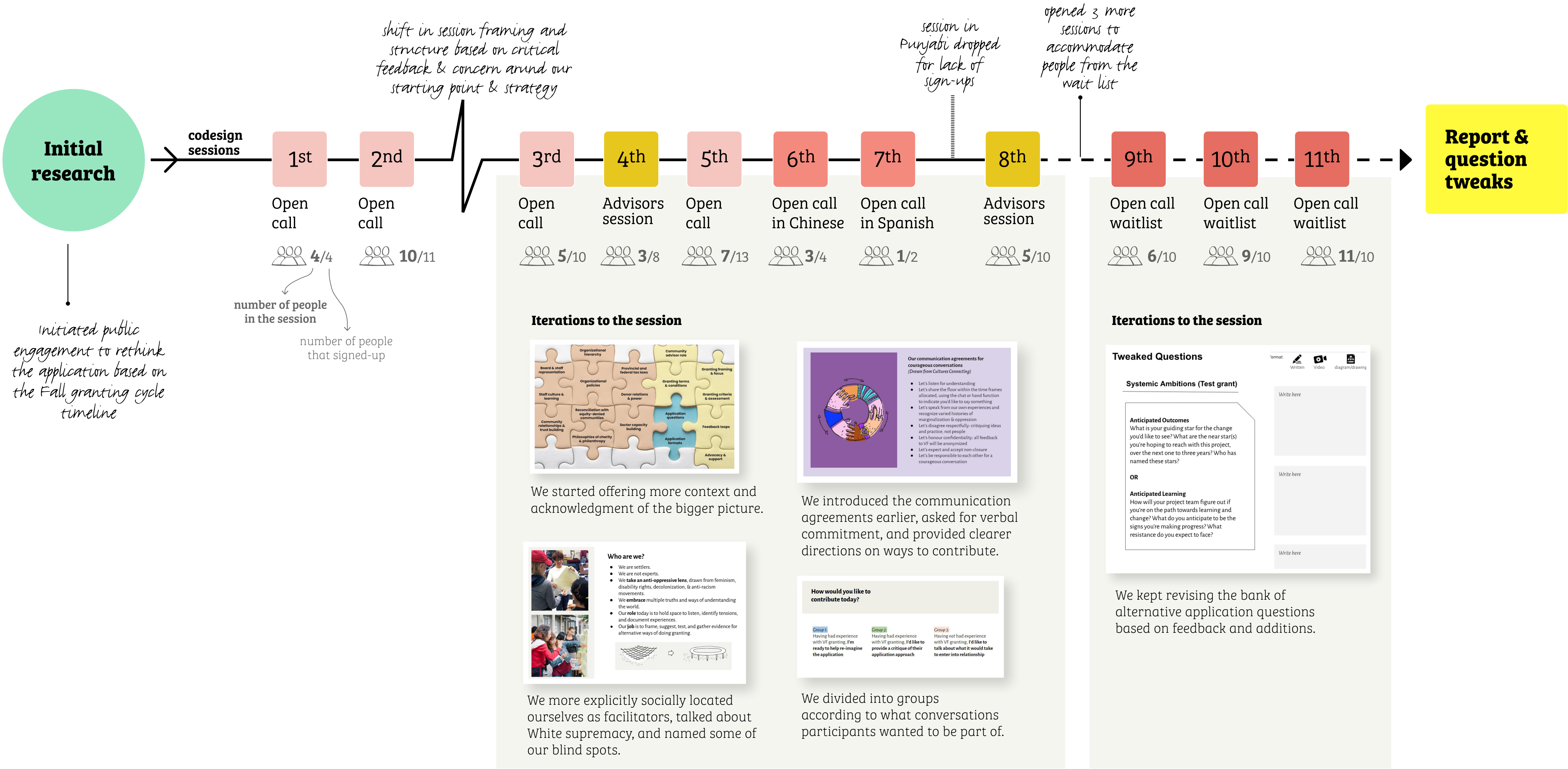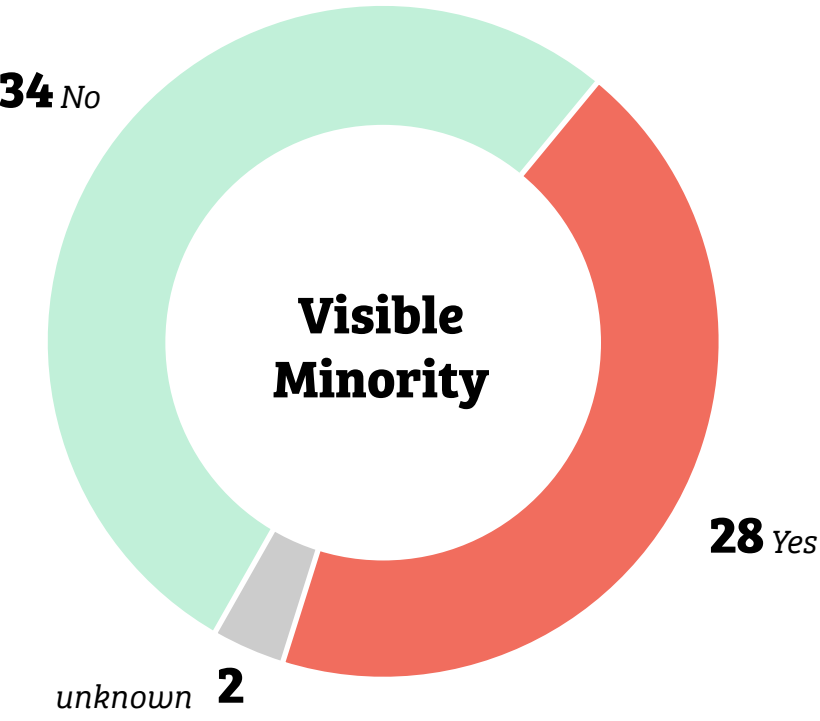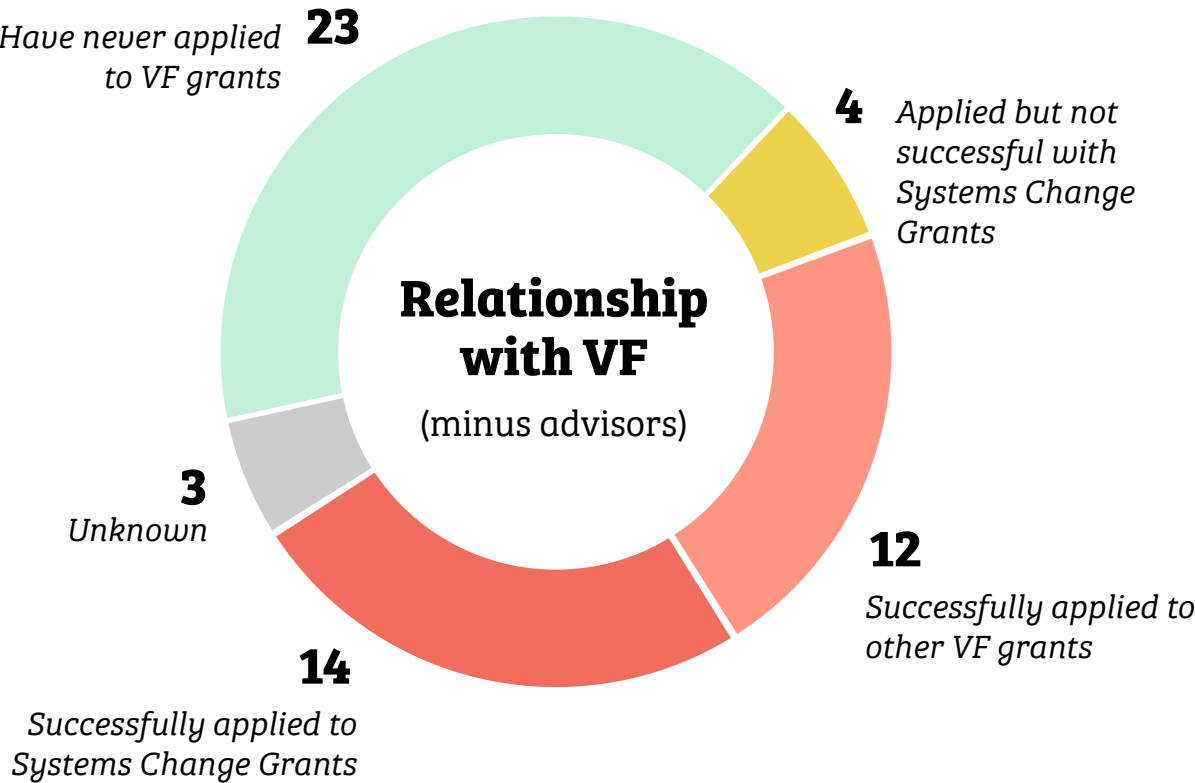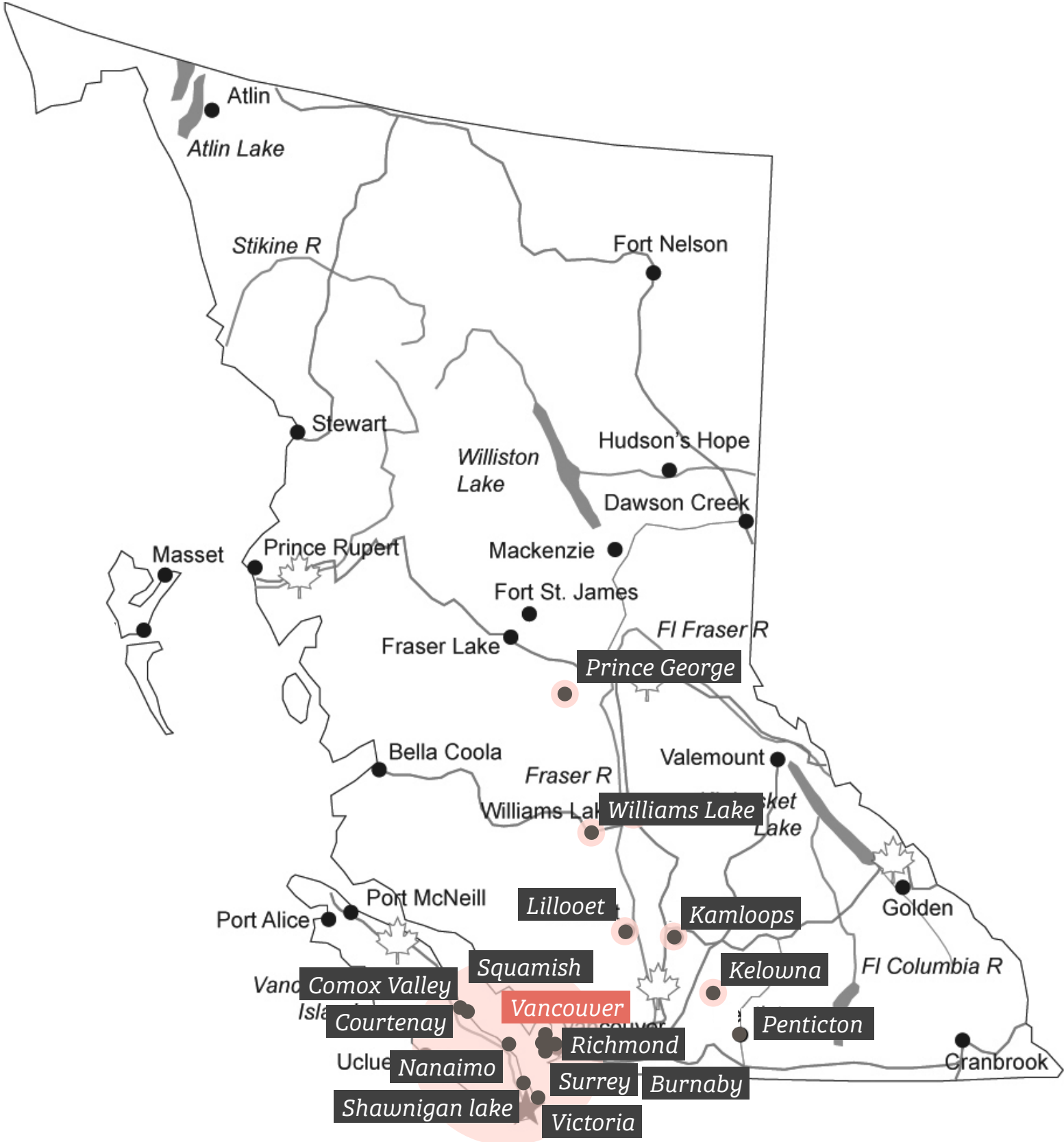- Let's disagree respectfully: critiquing ideas and practice, not people
- Let's honour confidentiality: all feedback to VF will be anonymized
- Let's expect and accept non-closure
- Let's be responsible to each other for a courageous conversation

Communication agreements

Who are we?
- We are settlers.
- We are not experts.
- We take an anti-oppressive lens, drawn from feminism, disability rights, decolonization, & anti-racism movements.
- We embrace multiple truths and ways of understanding the world.
- Our role today is to hold space to listen, identify tensions, and document experiences.
- Our job is to frame, suggest, test, and gather evidence for alternative ways of doing granting.

Our role and power as facilitators & designers

2nd Small groups for deeper conversation

Participants self-selected into breakout rooms based on their relationship with Vancouver Foundation and the conversations they wanted to have. We used a shared Google slide deck as a kind of whiteboard: participants were encouraged to interact with the visuals, directly comment, vote for provocations, and access it after the session.

We concluded the session by communicating next steps, and a closing ritual where each participant shared a rose (positive), thorn (negative), and bud (learning) from the codesign session.

2. Barriers Now, let's focus on surfacing and understanding the barriers you experience to filling out applications:
- More to add to the word cloud?
- Vote for the ones you feel most!

2. Gaps Let's explore the gap between what you think VF prioritizes and looks for in a systems change application, and what you think they should value.

What VF seems to prioritize — What VF should value

Ideal Questions What might you want to share in stage one of an applica...

Demographics and Lived Experience	Systemic Ambitions	Engagement	Conditions for Systems Change
Questions about who is leading and doing the work, and what informs their worldview.	Questions about the focus of the work: what systemic challenge is being addressed, its causes, and possible levers of change.	Questions about who is participating in the work and how.	Questions about what conditions are in place in your team to move the dial on systems change.

