

# Our Guide to Systems Change

Learning from an enquiry into “What does it take to change a system?”

Renaishi, June 2024



# Introduction

Building on our 2019-2020 work exploring how to effectively [fund place-based systemic change](#), and research in 2022 setting out [four approaches to systemic change](#), in 2023 we launched a [year-long enquiry into what it takes to change a system](#). The enquiry was structured around a set of hypotheses we developed through our extensive work in systemic change – largely but not exclusively in place. It brought together our learning from working with partnerships, people and organisations engaging with systemic change.

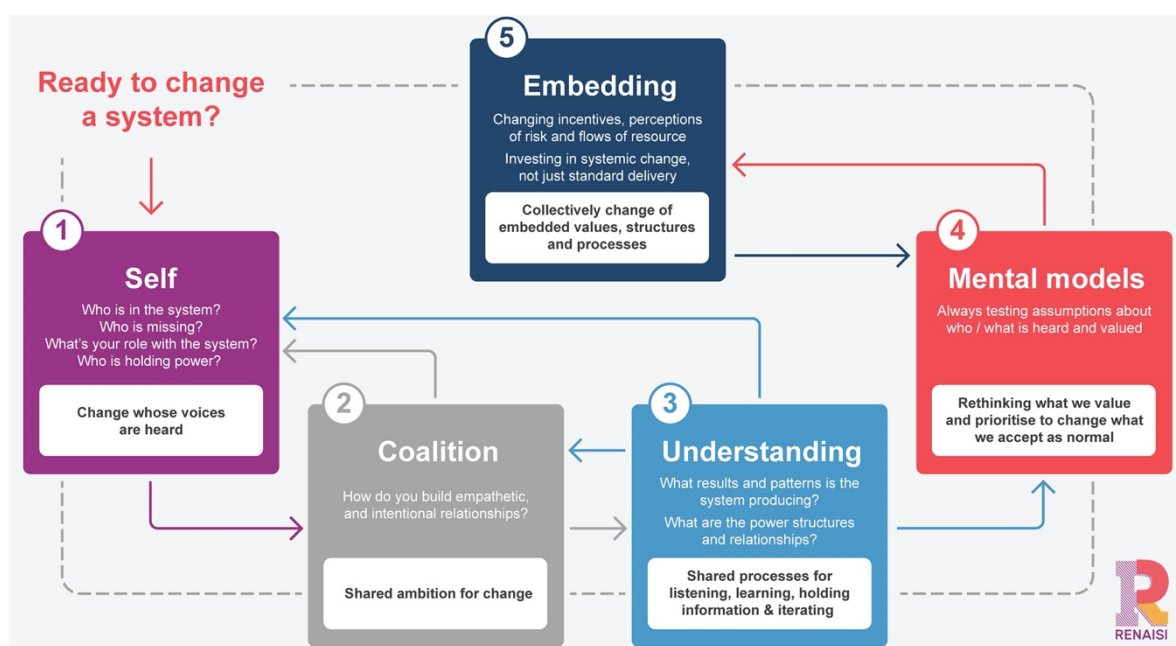
The enquiry included three themes that we feel are critical to systemic change:

1. Learning about the system and your role in it
2. Deep and active collaboration
3. Changing what's valued and accepted

Within each of these themes, we proposed elements, or activities, that we had found to be critical to making meaningful and lasting change. These ranged from actively interrogating your own role within a system, to changing elements such as incentives, perceptions of risk and flows of resources. Read more about these elements [here](#).

Throughout the enquiry, we examined how to implement these elements in practice and how the elements could create the conditions for systemic change. Reflecting on what has enabled change and what has held it back across all of our projects and work across the UK, we found that many of these elements are critical to systemic change, but also uncovered new insights around **the importance of sequencing**.

This guide to systemic change summarises the learning from our enquiry, setting out five activities that we have found critical for organisations and partnerships that want to change a system. We know that the journey won't be as simple and linear as the diagram below. You cannot tick one activity off and move to the next – each will require ongoing work to embed overtime. But we do think that there is a clear starting point – and that starting point is yourself.



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## Activity 1: Self

*Interrogate your own role in the system by prioritising the voice of lived experience to understand what's causing harm.*

### Why is this important?

Readiness for systemic change requires honesty, humility and a willingness to change.