Other

Conditions for Systems Change

Uncertainty & learning

How will your team figure out if its on a fruitful path towards learning and change? What do you anticipate to be the signs that you're moving in a constructive direction? What are your milestones?

Create your milestones map

Let's take a look at some alternative questions

Provocations to spark discussion and imagination, a starting point.

love, reject, mix & match

First: Swapping stories & experiences of applying for Systems Change Grants
group 1: Helpful and unhelpful experiences of application processes
group 2: Last experience with VF
group 3: Reasons for not engaging with VF

Second: Sharing desired stories & experiences
What do you wish you could share with Vancouver Foundation about your systemic work and ambitions?

Last: Responding to provocations
Exploring alternative application questions and formats; adding ideas and thoughts.

Iterations to the codesign process

shift in session framing and structure based on critical feedback & concern around our starting point & strategy

session in Punjabi dropped for lack of sign-ups

opened 3 more sessions to accommodate people from the wait list

Initial research

codesign sessions

1st	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**5th**	**6th**	**7th**	**8th**	**9th**	**10th**	**11th**
Open call	Open call	Open call	Advisors session	Open call	Open call in Chinese	Open call in Spanish	Advisors session	Open call waitlist	Open call waitlist	Open call waitlist
4/4	**10**/11	**5**/10	**3**/8	**7**/13	**3**/4	**1**/2	**5**/10	**6**/10	**9**/10	**11**/10

Report & question tweaks

Initiated public engagement to rethink the application based on the Fall granting cycle timeline

number of people in the session

number of people that signed-up

Iterations to the session

We started offering more context and acknowledgment of the bigger picture.

We introduced the communication agreements earlier, asked for verbal commitment, and provided clearer directions on ways to contribute.

Who are we?
- We are settlers.
- We are not experts.
- We **take an anti-oppressive lens**, drawn from feminism, disability rights, decolonization, & anti-racism movements.
- We **embrace** multiple truths and ways of understanding the world.
- Our **role** today is to hold space to listen, identify tensions, and document experiences.
- Our **job** is to frame, suggest, test, and gather evidence for alternative ways of doing granting.

We more explicitly socially located ourselves as facilitators, talked about White supremacy, and named some of our blind spots.

How would you like to contribute today?

We divided into groups according to what conversations participants wanted to be part of.

Iterations to the session

Tweaked Questions

Systemic Ambitions (Test grant)

Anticipated Outcomes
What is your guiding star for the change you'd like to see? What are the near star(s) you're hoping to reach with this project, over the next one to three years? Who has named these stars?

OR

Anticipated Learning
How will your project team figure out if you're on the path towards learning and change? What do you anticipate to be the signs you're making progress? What resistance do you expect to face?

We kept revising the bank of alternative application questions based on feedback and additions.

Who engaged?

64 codesign session participants
8 are Community Advisors

127 expressed interest
708 event views
66 waitlist

11 codesign sessions
2 for Community Advisors
1 Chinese-speaking
1 Spanish-speaking
7 open call

Map labels: Atlin, Atlin Lake, Stikine R, Fort Nelson, Stewart, Hudson's Hope, Williston Lake, Dawson Creek, Mackenzie, Masset, Prince Rupert, Fort St. James, Fraser Lake, Fl Fraser R, Prince George, Bella Coola, Valemount, Fraser R, Williams Lake, ...ket Lake, Port McNeill, Lillooet, Kamloops, Golden, Port Alice, Squamish, Kelowna, Fl Columbia R, Comox Valley, Vancouver, Penticton, Courtenay, Richmond, Cranbrook, Uclue..., Nanaimo, Surrey, Burnaby, Shawnigan lake, Victoria

Relationship with VF (minus advisors)

- Have never applied to VF grants **23**
- Applied but not successful with Systems Change Grants **4**
- Successfully applied to other VF grants **12**
- Successfully applied to Systems Change Grants **14**
- Unknown **3**

Visible Minority

- No **34**
- Yes **28**
- unknown **2**

Systemic issues addressed by participants

- Childcare: quality & access
- Environmental justice
- Education equity
- Access to arts
- Disability & inclusion
- Indigenous youth
- fatfobia
- Stigma, health & mental health equity
- Refugees & immigration
- Gender equity
- Racism
- Poverty
- Street Involved youth & adults

Self-reported lived experiences of participants

Indigenous . Black . Undocumented refugee . Classism . HIV . Racism . South American Immigrant . African Immigrant . South Asian Immigrant . Sexism . Rural/ Small Community . Working Poor . Substance Use . Mental Health . Anxiety

Participant segments

How are participants showing up to systems change grantmaking, or not? What drives interactions with Vancouver Foundation? We can't reduce engagement to one or two things: there is not one motivation or one set of assumptions that all potential applicants hold. By grouping perspectives into personas or segments, we hope to capture some recurring patterns in how codesign session participants related to or regarded Systems Change Grants. Some had only ever read the description or scanned the application; others had been recipients. Others still came to learn more about the world of systems change granting, having never heard of this particular grant type before.

Understanding their beliefs, pain points, perceived barriers & enablers, and aspirations can inform the design not just of an application, but of broader relationships and experiences with Vancouver Foundation. Of course, no one grant can be everything to everybody, but decisions about who is well-served, and who is left out, can only be intentional when those groups are well understood.

The following groupings or segments are overlapping and not fixed: they describe organizations and leaders at a point in time, as they engaged in the codesign process.

The Professionals

The Unheards

The Straight Shooters

The Befuddled & Frustrated

The Daunted

The Thwarted

The Storytellers

The Professionals

The Professionals are doing well in the current system, and likely hold a grant. They tend to be from larger, urban organizations with broad networks, and have university-educated staff writing their grants. They are less likely to have lived experience in their line of work.
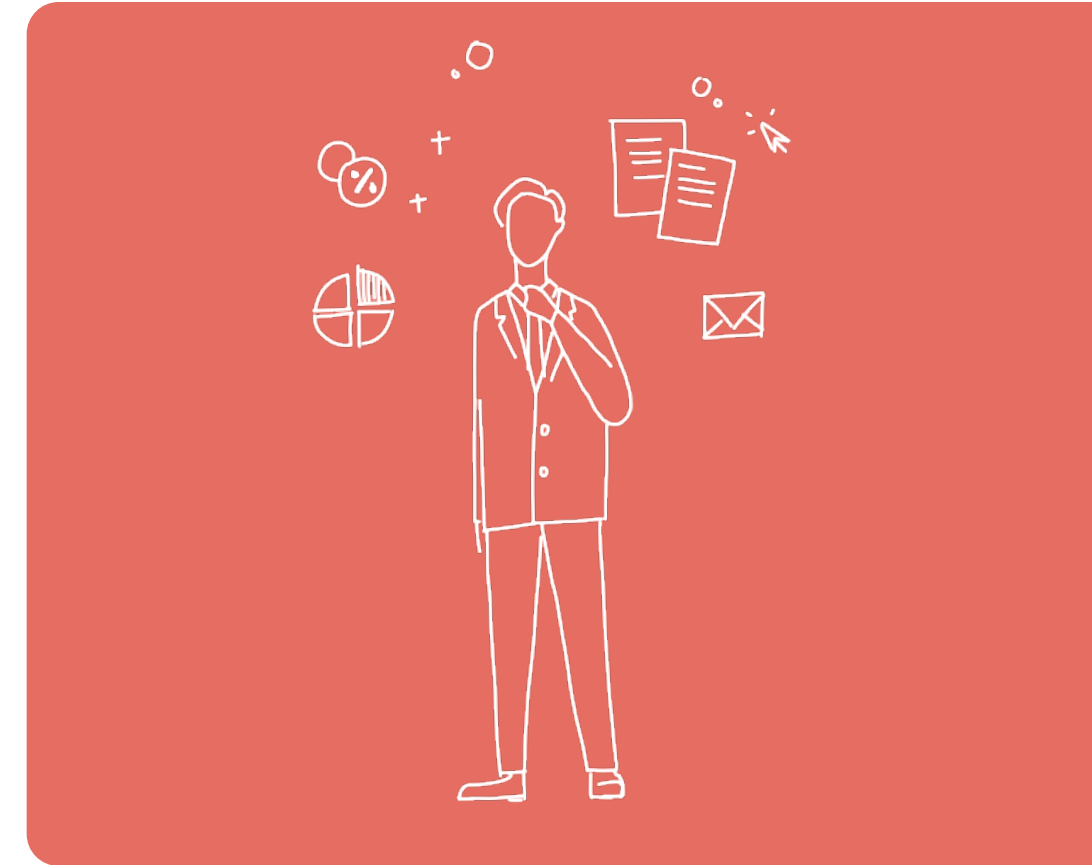
The Straight Shooters

The Straight Shooters are weary of the game: each new funding opportunity (be it from government or a foundation) requires a different framing, set of buzzwords, and approach to the work. They are leaders within communities of which they are a part: their lived experience and relationships guide their sense of what is called for, but it rarely seems to align with the hearts and minds of funders, Vancouver Foundation included. They know they could find a way to make their work look like the answer to a funder-felt problem, but question why they should have to contort themselves to get money? Ultimately, they see themselves accountable to the people experiencing problems on the ground, not the funder. This leaves them questioning whether there is grounds for common understanding and authentic partnership.

The Unheards

The Unheards sense that their work isn't regarded as on trend and they aren't in touch with the latest buzzwords. With a strong sense of service to the community, their grassroots organizing attracts people without formal power, relies on the volunteerism of people with lived experience, and has little to no budget for formal communications. They work with people experiencing the ugliest side of systems, including those without the status to access Canada's social safety net.

The Unheards would like to have their work recognized and valued because that would mean acknowledging the value of the human lives they care for. They view the radical acts of mutual aid by people without formal power as deeply disruptive of current systems. In this sense, they regard their work as 'systemic.'

For the Unheards, each fresh funding rejection can feel like a personal blow. Already feeling abandoned by those with power and resources, rejection letters come as another reminder that their work and their community are unseen and undervalued. The Unheards have had to navigate a lot of systems not designed for them, and this is yet another one that is letting them down.
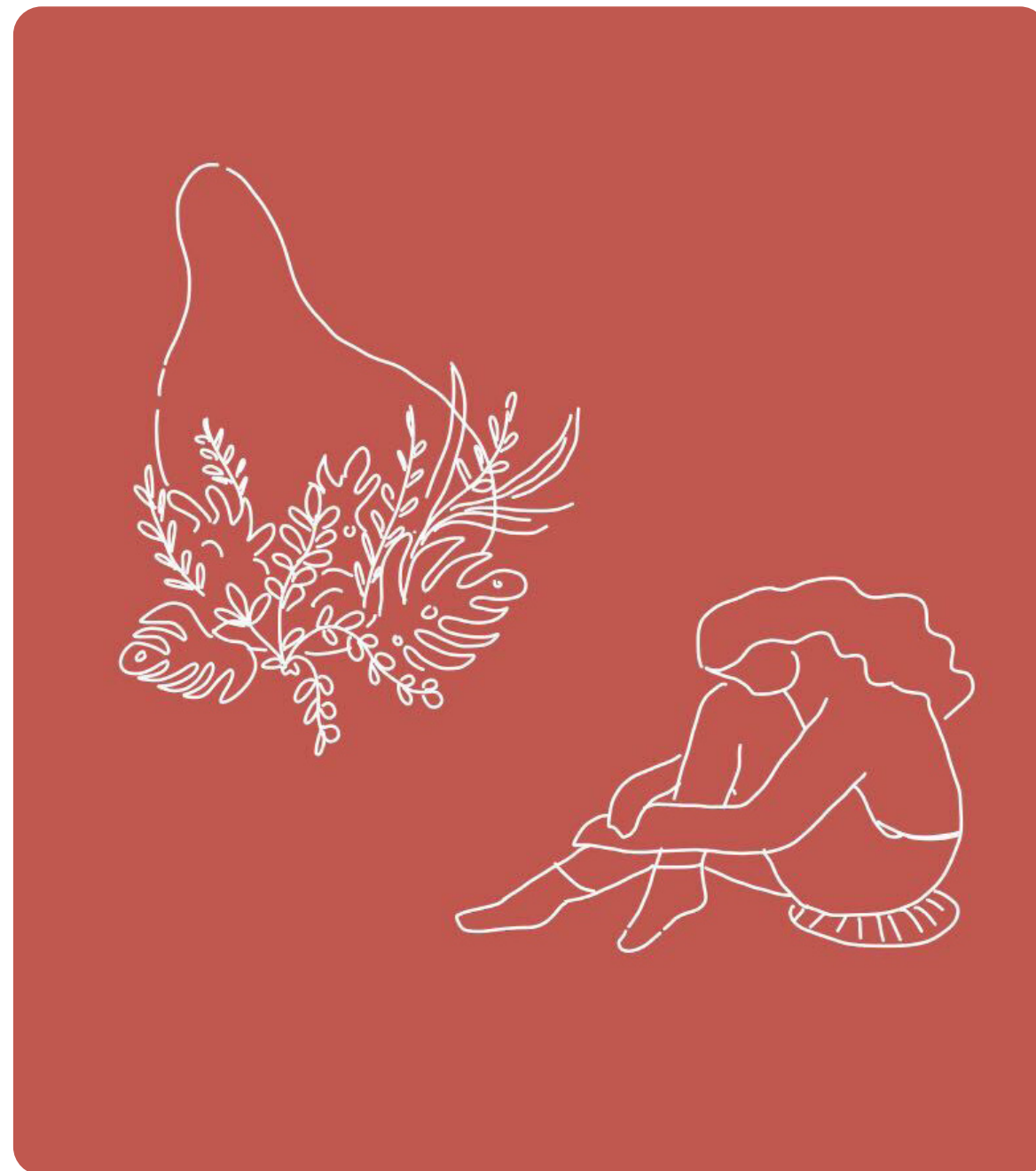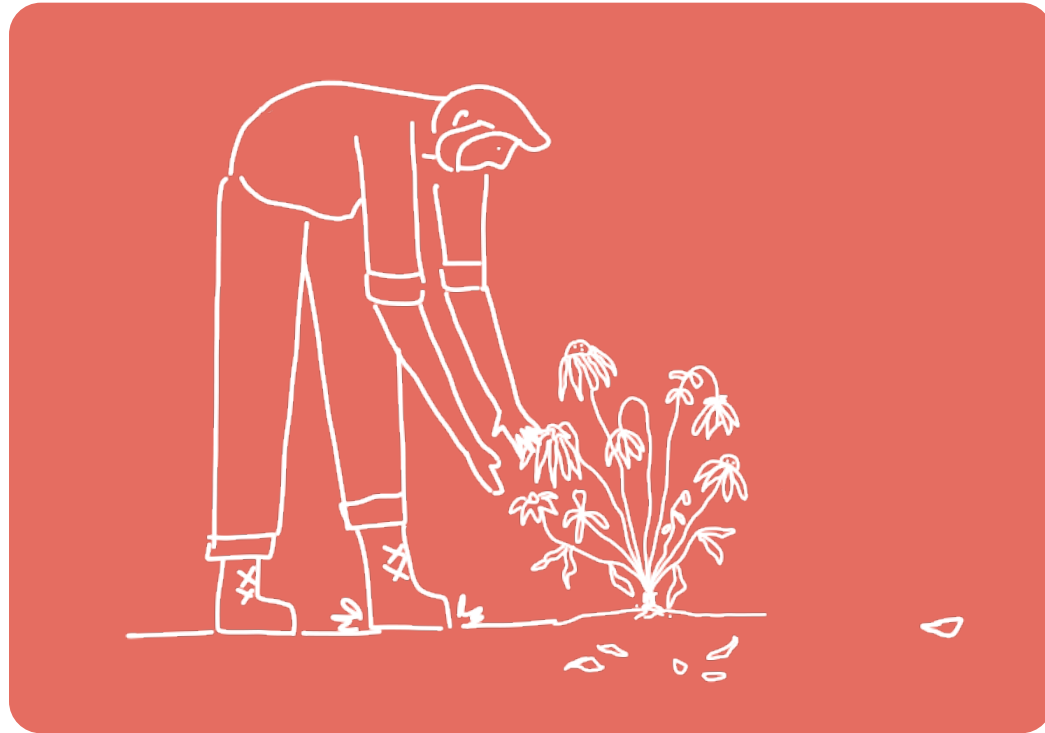
The Thwarted