We've learnt that organisations often embark on systemic change by focusing on partnership building, systemic analysis, narrative shifting, or redesign. These are all important, but pursuing these without starting from the self can overlook some of the most challenging, power-shifting elements of systemic change. Meaningfully engaging with systemic change requires that you build your readiness to think systemically, engage with others with humility and honesty, and acknowledge the narratives, attitudes and processes that might be causing harm.

That's not to say that an organisation wanting to engage in systemic change has to undergo a year of self-reflection before any other action – rather we've found that starting from the self is about leading your systemic change work with a genuine understanding of your own role, and a willingness to take active steps to change how you operate. This needs to continue and deepen throughout your systemic change work.

### What does it look like in practice?

This activity requires **interrogating why you are making the choices you do**. To engage in systemic change we have to understand the processes, narratives and beliefs that current systemic have embedded in your own organisation, some of which might be causing harm. As a funder selecting grantees, a researcher determining your sample, or a manager hiring staff, the choices we make about how we bring others into our sphere of influence reflect how power moves within the system. Scrutinising your own decisions is the best place you can start to begin understanding what is causing harm and what needs to change.

Exploring your own role can initially feel daunting and painful as you uncover the ways that you might be contributing to unintentional harm despite good intentions. But is about recognising the interaction between how your organisation works and the flawed system we operate within. It is not about blame. Embracing this process is all about being open to learning and growing. It requires determination, resilience and humility.

Doing this work requires changing whose voices shape your organisations' understanding of the system by **creating mechanisms for people with direct experience of marginalisation and exclusion to design and oversee work**. Individuals who benefit from the current system, especially unknowingly, are unlikely to fully grasp its harmful effects and power imbalances. Shifting power to those with experience of harm will uncover your organisation's blind spots and build deeper understanding of system dynamics. Establish compensated, long-term, decision-making roles for those with lived experience of marginalisation.

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We have seen this across [Youth Futures Foundation's Connected Futures](#) programme, where the Youth Futures Foundation team continually reflects on how their approach to funding might hold back systemic change. Developing a practice of ongoing reflection, and close, open relationships with the partnerships they are funding, enabled them to see that their initial approach to having a Phase 1 and Phase 2 of funding was likely to lead to some partnerships jumping to solutions in order to access Phase 2 funding, rather than taking the time to engage in a deep exploration of what is going wrong in their local area. As a result, they introduced a "Phase 1.5" as a bridging period of ongoing funding that would allow partnerships to experiment with a few systemic change interventions and learn about what works before proposing a solution. Shifting whose voices are heard also enabled different forms of decision-making in the partnerships themselves, with many of their plans, timelines and outcomes shifting due to concerns raised by young people recruited to oversee work.

This process necessitates giving away some of your organisational power to engage in long-term meaningful coproduction. It can be uncomfortable but is a critical part of engaging in systemic change with clarity on your own role and how it needs to shift. This process also requires devoting time to build your approach to coproduction with those engaging in it, recognising that they might have experienced exclusionary, extractive or tokenistic approaches to coproduction in the past.

We have also learnt a lot from the [Women of Wythenshawe](#) (WoW) network about how to centre internal power-shifting in systemic change work. The WoW network formed and developed its approach to systemic change through bringing together women with experience of gendered poverty in the area to share their knowledge and experience about what needs to change. This process has not been natural or straightforward for all organisations and individuals engaged in this work. Over the first year of the network, they learnt that building the trust and solidarity necessary for this coproduction sometimes meant excluding staff members from the room to ensure that women with lived experience could build trusting relationships across each other and create a space that felt truly their own.

Shifting power at the beginning of your work is critical to enable the approach that follows in the next activities to be a reflection of different voices and hierarchies to those upheld in the current system.

### Questions to explore:

- What are your relationships like with the organisations and individuals you interact with? Where does the power sit?
- How do you share and spread the power you have (e.g. your resources, assets, relationships or expertise)? What drives your decisions around this?
- What processes and practices do you adhere to that cause harm and/or maintain a power hierarchy? Why do they exist? Can they change?
- Whose voices need to be heard to change the balance of power?

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- What stories about ourselves and others might be (unintentionally) holding problems in place?