The Thwarted were excited about forging a new kind of relationship with Vancouver Foundation: one based on shared purpose and evolving trust. They saw their Develop Grants as the first step in a longer-term partnership. Only they found Vancouver Foundation to be a hands-off funder: progress reports seemed to go unread; there were few meaningful check-ins; and little mutual learning. The Thwarted assumed Vancouver Foundation were invested in seeing their work deepen over time, but found their relationship to be a short-term dalliance. Unable to secure more funding from Vancouver Foundation, they were left to do hard-to-fund work, and with sore feelings.

The Befuddled & Frustrated

The Befuddled & Frustrated tend to start with the rubric. What's being measured here? What's being valued? They've been conditioned to show foresight, responsiveness, and careful planning, not vulnerability, uncertainty, or curiosity. They listen and read attentively for clues, but eventually throw their hands up exclaiming: 'Just tell me what's required and how you are scoring!' Some of the Befuddled & Frustrated are grant writers and may not have a personal relationship to the work. Others are new to grant writing, and arnestly feel that the grant applies to their work, but have the disquieting feeling that they are failing to read between the lines. The short explanations on their rejection letters often serve to deepen this suspicion.

The Storytellers

The Storytellers don't like to be confined to the written word: it's not their favorite medium. They want to know and engage with their audience, using body language, images, spreadsheets, and testimonials to weave a narrative that shows the form and impact of their work. For this group, the link between means and ends is paramount and their strength is not writing, it's relationships and an action orientation.

English may not be their first language and they are generally outsiders to the academic spaces from which systems change language springs. On paper, they are challenged to show what's different about how they work and learn, perhaps because it is intuitive. They long for a real opportunity to convey their work in a manner that draws on their style and talents.

The Daunted

The Daunted are cognizant of the magnitude of systems change relative to their own sphere of influence. They are not without ambition, but don't have the hubris to make the kind of claims they perceive are necessary to play in this field. Rather, they show humility and sincerity in the face of a task they see as beyond the scope of what any one organization can be accountable for.

The Daunted tend to ask probing questions about the merits of their work as seen through the lens of systems change grant reviewers, and recognize the deep learning required to shift whole systems. They often feel the process of seeking funding requires undue arrogance, certainty, and/or insider relationships and language.

They would like to talk about their work in terms of modest and incremental contributions to a larger effort, and often showed interest in being brokered to partners who might share in their vision and treat them as equals. Rural and BIPOC grassroots organizations are well represented in this segment.

Emergent Learning

These were the existing application questions for the Develop Grant, and first stage of the Test and Scale Systems Change Grants that we came into the codesign sessions exploring. On the right, you see the questions that all three grant types asked. And below, you can find the questions particular to each type.

DEVELOP, TEST, & SCALE GRANTS

Project Summary
- State the title/name of your project
- Indicate the anticipated start and end dates for your project

Systemic Issues and Root Causes
What is the pressing issue you're trying to address? What systemic behaviours, attitudes, resource flows, and/or policies have you identified that are holding the issue in place?

Budget Spreadsheet

Collaboration
Who are you currently partnering with? Who else do you intend to include in the development process? How are people affected by the issue involved?

Project Description
What is the pressing issue that your project is trying to address? Why is addressing this meaningful? How will your Develop process lead to a fully formed and viable project plan?

DEVELOP

Systemic change
Why will developing a plan to address this issue be meaningful? How do you foresee the community being able to influence or change the systemic behaviours behind the issue?

Process
Where are you currently in the design and development process? What have you done to move your ideas forward, and what activities do you still need to do?

TEST

Research and Evidence
What research or other evidence are you using to inform your plan to influence systems change?

Anticipated Outcomes
What are your anticipated outcomes for the project (short, medium, and long term)? How will this change be transformative and meaningful?

Process
How do you plan to influence or change the system?

SCALE

Systemic change
Summarize your current social innovation. How long has this project been running? What impact has this project already had on the pressing issue(s) you described above?

Scaling the Social Innovation
At what scale has the current social innovation been operating? To what new level do you intend to scale this work (to new locations, to new institutional levels, more deeply within the current system)?

Research and Evidence
What formal evaluation have you conducted to prove your current social innovation's effectiveness?

Anticipated Outcomes
What are your anticipated outcomes for the project (short, medium, and long term)? How will scaling create a greater response to the pressing issue you've identified?

Process
How do you plan to scale your influence to a new level within the system?

Learning about the application

Given the fall grant cycle timeline, we focused mostly on question substance, rather than on form. Our codesign sessions touched on, but did not deeply probe alternatives to the written format like videos, drawings, pictures, or transcripts of conversations. Still, there was agreement amongst smaller organizations, especially those led by second-language English speakers, that emphasizing the written word (and expecting clarity and rigor in that format) disadvantages them. Vancouver Foundation is currently testing non-written formats through another one of its granting programs, LEVEL, and we encourage the translation of learning from that process to other granting streams.

Alongside unpacking the content of existing questions, we explored two new types of questions: those about the (1) demographics and lived experiences of the project team (2) the team approach to learning and uncertainty.

Neither of these additions made their way into the fall systems change grant applications. Before answering questions on demographics and lived experience, organizations told us they want Vancouver Foundation to model this kind of transparency. Without knowing who is reading and assessing their applications, many organizations saw it as unfair to share the make-up of their leadership, board, and staff, regardless of whether their make-up was diverse or representative of the community they serve. We see an opportunity to turn the theme of transparency into a parallel body of work, drawing on the equity, diversity and inclusion expertise and training that Vancouver Foundation is currently sourcing.

While questions focused on teamwork (versus the problem, project, or the process) tested quite well, the Systems Change Granting team at Vancouver Foundation decided that tweaks should not add length to the upcoming application. Deciding which questions to cut was seen as a more fundamental restructure: one that needed more time and consideration. That's because team questions would speak to a different application logic: rather than show what you know about the systemic issue and share your plan of action, you would describe how your team learns, makes mistakes, and engages with community. Vancouver Foundation staff and leadership are supportive of exploring this alternative logic moving forward.

Learning about the context around the application

Early on in the codesign sessions, participants rightly critiqued the scope of our conversation. Why focus on the application? They wanted to talk about the larger system in which the application is just a prop. Without digging into the structures, beliefs, values, relationships, flows of authority and resources at Vancouver Foundation, participants pointed out that application changes would have little impact.

Relating means to ends

Systems change is an end goal, though a broad one. It doesn't tell us which systems we want to shift, or what kind of change we want to see in systems. Vancouver Foundation's approach to that question has been that it's up to communities. They support groups working to shift very different systems, from education to animal welfare to ecological conservation. They do not determine the values behind systems change either. Systems change projects could be oriented towards more coordinated systems just as much as they could be oriented towards more just systems. Vancouver Foundation has seen its role as supporting the ambitions of British Columbia's charitable organizations, not shaping them.

And yet, as many participants of the codesign sessions argued, means shape ends. People take a lot of cues from the application experience about what kind of work they might be supported to do. And no approach feels neutral to everybody: the process of granting dollars to support systems change work is either reinforcing existing authority and resource flows, dominant narratives and beliefs, or contesting them. Through our interactions with codesign participants we heard what they would value in a process. Participants wanted to see a strong link between values and process in the application. Not surprisingly, questions frequently arose about what Vancouver Foundation stands for, and what the Systems Change Grant is for.

We had framed our mission in terms of achieving greater equity and impact through the Systems Change Grant, starting with the application itself. People naturally talked about what an equitable process for getting to systemic change might look like for them, but tended to reject a narrow focus on application questions. How people were invited to express themselves and communicate their work was important. Also important were conditions of access, the context in which their application would be assessed, and the kind of relationships and capacity building available for ongoing systemic work.

Descriptors of systems change

non-linear   emergent   feedback loops   inter-connected   complex   hearts & minds
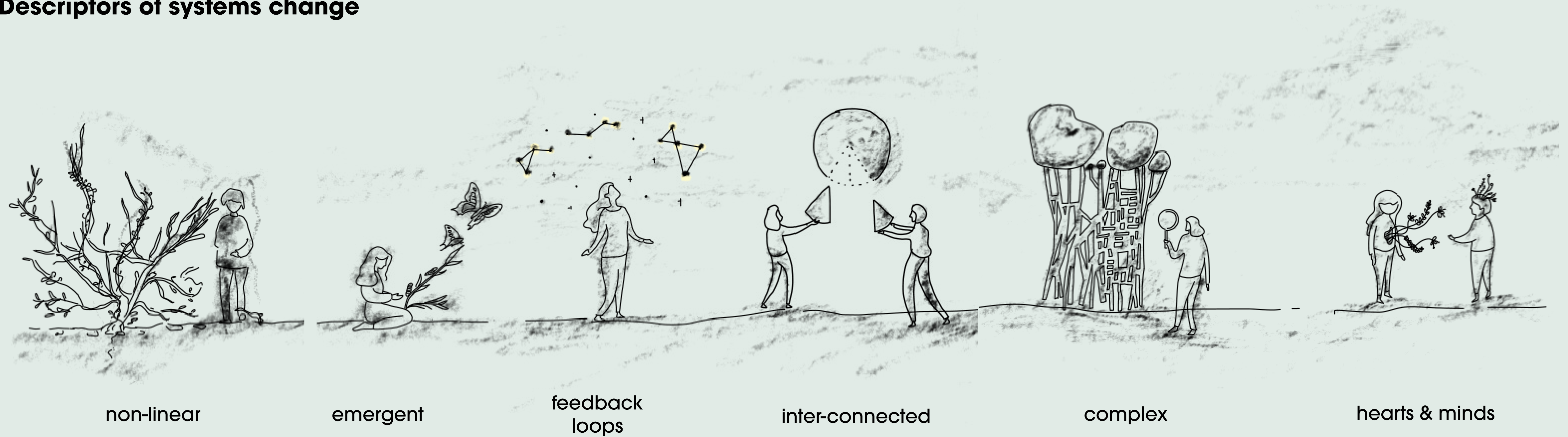
If it makes sense that ends and means should be in alignment, we need to ask: what are the characteristics of the systems our communities want in the end? How can we collectively begin to realize that future state in systems change work? Systems designed for a purpose like justice will be qualitatively different than systems built for another value, like coordination.

Even where a system's purpose isn't made explicit, it will reliably operate to produce outcomes that reflect some implicit values.

In the next section, we share some ideas about what the characteristics of a just funding system might be. Shifting towards a just funding system will require that we open ourselves up to complexity, emergence, and non-linearity, moving away from top-down expertise and technical knowledge and towards more grounded ways of sensing, being and understanding. This is at the heart of systems change work.

Features of a just application process

So, how can a systems change grantmaking process embody the features of a just system? Here's some of the features codesign participants named as key.

We provide quotes to give some context around how these features showed up in our sessions. This was not a consensus exercise, nor did we assume that the more repeated a sentiment was, the more true or valid it is. In the spirit of our inquiry, we have highlighted the voices of participants from equity-denied groups, or groups who have never been recipients of Vancouver Foundation's grants.

1. Access

2. Expression

3. Assessment
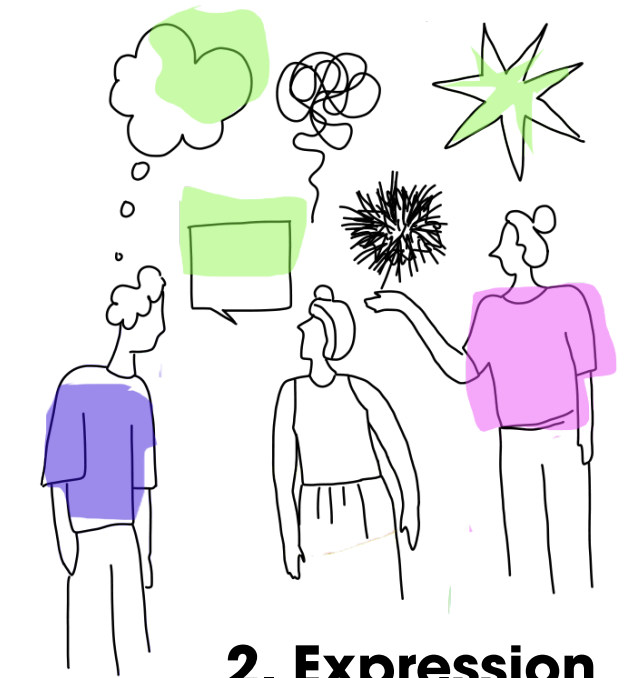
4. Supportive conditions

*Over the following pages, the quotes describing just features are colour coded by:

Experience with VF's Systems Change Grants
(Quote background colour)

never applied

unsuccessful applicant

recipient of grant

Characteristics of the group / organization
(Corner colour stripe)

small or newer

lived experience-led

BIPOC-led

rural

1. Access

Those who have the greatest interest in systemic change are those marginalized by, and removed from the benefits of, current systems. Not surprisingly then, grassroots, rural and BIPOC-led groups, to mention a few, face greater barriers to accessing systems change funds as well. To ensure that system change is being driven and shaped by the world views and experiences of equity-denied groups, barriers to access must be addressed including:

1.1 Support to apply

1.2 Legal structure

1.3 Language
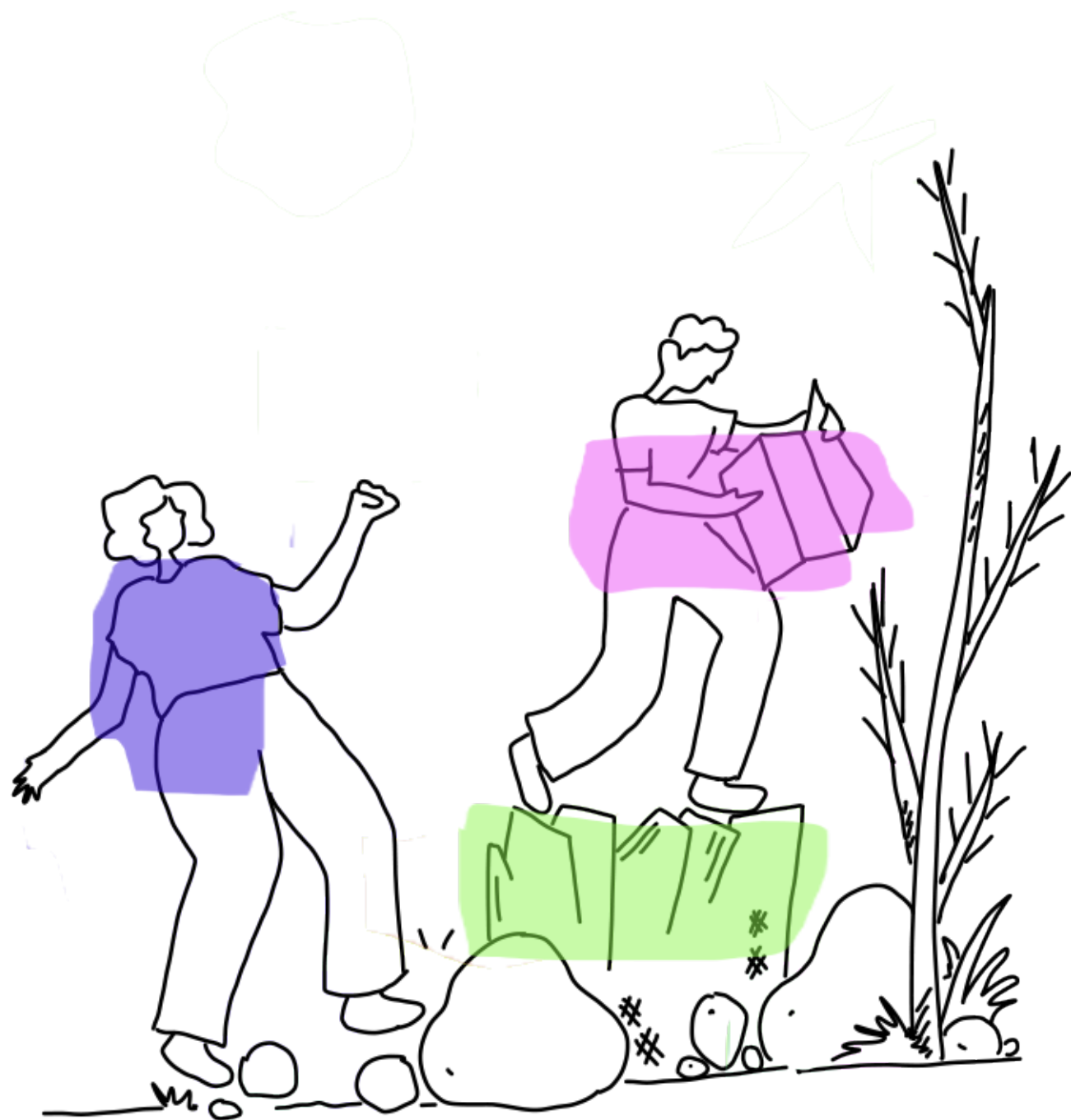
Yes, there are many grassroots orgs doing activism, which is the foundation of systems change work. But, the money is going to organizations with a track record, infrastructure, histories, and resources where they can prove they are financially sound and can have a well thought out application. I do think there is a disconnect between the grassroots organizations that are doing the actual inventive work to change the system, and where the money ends up going. **-- Lived experience-led, small organization, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

1.1 Support to apply

The resources required to apply to the systems change grant can include knowledge of systems change literature, access to grant writers, translation, volunteer hours, relationships to other organizations and groups, and so on. For small, volunteer-led, rurally located, and lived-experience led organizations, such a list might dissuade them from applying.

What if VF recognized the resource differential of applicants and sought to even the playing field by providing grant writers on loan, free resources on systems change, and/or cost recovery for lower budget organizations?

"We are not here for the love of money, we are doing it for our community…We are full time volunteers and contribute from our pocket. We exist because we want to improve and save lives… We are people without education, immigrants, people that don't speak English that are on disability and we are supporting each other… VF should support grassroots organizations, people that are on the ground doing the work every day. Covid has been a blessing in disguise because we've been able to get funding." **-- Lived experience, BIPOC-led, small organization, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

"Recognize it takes longer to do the process if you have a disability or are new to the process. You end up putting up a lot of extra hours to counter that lack of experience applying. [It requires a] shift on how these rules are thought of and what productivity means, not being quantitative." **-- Small, newer, lived experience -led, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

"One of the things that is super important is lived experience, those voices. Going back to our introductions, people don't always come to these grants with professional capacities. Finding a way to support that, and relational grant development…" **-- Lived experience-led, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

1.2 Legal structure

Groups without charitable status cannot directly apply to VF. They were frustrated: some felt excluded from the process; others felt they needed to make too many compromises to be taken under the wing of an organization with the right legal status. On top of the other barriers to access, the search for a partner with charitable status was too much for many, some of whom didn't know where to begin. Vancouver Foundation, with its province-wide relationships could find and invest in ways to support unincorporated groups and non-profits doing systems change work.

That might look like covering the administration charge required by many organizations with charitable status, matchmaking, and offering template partnership agreements based on values of equitable systems change, for example.

"The work that we are doing is new to Canada and our organization. And so it's not always linear or clear... We are not a structured organization. Is VF interested in supporting groups that are doing...not fringe group but in our current context we are...it's not something people have seen before. Are they interested in working with groups of people that are taking this approach? Beyond applying to a specific grant cycle, could we pitch you: 'This is the work, the system change we are doing and working towards, would you like to support it.?'" **-- Lived experience-led group, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

"We (me and my partner) realized what we were trying to do wasn't systems change. I pivoted to do something that is - but then I had no partner. VF said 'go find one.' I did. It's not ideal. I'm like an employee when I didn't want to be...I had to partner with a big, white organization to get the money." **-- Rural, BIPOC-led, small organization, recipient of Systems Change Grant**

1.3 Language

A hallmark of a participatory, democratic system is that people can understand how to participate. Many find the language of the Systems Change Grant highly academic, and abstract, without sufficient grounding in context or real world application. There may also be cultural biases baked into the Vancouver Foundation's language of systems change without acknowledgment.

How could systems change be explained using examples, strategies and learning from the ground, including grantees?

"Transparency is super important. The rubric should be accessible. [Applicant agreement to publish] successful applications should be a condition of funding." **-- Lived experience, rural, BIPOC-led unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

"Lots of communities that are doing systems change work but don't call it that. The reason why systems thinking exists, at least the way I think about it, to get people who have a way of thinking about the world that is very compartmentalized and fragmented and essentialized to think differently about this. Some of the work that has been done by various academic based projects and Western oriented projects, they fragment things and therefore make these types of projects in that way and are therefore damaging in a lot of ways... You look at a lot of other communities and they just have different cultures and different communities with different epistemologies. For them interconnected thinking is just a given. So what we call systems thinking is just a part of everyday life or understanding of the world for other people." **-- Never applied to Systems Change Grant**

"What systems change depends on the community and the culture. What is systems change for the Vancouver Foundation? It is hard to understand what it means to them, also how to do systems change, it seems as if we missed a part of that." **-- Lived experience, BIPOC-led, small organization, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

"In our community we have a low literacy rate, about 100 non-profits. A lot of people don't understand the language. They get frustrated. A lot have awesome ideas but not the expertise to write: they are totally losing out. They don't even try to apply because the expertise is not there." **-- Rural recipient of Systems Change Grant**

2. Expression

Communicating systemic ambitions is a learning curve for organizations who have been conditioned to talk about service delivery, outputs, and short-term results. For some, their vision for a changed system is a much more cha- llenging one to share, because it doesn't reference commonly understood ideas, widespread beliefs, or established approaches.

Barriers cited include English as a second language, coming from a different cultural context, or being a small organization without dedicated communications capacity. With word limits, applicants feel the pressure to use the right words to convey big thoughts. Many asserted that their writing skills were not a good indicator of their competence in the work they do, and the relationships they hold.
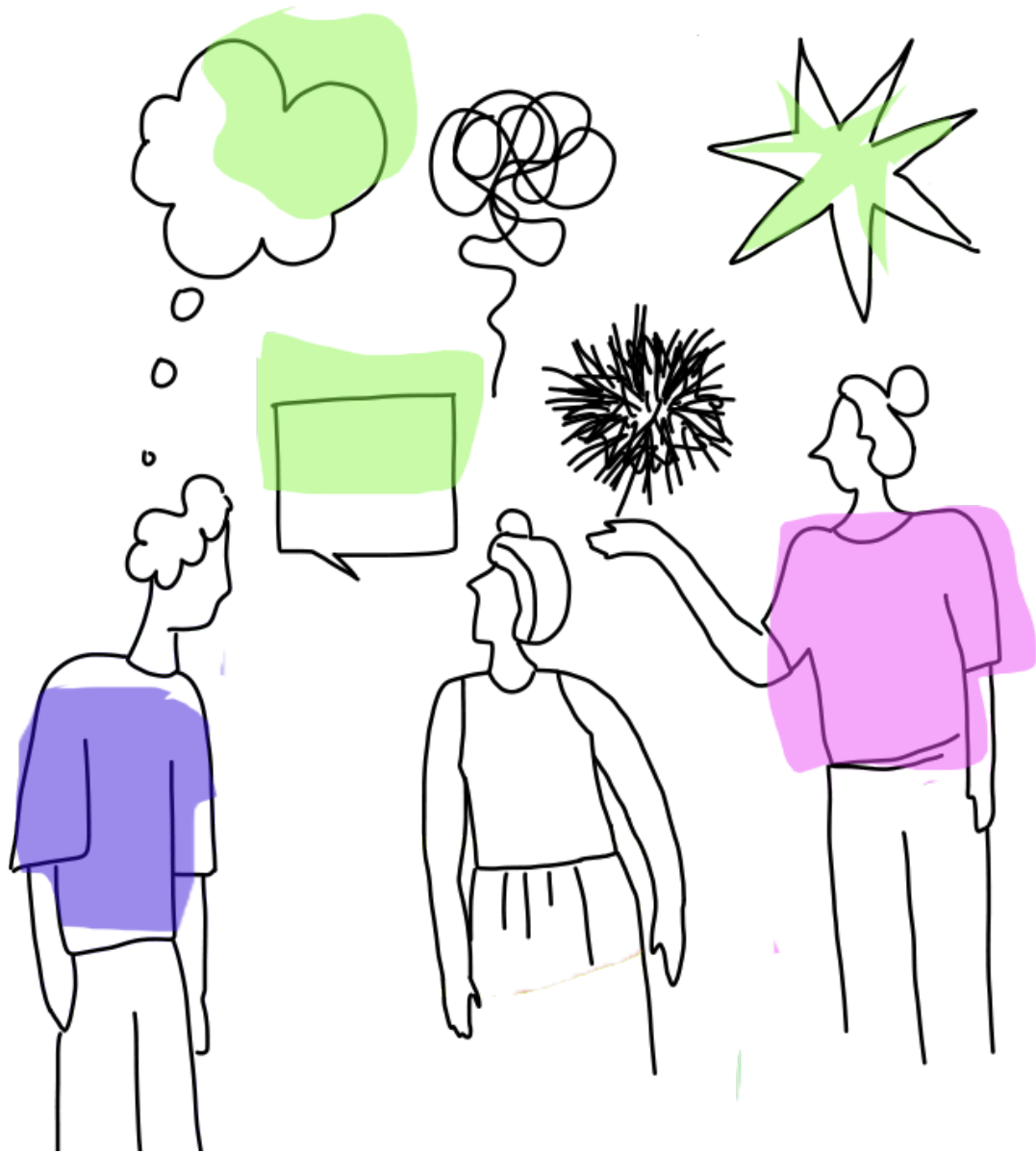
"Applications specifically for BIPOC gives me permission to apply. It decreases intimidation. They will not focus so much on the grammar but on the content of who the support is for, how the support will be." -- **Lived experience, BIPOC-led organization**

2.1 Multiple formats

When it comes to work that is characterized by its non-linearity, structures, relationships, and feedback loops, prose can be a very limiting form of expression. Participants spoke to the difficulty of translating images, videos, and spreadsheets into tightly worded paragraphs. What if people could choose from a range of communication modes that allowed them to put their best foot forward?

"What about non-written forms? Images, audio, video...they could give options. I would be interested in a combination. [They would] need advisors who are set up to review in different formats. It would work better to accommodate access needs." -- **BIPOC-led organization, recipient of Systems Change Grant**

"I am a very visual person and our team [too]. I wish you could submit a diagram ...to more holistically show your approach. We had this great diagram and we had to write it, and ugh! And I only had so many words. [I'd like] different modalities to submit proposals." -- **Lived experience- led, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

"Writing isn't my strong suit. Other ways that people like telling their story: I love statistics, spreadsheets! Also, feedback from participants, testimonies." -- **BIPOC-led, small organization, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

2.2 Conversational

A common refrain near the end of codesign sessions was one of regret from a previously declined applicant that they had not known how to talk about their work differently. They appreciated the opportunity to be part of a discussion about systems change work. Some commented on how rare that opportunity was for them and longed for a conversational, or dialogic application process. A back and forth would give applicants the opportunity to clarify, rephrase, re-think or re-frame. Arguably, such a process might better reveal which teams have the learning orientation that's a hallmark of system changers.

I think it's easy to look at what others are doing or the way things are framed and see yours is somehow outside of what is currently being funded... When I look at those big questions, it's like, oh, it would take so much to get anybody to understand what it is we're actually doing, because it's not the kind of stuff they're already doing." I find the language of systems change is intimidating. I like to think that what we want to work on is systems change, but when I read it on a grant document, or it's a systems change thing, I don't know if we're fit, and I feel like the further you are from being in that circle where that kind of work is being done and named that way...You might be actually doing more profound systems change work, but you would never use that language and you would feel horribly arrogant to suggest that what you were doing was systems change." -- **Never applied to Systems Change Grant**

"[Barriers to applying are] being a good writer, knowing how to apply, to speak the same language as the granter. I'm ESL, I have grammar trouble." -- **BIPOC member of larger organization, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

3. Assessment

How do grant reviewers gain the context and authority to evaluate proposals? As a granting program that funds work across sectors, and throughout the province by actors big and small, how can reviewers set themselves up to grapple with the often challenging particulars, uncertainties, and big ideas behind an application rather than zeroing in on conventional, but arguably less reliable or predictive information? How can assessors avoid defaulting to dominant assumptions and biases about what systemic work is feasible, worthwhile or novel? There are three main elements participants emphasized:

3.1 Grounded voices

3.2 Contextual decision-making

3.3 Fit for purpose

3.1 Grounded voices

Communities are complex, heterogeneous, and their members have differential access to power. When determining what is valued, contested, or just in a given community, Vancouver Foundation may have a duty to seek out multiple perspectives -- not just from applicants or from Community Advisors with the financial capacity and professional language to voluntarily adjudicate applications. This might look like reaching out to people on the ground who are directly affected by services and systems, to provide context to the voices of grant writers and organizations that serve the community.

"We don't know how they are approving the grants. Change is happening [here, but] they are not part of our community. How would they know without meeting us and knowing about our culture? There could be an advisory board that knows and comes to the community." **-- Lived experience, BIPOC-led, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

"In my ideal world, it wouldn't be me saying it. This comes back to mutual transformation. We have had incredible gifts come from people who have come to our community. If you're talking about systems change, I would want them to hear [the] experience of people with refugee status [who] are living with Canadians. That is amazing. We want to replicate and scale [that]. Unfortunately, the way our charity model works, it is an "us" and "them": the people we are trying to help become othered. We are undoing systems change, the moment we start writing about it." **-- Smaller organization, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

3.2 Contextual decision-making

Some applicants asked how the reviewers might be qualified to assess their application. Knowing reviewers might not have personal experience of conditions on the ground, they wondered how they could assess them fairly, especially alongside applications from contexts from which they might be more familiar. Others spoke from the perspective of lived experience, with questions about how their voice is valued and anticipated in the application process.

"[I'm] intimidated because it is impersonal. My experience is very personal. Putting those out there, and being measured by that...When you have a professional background you know how to answer and what is expected...It [might] open doors and also take away value if you are not currently living it. [Treatment of lived experience] can be tokenistic and uncomfortable. [It] can also put a hold on personal healing."
-- Small, newer, lived experience-led, never applied to Systems Change Grant

I don't understand how grants are assessed. I wasn't clear who was actually looking at this thing. I think some transparency at how this is addressed: this is the group that is looking at this, and these are the lenses.
--Unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant

"Because they are based in Vancouver, they don't have local information." **-- Lived experience, BIPOC-led, small, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

"How does Vancouver Foundation know if the people who are leading or who are engaged are the right people? Why are they the right people to engage? How is Vancouver Foundation qualified to assess [me and my work?]" **-- BIPOC led, small organization, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

3.3 Fit for purpose

The Systems Change grant application asks some different kinds of questions to get at the systemic nature of proposed work. But some questions are surprisingly faithful to traditional service delivery funding applications; namely, questions about budget and time frame. Participants recognized that these questions are often premature, time consuming for them, and the information, tentative as it is, is ultimately unreliable for grant reviewers. They also noted that budgets were sometimes cited as a reason for a decline at the earliest stage, which begged the question: are reviewers paying attention to the right things?

"[It's] a balance, between having thought through your project well enough to be able to describe what your approach is - and that's really important for one to demonstrate in their application...But I found that in the application process there is a section where it asked you to map out the three years and the level of detail required for that and the budget is more than I thought was reasonable given the work underway. And we built into our schedule saying this was the projected - subject to change - work plan but nonetheless there was a lot of detail in the work planning required relative to how much one can know before one really embarked on the project."
--Lived experience-led, successful recipient of Systems Change Grant

"I find budget details to be difficult because they ask you to project your budget or allocate budget, it's a headache. So much goes behind the scenes, it is hard to put a monetary value on everything we do. It is hard to articulate that and put an amount to it, especially things considered as community building, that aren't traditionally looked at in this way. It feels different to the way we operate." **-- Never applied to Systems Change Grant**

4. Supportive conditions

Systemic work has traditionally not been well funded, or widely understood within charities. It requires different resources, relationships, capacities, and mindsets than service delivery. It requires bravery, fortitude and persistence, but also trust, vulnerability, and authenticity. How can Vancouver Foundation support organizations to develop optimal conditions for this work? Two characteristics were consistently identified:

4.1 Relational

4.2 Long-term

"They realize that there's uncertainty or failure, or just sometimes failure is the first step to succeed. And I feel like they get that part, which is cool, because deep systems change is experimental, it's so complex, and especially working with communities. It's the community who's going to take it on, and then it's going to do something else that you have no idea… it's going to take on a life of its own. How do you explain that in an application?

That's what's happened with our small project. If I tried to get funding for what I thought it was going to be, it's turned into something totally different and amazing and inspiring… It's shifting the idea that the funders are in control, but it's almost like we're in a subjugated position… Peer driven change can require a fundamental shift in perspective, to recognize and embrace the initiative, self determination and mutuality of individuals, and to reconceive of them as makers not takers.

So it's like they're the ones creating the opportunities and how can we shift that? 'I'm the one giving you the money, so do everything you possibly can to like make me believe you.' How can we make that relationship more equal? Where you're not begging? I think Vancouver Foundation does that better but you still feel like you're on a different level, like you're small, and they're big." **-- Small organization, never applied to Systems Change Grant**

"I was pleased when Vancouver Foundation moved toward Systems Change, but they've never been clear what their skin is in the game." **-- Rural organization**

4.1 Relational

Participants identified that systemic work requires different relationships to thrive. Experimentation, and the vulnerability of risk and failure, require trust and openness with a funder. A sense of a shared purpose can engender a feeling that the grantee and the funder are 'in this together' or both have 'skin in the game', which undergirds truly transformational work. Some participants identified that this relationship with Vancouver Foundation might be based on mutual recognition of, and appreciation for, each other's work.

"Scheduled 30 minute calls with grant managers...and have access to them in advance of the grant application. The purpose is to help us put the best of the project forward and warn us if it's not a system change application. Important for us as a human moment but also for the grant managers. Hearing the voices I think they learn about the sector as a whole (it's hard to put everything on paper). It's the best moment for me and the most human and it doesn't involve text non-accidentally. The other moment that feels human is the efforts they go to to explain the main questions by little sub-questions on the grant itself, that feels like they are trying to help you answer the question. That there's no tricks, there's lots of transparency."
--Successful recipient of Systems Change Grant

"An example of [another] granting agency, they went into the community to give workshops to support to apply. They talked about how to apply, what's acceptable - and that got a lot of uptake because of the community conversations. After receiving a grant they would send a team. It was an environmental project: they were literally pulling weeds with us while we were talking and really getting engaged in what we are doing. I found that so awesome. They were friendly and it didn't feel like monitoring." **-- Rural, successful recipient of Systems Change Grant**

"I also felt that staff act like it's cheating to help us [understand what the application is looking for]." **-- Rural, BIPOC-led, Develop cohort**

"I think relationships should be a key value. Even how they set-up the grant process speaks to the value on relationships. If I can give one example, I have had a number of good experiences. One is with the Law Foundation. You pitch your project AFTER a verbal conversation, and the LOI is developed in conversation. You know already because you are working on it together, and then it goes to a decision-making body. And if you get past that, you generally have the grant. So all the work you've put in, you know there is payback. That was a really relational process, trying to understand the goal of the process." **— Small organization, unsuccessful applicant to Systems Change Grant**

4.2 Long-term

Participants understood systemic work as long term work. Some expressed the desire to be on more of a journey with Vancouver Foundation, in which the Foundation is investing in their ability to develop networks, grow important partnerships, and otherwise develop their capacity to do systems change. This might look like making discrete grants (Convene and Develop, for example) a more coherent user journey. Rather than seeking evidence that organizations already have the right partnerships, skills, and resources in place, Vancouver Foundation would support them to develop those key conditions.

"My feeling is, if you are supporting us for a Develop grant, you should be invested in us to see us move to Test." **-- Rural group**

"We had a good conversation with a grant manager before the letter of intent. We got invited to submit for the second phase, and we were not successful. But, we got conflicting feedback in terms of reviewers' comments. They wanted us to increase our partnerships. It does feel that systems change is so big. Figuring out how to tackle it, and through what pieces, seems a bit daunting. It's helpful for us to have more direction, capacity building." **-- Lived experience-led organization**

Understanding the Community Advisor role

One of the things that distinguishes community foundations like Vancouver Foundation from private, family foundations is the role community members play in decision-making. Around 75 community members volunteer their time each grant cycle to read, assess and recommend applications. It's a big investment of time. Who within the community has the capacity to be a Community Advisor and who might be missing? How do Community Advisors conceptualize their role and make sense of applications? What biases do Community Advisors see show up in the decision-making room? These were just some of the questions we posed during Community Advisor codesign sessions.

About ten percent of Community Advisors joined the sessions; those that did demonstrated considerable reflexivity around their role. Below, we've clustered their quotes into themes. In particular, Community Advisors had a lot to say about what it would look like to be making decisions with the value of equity as a top priority. They articulated some of the challenges to doing so at present, including structures, practices, and cultural norms of the advisory committees. They posed just as many questions as we did about how to assess the impact of system change grants, and indeed, what the desired impact of grants might be. Another lively discussion revolved around power and authority, and some uncertainty about how advisors' recommendations contributed to final decisions.

We found that …

1. Many Community Advisors have an astute sense of which parts of Vancouver Foundation's system change granting system might unlock more equitable change.

2. Advisors have little ongoing contact with Vancouver Foundation, and much of the communication is of a technical nature. There is lots to be gained by engaging Advisors in conversations about the intentionality of their role.

3. Advisors' awareness of their own biases doesn't amount to much for the applicant unless Advisors also have explicit direction to direct dollars to equity-denied groups, and see evidence that the granting system is valuing and actively seeking out alternative ways of doing systemic work.

1. Empty words

Advisors can find it frustrating to make decisions based on words alone.

"I am noticing, especially in my first round reviewing applications this spring, [that] many orgs include words around equity and justice, but the orgs are failing to do equity and justice work...but they are just including it in their application. I am interested in how Vancouver Foundation can create mechanisms so that orgs have to more deeply think about equity and justice, versus just saying that."

"I felt that the best grant writers are not always the best grantees."

"I think they value funding things that they are supposed to be funding (which are good things!) from lots of rich white people, and what is the buzzword of the year? I am not always sure: is it actually Indigenous-led? Is it systems changing? Or do we keep the same colonial systems by giving money to white-led orgs?"

2. Decision-making basis

Community Advisors see an equity-based decision making process as distinct from the current one, which relies on a majority rule and merit-based selection.

"As an advisor, I wanted to provide some critiques of applications that did not show they were doing equity work. But, when it comes to moving [proposals] forward, we rely on a voting system... And that is a losing battle, especially if I am the only person with an equity lens. There needs to be a way to change how we review, and who is reviewing, so equity is more weighted."

"Yes, there are many grassroots orgs doing activism, which is the foundation of systems change work. But, the money is going to organizations with a track record, infrastructure, histories, and resources where they can prove they are financially sound and can have a well thought out application. I do think there is a disconnect between the grassroots organizations that are doing the actual inventive work to change the system, and where the money ends up going. "

"If Vancouver Foundation is valuing systems change, truly, then they need to have Community Advisors that can adjudicate to dismantle systems. Rather than [spotting] a well written application. There are folks at late stages of [their] career, and a high level of education, but that doesn't mean they are interested in dismantling."

"I see bias in volunteer advisors; we bring a certain lens. Bias is not necessarily bad, but we need to acknowledge it. Sometimes conversations are for/against based on what we value. We no longer have to come to consensus. I don't know if that is better or worse."

"People are sensitive to an equity lens and I think go in with the benefit of the doubt and try to be open. The odd advisor looks at the budget and is technical."

"The thing about risk is, it is a part of systems change, but if we fund one organization with $300,00-400,000, another organization loses out. It feels important to look at the skills and knowledge of that team to do systems change, which is very different from other skills. There's a difference between an organization's reputation to deliver their services and their ability to do this work."

3. Apples & oranges

Advisors often struggle with a structure and granting program that requires them to compare applications that have little in common, from who is applying to what is proposed.

"I really noticed having very different kinds of projects in the same bucket."

"The current approach is comparing apples and oranges: art being compared with environment, and health work."

"We are comparing apples and oranges: comparing urban applications to much smaller rural organizations. Can we do streams based on capacity or experience so organizations are 'competing' against more like types?"

"Seems like the different sectors are pitted against each other."

4. Unclear power

Advisors expressed doubt and confusion over their agency in the process as a whole. Many had little sense of how often their recommendations went forward and why, or why not.

"We are missing the feedback loop to know what actually gets funded. I look at the website like everyone else. So I am not sure what VF values."

"I think the board makes decisions? There isn't really a feedback loop to advisors. I have always been curious about the role of Community Advisors. I think we could go deeper and be less one off. There is no continuity between projects. I would appreciate that. My brain can't keep all the linkages going."

"What is the role of the staff? I am also super unclear about that. Where is the accountability at? I really don't know how the staff think because the staff don't say anything in our meetings. And oftentimes, I find we don't get more information from them (even when we've asked questions to the applicant). Then we fill in our gaps with our own knowledge, and we're even encouraged to do that. That makes me a little uncomfortable. I do it, but I try to state my own biases. We should have bias training."

"I think it is clear that we do not have the power... We are operating in a bit of a vacuum."

5. Information gaps

Advisors talked about the gap between what they feel they need to know to make a discerning choice and the type and depth of information they receive through an application.

"In all the grants I've reviewed, I've not seen systems change...A lot of the applications are quite a bad fit. I am always asking: is this systems change? I don't even know what it is anymore."

"I thought [asking about] community connections was a big piece for VF; that is, that people have identified who they want to engage and why. The application asks but sometimes they aren't identified specifically enough. But I would like to know more about those relationships. Why do [applicants] think they are so important? How does it help with systems change?"

"There's a real challenge - that doesn't fall easily in the rubric - about answering the capacity of the organization to do the work. Often we ask, 'how can we make the application easier?' But how can we address organizations' ability to do the work?"

"Some of what I value I have to read between the lines. I want to see if applicants are adopting systems thinking and a systems perspective. You can take a systems approach without taking a systems change project. Are the people directly impacted involved in every stage of the process? Are they able to learn and adapt? Do they have the humility and willingness to change tack? This is where I have to really read between the lines."

"I want to know about internal organizational work: how are you working to address power flows within your organization? Because if not internally, you can't do this work externally."

"I really appreciate that staff do due diligence and have feedback loops and can answer our questions when we have them."

6. Opaque impact

Advisors expressed they lacked a clear understanding of desired impact. Many wondered how a theory of change might help them better evaluate their choices and consider the aspirational end state.

"VF has a certain amount of faith and wants people to have confidence in them on a reputation level, but, in other funding agreements [I've seen], there's usually a lot more transparency and metrics about how work will be assessed. But not with VF, who also works across so many different areas. Can we ever report back on impact? It feels like driving blind."

"I read applications that very nicely cite research but don't show how they will assess if their activities produce learning about that research. I am dying to know what works! Can we research grantees and produce knowledge about what happens?"

"What is VF's theory of change? It's very academic, but also, very unclear. When we look at a remote community (working in relative isolation) who applies, we have to stop and ask 'how will work there affect the whole system?' Often the link is learning posted on a website. Other applications are highly plugged in with wide stakeholder groups."

"VF's theory of systems change is very unclear, undefined. Maybe VF needs to do more of that work for applicants to see. VF could provide conditions for more of a spirit of inquiry, risk, and experimentation."

"We don't prioritize looking back. But, systems thinking is all about learning and adaptation. We don't have the learning to go on…"

"If VF wants to make a breakthrough here, it needs to pick a focus (sector, group of people, etc)."

7. Insufficient access

Advisor participants demonstrated an awareness of biases that might prevent first time applicants from receiving grants; they did not necessarily believe that awareness was sufficient to open doors.

"I find that the application itself often puts public education in a bad light, or there is a sense that it is failing the group making the application. My bias is obvious: as a retired administrator, I believe in the need for public education. I am pretty careful when I see those applications come through. What kinds of collaborative efforts have gone into putting this application together? The language in the application is important so I look more carefully at the partnerships."

"The idea of systems change to me implies willingness to take risk. I wouldn't want to see an application that was about reassuring VF they aren't taking a risk."

"If the application rewards previous experience in systems change, does it scare off newcomers with insight?"

"In my experience, Indigenous applicants have an instinctual feel around upending the status quo. And yet, sometimes, the application can still feel weak because we are asking them to use our language. Couldn't we have a convening with applicants to do the systems thinking and languaging part?"

8. Dollars and sense

There wasn't consensus about the use case of the budget. For some, it's such a standard part of grants, there was little sense it could be questioned. Other advisors described the budget as a litmus test to see if activities showed up as projected expenses.

"We take it sometimes to validate what they've said they're going to do. Are they seeking the right support?"

"It's a very interesting logic investigation activity: how much of the budget is actually about creating real change? Sometimes a lot is eaten up by one person's salary and offers few new resources to end users."

Action: Where to from here?

How are we moving all this talk into action? The codesign conversations are fueling change within Vancouver Foundation. Some of these changes are small and incremental, though more immediate, and others will require long-term commitment, deep thinking, bravery, and leadership. Here we summarize how this work is contributing to both kinds of action.
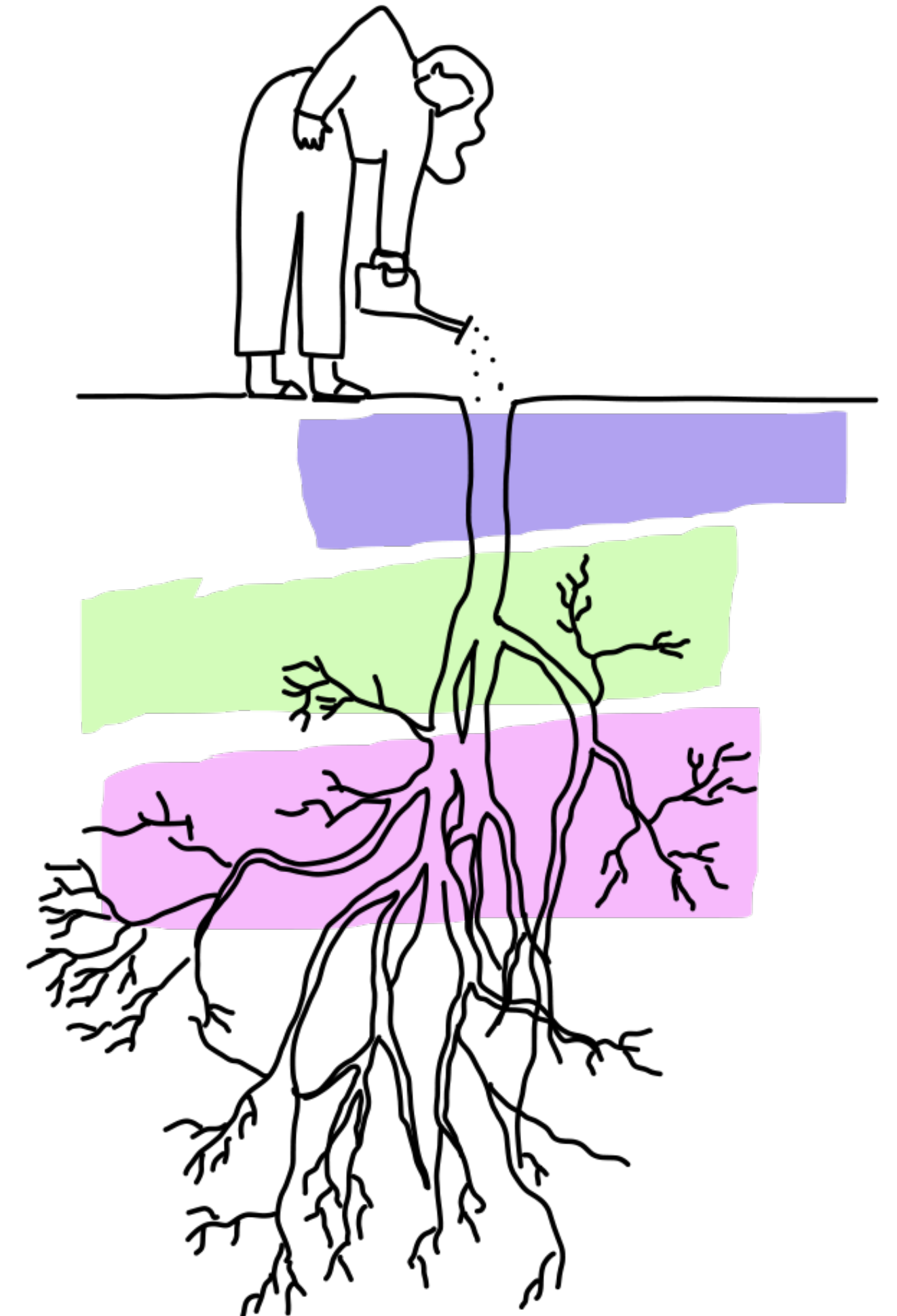
Small, incremental, & immediate change

Changes to the systems change grant application

Bringing together insights from codesign sessions, observations of advisory committees, and analysis of rejection letters from previous grant cycles, we proposed (1) tweaks to the application questions for Develop, Test, and Scale grants and (2) reflective tools for advisors. We focused on changes to question wording that staff felt could be implemented for the fall 2020 granting cycle.

The intent of the question tweaks were to:

1. emphasize learning over achievement;
2. give space for applicants to be explicit about their thinking and assumptions; and
3. embrace multiple ways of knowing and understanding, rather than just Western 'research' and 'evidence'.

These proposed changes were offered and accepted by staff in the spirit of experimentation:

- What can we learn from making small adjustments?

- How, if at all, does the information these tweaked questions elicit help staff and Community Advisors better understand the intentions, world views and approaches of applicants?

- Based on the learnings from these tweaks, how can Vancouver Foundation more substantively iterate what and how it asks for information?
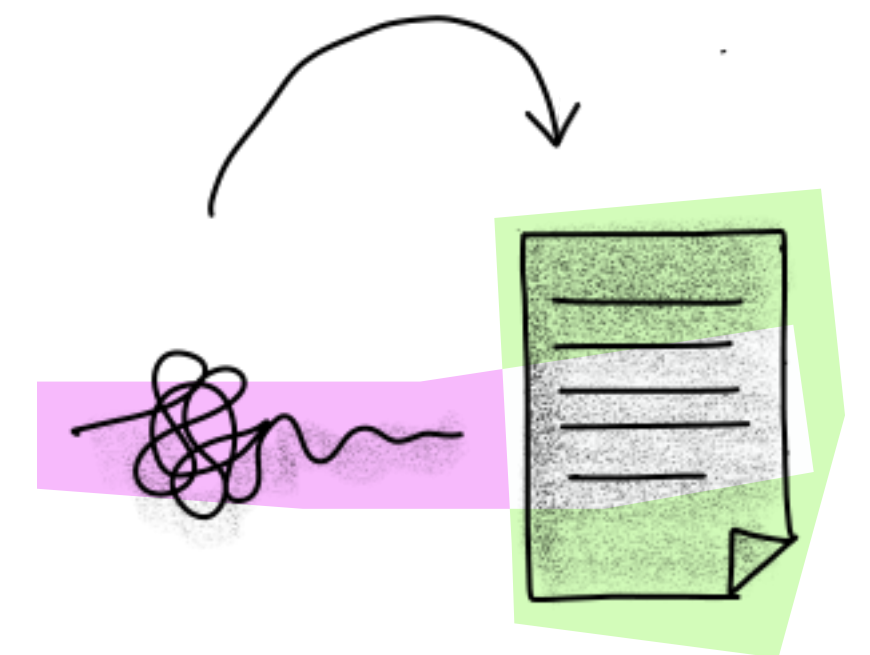
Rituals for grant reviewers: Self-location exercise

This cycle, the systems change grant team is developing and will prototype a social location exercise with staff reviewers and a subset of Community Advisors to surface biases and blindspots. Participants will be invited to reflect on how their identities are privileged or marginalized by dominant culture.

The goal is to prompt introspection, and alongside the card deck, introduce new norms and a common language for discussing how privilege and prejudice show up at the decision-making table.

Tools for grant reviewers: Bias card deck

So many of the small changes to the application reflect a broader ambition to debunk assumptions about responsible granting. We want to start making room for different world views and approaches. Of course, what people are invited to tell Vancouver Foundation is only one part of the equation. Alongside rewording application questions, how might we address how dominant perspectives and ways of knowing are employed by staff and advisors when judging applications?

The application changes, as minor as they might feel, are designed to give revviewers access to different information and spark different thinking. We created a new tool -- a deck of cards -- to assist reviewers as they read applications. These cards explicitly name eight dominant logics (identified through observations and by community members and Community Advisors) and then flip each logic, offering eight alternative ways to consider applications. Take a look at the card deck below.

For the fall 2020 grant cycle, we are asking advisors to observe and document their internal thinking processes. Advisors are invited to take note of where there is friction between their own experience, the existing assessment framework, and the guidance on these cards. While Vancouver Foundation staff have not yet revised the assessment framework (known as the matrix), Advisor's learning from this cycle will inform next iterations.

Take a look at each bias card on the following pages ...

1. Experience card
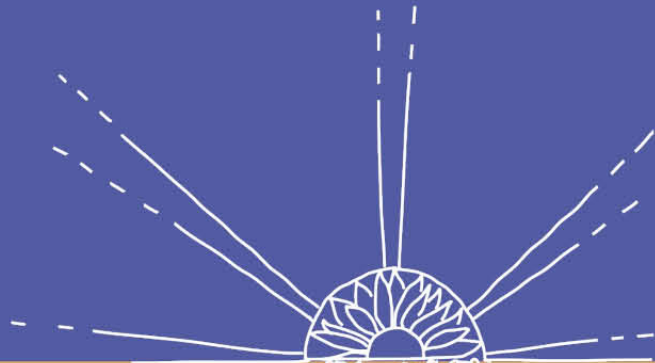
A common refrain from Community Advisors was about the challenge of comparing apples and oranges. They meant both in terms of the breadth of systems applicants sought to affect, but also the incredible variation in capacity between small organizations in remote communities and large, research-focused institutions with province wide networks. How can the potential impact of such organizations be compared? Similarly, some applications showed facility with the language of systems change while others struggled to express themselves with the preferred 'systemic vocabulary' of the application. Recommending applications without a command of systemic language was often framed by Advisors as risky and 'taking a chance.'

Participant segments such as the Unheard presented a different logic. They claimed a lifetime of experience disrupting systems without becoming accustomed to the language used by Vancouver Foundation. The Experience card reminds reviewers to consider the value of this kind of experience.

EXPERIENCE

Larger organizations more experienced in systems change work are a better bet, a safer investment. This work takes a different kind of capacity to what most organizations have.

DOMINANT LOGIC

FLIP THE LOGIC

A diversity of organizations supported to shift to a systems change approach will have greater long term impact. Also, while higher resource organizations may have a known track record of systems change work, grassroots groups with a lot of lived experience in their ranks may represent more personal and deep histories of systems change efforts.

EXPERIENCE

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

Organizations with closer relationships to equity-denied communities, new reference points and strategies

Why? A deep appreciation of the experiences of those not well served by our current systems is a real asset in systems change, as are perspectives informed by different inspiration, and ways of thinking

Develop, Test & Scale grants - New question: "Where you're at"

This cycle, Vancouver Foundation has added an additional question that can help applicants self-segment. It asks applicants to identify where their project team is at in its system change journey: whether they are beginners, experienced, or in between. While it could lessen the competition between organizations with very different levels of experience, it does not get at the difference between how different groups conceptualize and name their systems change work.

2. Timeline card

In our observations of Advisor Committee Meetings and our review of past grant decline letters, we noticed that the timeline of key activities question was often used, alongside the budget, to determine feasibility and coherence.

In codesign sessions, participants, especially those in the Daunted segment, were overwhelmed by the suggestion that they should be able to outline a linear plan to change the system -- especially during an initial Develop grant. They and others were unwilling to express such certainty at such an early stage. Systems change is emergent work, often guided by questions and assumptions to be tested and revised.

The timeline card encourages reviewers to focus less on a plan of activities and more on the desired outcomes, starting points, and guiding questions so they can appreciate the applicant's approach to the work, rather than just their traditional planning abilities.

TIMELINE

DOMINANT LOGIC

A thorough plan shows this organization can break down a big piece of work into clear, sequential steps, and will be responsible stewards of grant dollars.

FLIP THE LOGIC

A thorough plan says little about this organization's capacity for emergence, adaptation and learning: three core features of systems change.

TIMELINE

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

Strong guiding questions

Why? If the applicant is clear about what they want to learn, they can respond to emergent opportunities.

Starting points and phases

Why? A rough map that indicates what will be explored or tested in different periods of the project indicates starting hunches but also openness to emergent learning.

**Develop, Test, and Scale Grants
- Process question**

A change to the process question in the Develop application gives the applicant space to share their questions, rather than their answers.

What are some of the questions you hope to answer with this Develop grant, and what are you seeking to better understand about how to influence or change the system? Tell us about your project activities and how they will help you to explore these things.

For the Test & Scale grants, applicants are now asked to surface their assumptions about how activities will challenge systems or propel deeper or wider systems change.

**Test & Scale Grants
- Anticipated Outcomes question**

Changes to this question introduced the metaphorical language of guiding stars and near stars to shift the language away from the more technical and traditional use of short, medium, and long-term outcomes.

What is your guiding star for the change you'd like to see? What are the near star(s) you're hoping to reach with this project, over the next one to three years?

A guiding star may be interpreted more flexibly as a sign you are headed in the right direction. This recognizes the long term, complex, and non-linear nature of systems change.

3. Partnership card

We know partnerships are important to systems change: it's a collective endeavor. Participants talked about the kinds of relationships they would like to build, or have spent many years building, to support the work. For small organizations, the capacity to develop strong partnerships with other organizations is often contingent on funding so they felt at a disadvantage listing partnerships on the front end. At the same time, many considered the relationship to the community they serve a central one in guiding the work, and were unsure how participation of end users versus participation of other organizations might be regarded and valued.

We wanted to focus on the values behind partnerships, and blur the distinction between collaborators and beneficiaries, which is rooted in the logic of less participatory systems with top down power structures.

The Partnership card asks reviewers to consider the power Vancouver Foundation has to help organizations get connected rather than allowing a small network to be a barrier to funding.

PARTNERSHIPS

DOMINANT LOGIC

Evidence of partnerships shows this organization knows how to engage community and that their work & learning will have more impact.

FLIP THE LOGIC

Listing community partnerships in a first round application says little about the quality of relationships, and more about an organization's bandwidth to contact organizations in advance. We know systems change requires resetting rather than replicating power dynamics, and takes dedicated resource.

PARTNERSHIPS

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

The type of stakeholders and resources they would like to engage.

Why? Applicants who are able to go beyond 'the usual suspects' may have a better sense of how to shift sticky systems and find new approaches. VF funding will only increase their ability to bring different players to the table.

What learning is valued and how it is documented.

Why? While a small or remote organization may not have the network to share its learnings broadly, if what they are seeking to learn and document has broad appeal, VF can help to bring it to a wider audience.

Develop, Test & Scale Grants - Collaboration and Participation question

The prior collaboration question, which asked about which partnerships had been secured by the applicant and who they would seek to involve going forward, became a participation question that focuses on the applicant's approach to engagement and power-sharing.

Share with us your approach to working with others. Who are you engaging in your development process, who do you hope to engage, and in what ways? How are the people most affected by the issue participating and what power(s) do they have in your project? For Test and Scale: Where does decision-making lie?

This new question suggests that the people most affected by the issue may be project partners, not just recipients.

4. Data card

From observing review committees and hearing how codesign participants understood the research and evidence question, we wanted to develop greater discernment around data and evaluation. Rather than view evidence from a dominant, Western lens, this is an opportunity to take a critical approach to what and whose information is appreciated as evidence.

Some codesign participants talked about the lived experiences and cultural knowledge driving their work. We see these as valid ways of knowing that should be made explicit in an application and fully appreciated by reviewers. Strong applications will likely draw on multiple ways of knowing.

DATA

Citing statistics, research and data indicates the organization has a strong basis for its work.

DOMINANT LOGIC

FLIP THE LOGIC

Citing statistics, research and data without critiquing dominant perspectives and methods may indicate there is little understanding of systemic bias. Citing other wisdom traditions and ways of knowing indicates capacity to hold a multiplicity of perspectives: a core feature of systems change.

DATA

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

Diverse or broadened sources of data

Why? An ability and disposition to find value in different knowledge bases is a sign that the applicant may have capacity for systems change. That might include valuing subjective and contextual data, such as stories and experiences.

Test & Scale Grants - Research and Evidence question

The Test grant's Research & Evidence question was broadened to explicitly invite stories, insights and lived experience that are driving the work. The change recognizes that the language of research and evidence comes from a Western, colonial lens, and that 'evidence-based' interventions and policy making has had the effect of elevating certain evidence above others, often rooted in an empirical worldview. The question now concerns itself not only with what information is cited, but also whose.

What is shaping your knowledge and understanding of the systems you're seeking to influence? What and whose stories, experiences, research, evidence and ways of knowing is your approach grounded in?

The Scale grant previously asked about evaluation in the context of proving an hypothesis. It has been adapted to embrace a more holistic view of learning and evaluation.

What learning and evaluation have you done already, and whose voices were included? What key data, insights and lessons have emerged, and how is this informing your scaling strategy?

The focus has shifted towards gaining insight rather than proving a hypothesis.

5. Definitions card

What is systems change? This was a recurring topic in codesign sessions. Many organizations didn't see their understanding of change reflected in Vancouver Foundation's definition of systems change. Notably, many of these were (im)migrant-serving and lived experience-led organizations; a significant proportion of whom didn't feel they had the power to lobby governments and change policies, but who did feel they were mobilizing the community and addressing stigma in disruptive ways.

Where is the space for culturally-embedded perspectives on systems change strategies? Systems consist of structures, practices, relationships, and also, beliefs. We observed that reviewers appreciated the importance of systemic cultural change -- shifting hearts and minds -- but struggled to understand how it might function or be evaluated as a finite project. Policy change is much more easily measured. Grassroots groups were often challenging dominant beliefs through their work, on the ground, and saw this as systemic as policy efforts.

DEFINITIONS

To be systems change this project must show it's doing activities that address the root causes of the problem. Direct service is not generally systems change.

DOMINANT LOGIC

FLIP THE LOGIC

What makes a project systemic is more about its intent and capacity to disrupt status quo logics, power dynamics, resource flows and policies. For example, a direct service that tackles stigma, or redirects resources to marginalized folks could be systems change.

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

How the logic and/or values of the proposed work is counter to that of the dominant system

Why? Systems change isn't necessarily top down, from policy change, or legislation, for example. It also relies on new interactions and ways of relating, on the ground.

Develop, Test & Scale grant - Systemic Issues and Root Causes question

The changes to this question reflect two intentions. Firstly, we wanted to ask about the systems the applicant is seeking to influence using more accessible language. Secondly, for the Develop & Test grants, we wanted to emphasize that a full understanding of the system is not required at these stages and that gaining such an understanding is one of the goals of the grants.
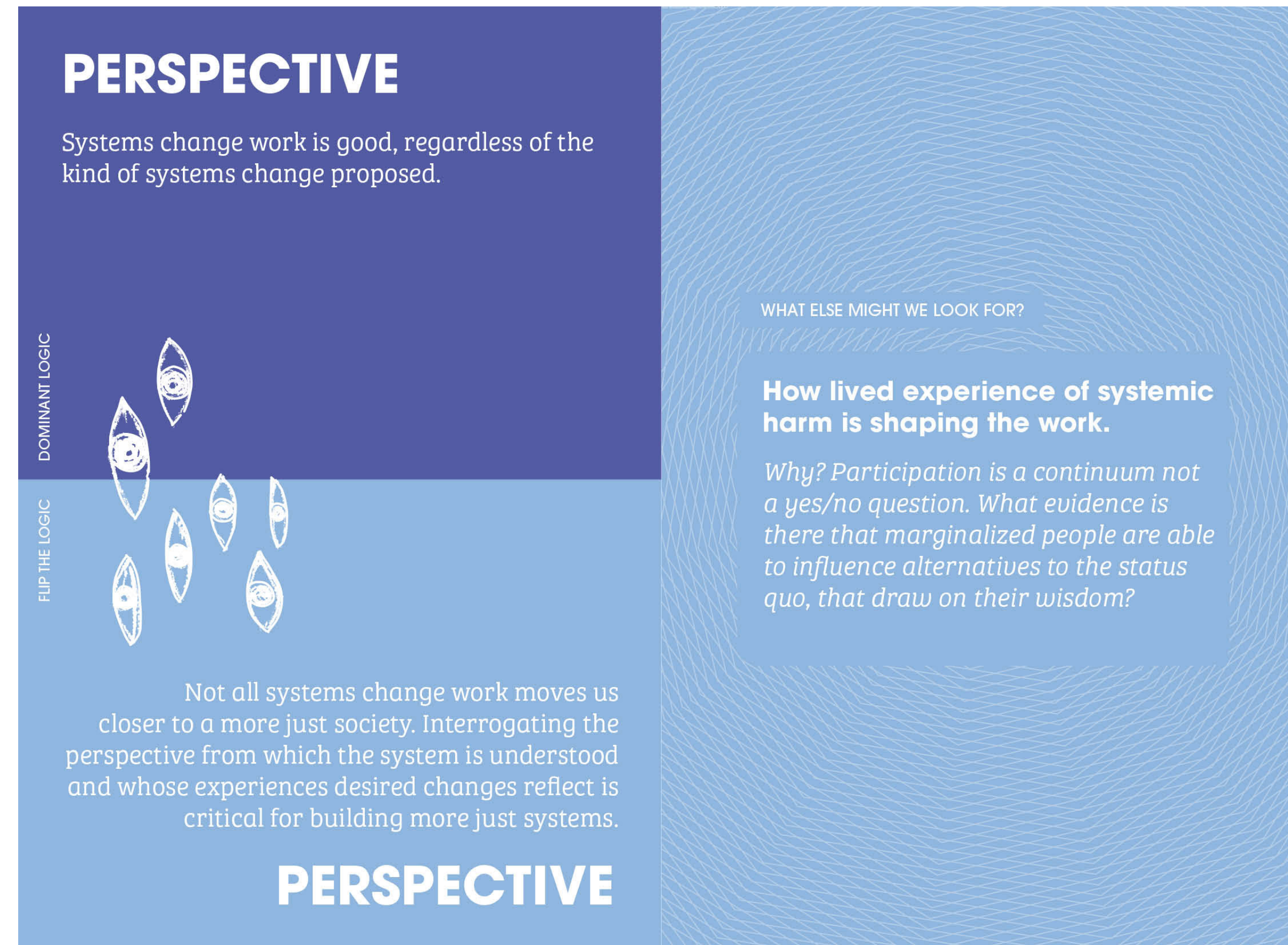
What is the pressing issue you're trying to address, and in doing so, what are the system(s) you are coming into contact with? What are your early hunches about what parts of the system(s) — e.g beliefs & mindsets, relationships & power dynamics; structures, policies & resource flows — are holding the issue in place?

6. Perspective card

Systems change from whose perspective? Not all systems change is 'good' or 'just' -- it depends on the substance of the change, and who holds the power in naming, framing, and re-imagining the current state.

Observations of review committees made it apparent that Community Advisors are very interested in how those most (negatively) affected by the current systems will be involved in re-shaping them. Applications weren't always explicit about the nature of that involvement, and who decides on the purpose and direction of the project.

Grassroots, lived-experience-led organizations saw their unique perspectives on systems as a strength but weren't always sure how to state this to their best advantage in an application.

PERSPECTIVE

Systems change work is good, regardless of the kind of systems change proposed.

DOMINANT LOGIC

FLIP THE LOGIC

Not all systems change work moves us closer to a more just society. Interrogating the perspective from which the system is understood and whose experiences desired changes reflect is critical for building more just systems.

PERSPECTIVE

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

How lived experience of systemic harm is shaping the work.

Why? Participation is a continuum not a yes/no question. What evidence is there that marginalized people are able to influence alternatives to the status quo, that draw on their wisdom?

**Develop Grant
- Systemic Change question**

Slight changes to the framing of this question re-centre learning and inquiry, which is more aligned with the purpose of Develop grants.

Why is further exploration & inquiry into this issue important? Who in the community do you see as being able to challenge or disrupt the ways things are now?

A second change breaks down the word 'community,' recognizing it is not a homogeneous entity and inviting the applicant to share which voices in the community they perceive as having a role to play.

7. Budget card

It was clear in grant review committees and rejection letters that even at stage one, the budget served as a significant filtering factor. Perhaps because of the spreadsheet format, Community Advisors gravitated to it and found it helpful to compare the proposed budget to proposed activities as a sort of basic sense test.

In codesign sessions, applicants frequently talked about projecting budgets at such an early stage as a meaningless exercise that ranged from tedious to overwhelming. Many accepted it as a hoop one jumps through for funders while acknowledging that anything conceived at such an early stage, with no room to show a range of scenarios, is highly un-reliable information. Others earnestly tried to pre-dict an uncertain future and even experienced it as a failure on their part that they couldn't.

Some representatives of organizations without ac-cess to grant writers just found budgeting a really time consuming task for a letter of interest.

This card seeks to decentralize the primacy of the budget as the measure of a proposal and encour-age reviewers to appreciate the deeper intentions behind the work over the technical aspects.

BUDGET

DOMINANT LOGIC

A clear budget shows this organization knows its activities and can manage resources. `
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FLIP THE LOGIC

A clear budget shows this organization has experience writing grants and thinking linearly. Systems change requires a capacity for agile project management and responsiveness to ground conditions, which are likely to change between grant submission and decision.

BUDGET

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

Strong values

Why? If there are strong guiding values, spending decisions can be principled and advance the work.

Spending priorities that reflect the values and logic of the proposal

Why? Shows the applicant can extend and apply the logic of the system they are trying to create to the process of creating it (ie. Let ends dictate means).

**Develop Grant
- Budget question**

A fillable budget table is no longer required at stage one. Instead, we're asking (in narrative form) about estimated budget, size of request, and other secured or anticipated sources of revenue.

8. Writing card

Staff grant reviewers frequently said the Project Description section at the end of an application was their go-to question because it tended to be the clearest piece of writing. Clarity of writing was also prized by Community Advisors in their reading of grants.

This card asks reviewers not to jump to conclusions about applicants' fitness to do systems change work based on the clarity or correctness of their writing. Rather, it invites them to lean in and wonder about who is writing and how they might use communication skills differently in their work.

Acknowledging that the written format of the application inserts a bias right from the start, how can we take extra time to appreciate or learn more about an application in which someone is struggling with language?

WRITING

Clear writing indicates clarity of thought and capacity to communicate to stakeholders.

DOMINANT LOGIC

FLIP THE LOGIC

Clear writing indicates this organization's proficiency with English and says little about the organization's capacity to engage stakeholders from diverse backgrounds and with different styles of communication.

WRITING

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WE LOOK FOR?

Metaphors, examples, references

Why? Applicants may indicate what's inspiring their work, or how they understand it, through comparisons and reference points.

Relationship to community, preferred methods of communication and engagement.

Why? More significant than the applicant's ability to communicate with you is their success engaging a community who is typically left out of shaping systems.

**Develop, Test & Scale
- Project Description question**

The re-wording of this question in the Develop grant puts the focus on learning and inquiry, rather than on certainty and solutions. For Test and Scale, the question gives room to share thinking about how change might happen.

What is the pressing issue that your project is trying to address? Why is addressing this meaningful? How will you learn about the parts of the system keeping the issue in place? For Test and Scale: How will you influence or change the parts of the system holding the issue in place?

Deep & long-term change

After we've revised, iterated and tweaked system change grants, then what? Philanthropic funding is a system, and putting equity and justice at the centre of that system is a substantively different task than improving systems change granting.

What the codesign sessions unearthed was ample opportunity for Vancouver Foundation -- to amplify unheard voices; to make more equitable decisions; to pursue justice with the economic and financial capital at its disposal, to name just a few. **However, to make impact, there needs to be clarity about what Vancouver Foundation stands for.**

When it comes to our relationships with systems, British Columbians don't speak with one voice. We have varied interests and investments in the status quo and its disruption. Supporting British Columbians to change systems in the ways that are desirable to them may mean supporting multiple, competing objectives. Even with its considerable endowment, Vancouver Foundation doesn't have the resources to support all of the province's would-be system changers equally. It must make choices. In these choices, preferences emerge. So, what are those preferences and what worldviews do those preferences reveal?

Vancouver Foundation cannot so neatly maintain a neutral role. Many codesign participants argued the foundation can either tacitly support the privilege of current approaches, or explicitly make room for the non-dominant perspectives of equity-denied groups. If the biggest winners in the systems change grant competition are orga-nizations that are already successful in current systems, that signals to potential applicants that alternative approaches may not be valued. It is a reminder to us that systems are resilient, or sticky, and don't transform their logics by accident, but only through concerted and painstaking effort.

As a philanthropic institution set-up by settlers, Vancouver Foundation is part of systems of oppression: financial and taxation structures, legal and policy frameworks, communication and hiring practices, systems of thought, beliefs and values. Moving beyond small and immediate shifts within grantmaking to deep and systemic change within philanthropy will take will and persistence.

To date, equity and systems change have been conceived of as separate tracks within Vancouver Foundation, absent a cohering purpose. Our community engagements offer a possible new mandate: **justice as systemic change**. We see this not as a matter for operational tinkering, but as a question of overarching purpose and vision for Vancouver Foundation.

Over the next two months, we will move forward two bigger picture conversations, in parallel to Vancouver Foundation's own internal equity work.

- Exploring core purpose
- Exploring a third horizon (R&D) space
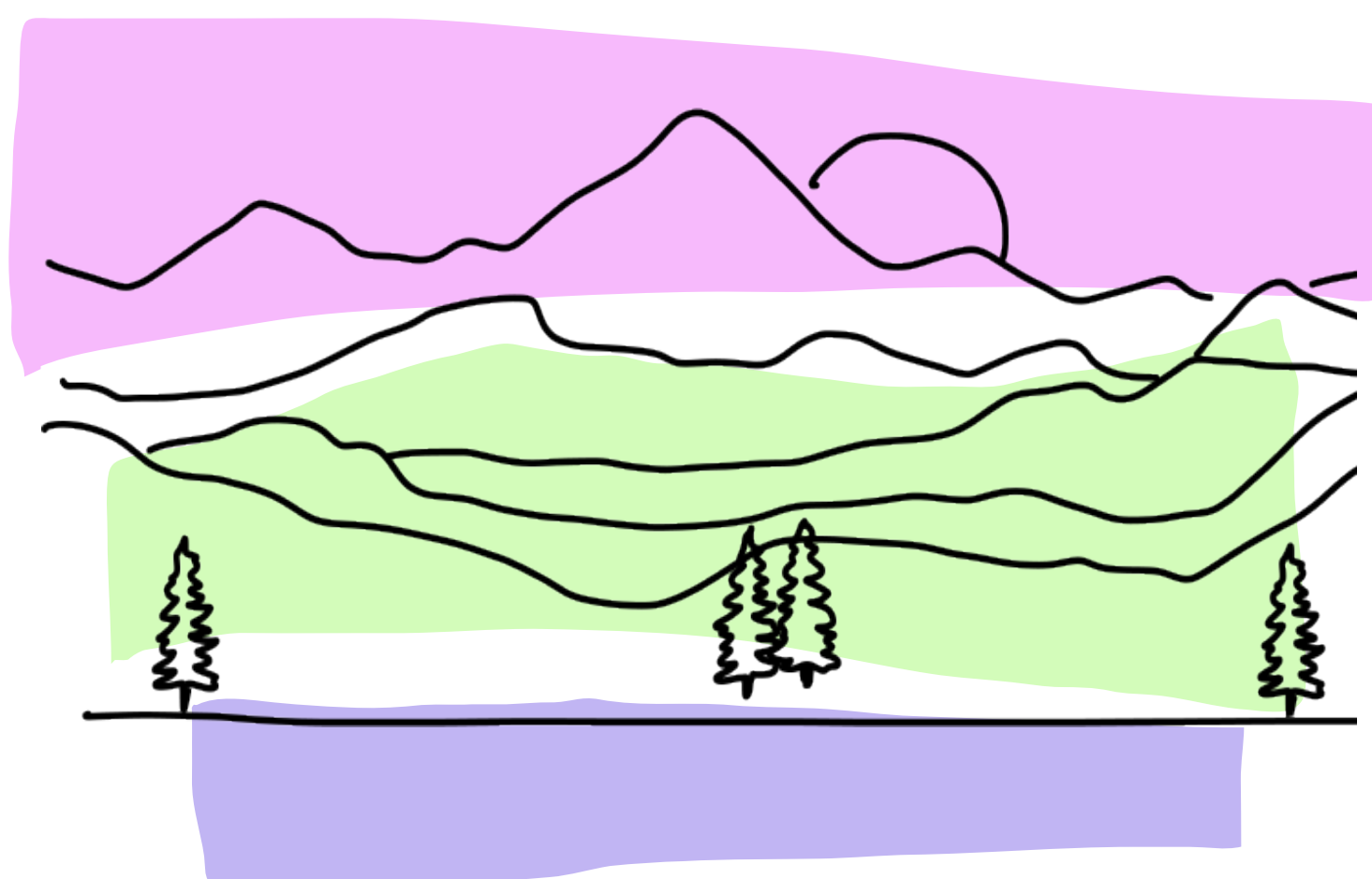
Exploring a third horizon space

Where is the best place to position systemic philanthropic work so that it can both confront and re-imagine the underlying structures, beliefs, relationships, flows of authority and resources that currently under-gird community foundations?

One of our lessons is that systemic work needs a dedicated home within the foundation. In the midst of a pandemic and a wave of protest that shone a spotlight on racial injustice, we confused the urgency of action with the need to make modest improvements to current practice. We got enmeshed in service improvement (what's called *first horizon* work) rather than transformation (what's called *third horizon* work).

Transformational, third horizon work generally happens away from daily operations so that it can maintain some autonomy and freedom to experiment and fail. Imagining alternative philanthropic futures can't really happen within the confines of business as usual; alternative futures need time and space for thoughtful and intentional development. When everyone is feeling the pressure of deadlines, it's too easy to default to familiar logics and practices to get the job done. That's why lots of institutions -- including financial institutions like banks and insurance companies -- set-up Research & Development units, with distinct teams and methods. If banks recognize the importance of an R&D space to wrestle with the needs and technologies of the future, surely foundations, which are wrestling with more profound questions of wealth and justice, need the same.

Exploring core purpose

What should be the frame for the work going forward? Is justice and equity the animating purpose of Vancouver Foundation? Or ...? What do those words mean, to whom? Another insight from the past many months is that adopting an anti-oppressive and anti-racist lens does not, on its own, answer some of the toughest re-distributive justice questions. These are questions about who amongst the marginalized and oppressed should receive resources. The oppressed and marginalized are not a homogeneous group.

Articulating what equity and justice looks like brings us to still more questions about how a pluralistic community could help define Vancouver Foundation's theories of justice. How should finite resources be allocated? On what basis? Is it about merit, or needs, or equality, or effectiveness, or ...? Is it about righting past wrongs and/or pursuing future generational interests? Is it about centering the interests of humans and/or non-humans and planet?

Expanding how we think and talk about equity and justice, from a multiplicity of world views and philosophies, just might be a first step towards getting underneath the rhetoric and reckoning with the complexity. And that, we know to be foundational for lasting systems change.

Reading List
A systems Change Approach to Justice

Systems Change Literature

Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018, June). The Water of Systems Change (Rep.). Retrieved March 4, 2020, from FSG website: fsg.org

A paper that seeks to clarify what it means to 'shift conditions that are holding a social or environmental problem in place' (Social Innovation Generation Canada's definition of systems change.) Kania, Kramer, and Senge do this by offering up a helpful framework for six conditions of systems change. InWithForward has employed this framework both to understand the status quo and generate future alternatives.

Hargreaves, M. B. (2010, April 30). Evaluating Systems Change: A Planning Guide (Rep.). Retrieved May 27, 2020, from Mathematica Policy Research website: Mathematica.org

An introductory methods brief for evaluations of system change interventions. Hargreaves incorporates systems theory and dynamics into evaluation planning and offers a three-part process to align (1) the dynamics of the targeted system or situation, (2) the dynamics of the system change intervention, and (3) the intended purpose(s) and methods of the evaluation. The result is evaluation design that captures system conditions, dynamics, and points of influence that affect the operation and impact of a system change intervention.

Meadows, D. H., & Wright, D. (2009). Thinking in systems a primer. London: Earthscan.

A very readable and foundational book that offers up systems thinking as a different way of seeing and thinking that allows us to "reclaim our intuition about whole systems and: hone our abilities to understand parts; see interconnections; ask 'what-if' questions about possible future behaviours; and be creative and courageous about system redesign."

Mulgan, G., & Leadbeater, C. (2013). Systems Innovation Discussion Paper (Rep.). Retrieved March 04, 2020, from Nesta website: nesta.org.uk

This discussion paper presents two essays that seek to bring theories of systemic innovation down to a practice level debate. In the first paper by Geoff Mulgan, he addresses a number of questions about systemic – or 'joined–up' – innovation, asking what it means to truly transform a system, encompassing the means, methods, and actions needed to realise its potential. The second paper from Charlie Leadbeater argues that companies, governments, cities, and entire societies need to move from seeing innovation in products and services as a source of competitive advantage, to focussing on innovation with entire systems.

Stevenson, A., Bockstette, V., Seneviratne, A., Cain, M., & Foster, T. (2018, April). Being the Change: 12 Ways Foundations Are Transforming Themselves to Transform Their Impact (Rep.). Retrieved February 28, 2020, from FSG website: fsg.org

This report looks at how 12 foundations are internalizing the work of systems change. From shifting aspirations, to shifting their own structures, to evolving staffing philosophies, skill development and cultures of support.

Philanthropic Purpose Literature

Choir Book. (2016). Retrieved November 13, 2020, from http://justicefunders.org/choir-book/

Justice Funders' "Choir Book: A Framework for Social Justice Philanthropy," makes an argument that philanthropic foundations committed to social justice need to practice being a choir, rather than just producing 'soloists.' The Choir Book curates practices for social justice philanthropy, identifies individual competencies that support values-aligned practice, and defines core values that are vital to social justice philanthropy.

Our Approach to Change (Rep.). (n.d.). Retrieved November 13, 2020, from Lankelly Chase website: https://lankellychase.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Our-Approach-To-Change-1.pdf

Lankelly Chase has adopted an approach focused on shifting system behaviors around perspective, power, and participation, to achieve better outcomes for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage. Their work began with identifying core behaviours that help systems function better in this respect across issue areas, such as homelessness, violence, health, the arts, community development, substance misuse and youth work. They argue that (i) it is the presence of these behaviours, more than any specific methodology, that seems to account for positive change and (ii) these behaviours need to be present and continually promoted in every part of the system.

Walker, D., Alexander, E., Arrillaga-Andreessen, L., Ballmer, S. A., Frazier, K. C., Hanauer, N., . . . Skorton, D. J. (2019). From generosity to justice: A new gospel of wealth. New York, NY: Ford Foundation.

With contributions from several distinguished thinkers and activists, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation articulates a vision for philanthropy in the 21st century based on the concept of justice. It attempts to answer the question: If there's a continuum between generosity and justice, how do we push our work closer to the latter?

Thanks for reading

Get in touch!

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