### Indicators of change:

- Processes evolve to shift the burden of risk to those with more power.
- Decisions about who you bring into your sphere of power change
- More (often unexpected) resources become available
- Tense or challenging conversations emerge, that generate new ways of working.
- Collaborative and trusting relationships between staff and people bringing lived experience develop.
- Those with lived experience listened to and their ideas implemented
- Changes in staff's perspectives on how change happens, what their role is and where there is potential for change

## Activity 2: Coalition

*Build empathetic, reflective and trusting relationships underpinned by shared ambitions for systemic change.*

### Why is this important?

Systemic change does not happen alone.

We know that systems are made up of lots of organisations, individuals and networks, many of whom will experience the system in very different ways. Understanding how a system works requires hearing from lots of different perspectives. Developing interventions that will change a system also requires the buy-in from lots of different actors that are currently perpetuating the status quo.

This activity feels pretty uncontroversial, with many in the social sector now agreeing that collaborative working is a more impactful way to support social change. Many funding programmes that aim at systemic change now requiring applicants to apply in partnership. However, we have found that funders aiming to support collaboration will generally provide resource for organisations to deliver activities together, but overlook the investment needed in the skills and time required for collaboration itself.

Investing in the development of a coalition for change is the next activity that we have found critical to systemic change.

### What does it look like in practice?

Having begun interrogating your own role in the system, organisations approaching systemic change should begin to bring other organisations and individuals alongside in the journey.

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**Start by exploring who is in the system.** Build a picture of the people, organisations, groups and services that influence an individual's experience of the system. In this process it is critical to both **hear a diverse range of perspectives on the system and uphold the insights and perspectives of those with lived experience of harm.** While the funder, local authority or service provider may believe their services are accessible and high-quality, if an individual says they can't find or access those services, we have to uphold their experience to really understand what needs to change.

Organisations might use systems mapping processes to explore who is in the system, such as those that we facilitated to bring together local stakeholders for many of the place-based partnerships in YFF's [Connected Futures](#) Programme and Smallwood Trust's [Women's Sector Resilience Fund](#). But they might also do this more organically through working with others on an issue that requires you to engage with a diverse range of actors in the system. We have seen this approach in the [Coventry Women's Partnership](#) who have been working together for over seven years to deliver a person-centred system of support that aims to break down the barriers that vulnerable women face accessing siloed services. The need to understand what is driving a huge range of issues that women experience has given them a clear picture of the organisations and individuals influence a women's experiences of harm.

As you engage with more and more of the system in this process to understand who is in it, try to **bring those you engage together around a shared ambition for systemic change.** The process of mapping out the actors and relationships within the system, in a 'systems map', should be seen as way to build a coalition, alongside an output in itself. "This focus on coalition building can ensure that systems mapping leaves those involved feeling motivated to drive change, rather than disempowered by having gained a deepened understanding of what is wrong, without a sense of access to or influence over those needed to create change."

Building this coalition requires **developing empathetic, meaningful and intentional relationships.** It has to enable partners who are used to competing with each other to come together with a willingness to reflect on what they might be doing wrong and leave their organisational agenda and ways of working behind in the interest of systemic change. For this to happen effectively each organisation in the coalition needs to step into Activity 1.

We have seen this interaction between Activity 1 and 2 through our role in the [No Wrong Door Partnership](#), convened by Black Thrive. The partnership came together with a shared ambition to improve the employment system for Black Disabled people in Lambeth, but without a shared recognition of each organisations' role in the system and the need to examine the ableism and racism in our organisations and ourselves as part of this change. The insights of Black Disabled staff and a group of Black Disabled Lambeth residents who were recruited to the partnership shifted this, forcing the partnership to acknowledge the internal work that systemic change would require. This shift in approach meant that to organisations in the partnership had to shift, as not all of the initial partners were able to commit to the long-term, deeper internal work that participation required. But this process strengthened the alignment and commitment of remaining partners, as each began to reflect more intentionally on what they would need to learn, change and give up to shift racism and ableism in the system.

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We've seen that coalition building is an ongoing, iterative process and the group will expand as momentum for change builds. We recommend going where energy lies to build a coalition of the willing first, alongside maintaining an awareness of all those influential actors in the system that feel out of reach, or are not yet bought into the ambition for change.

### Questions to explore:

- Who are the people, organisations, groups or services that have a touchpoint on a person's life, and influence their experience of the system you aim to shift?
- Out of this group, who do you believe understands that the current system is not working? (this might include some who currently benefit from the status quo, alongside those that it is harming)
- Who do you have existing relationships of influence with?
- Whose voices need to be heard in order to change the balance of power? And what are the stories we might be telling about ourselves and others that might be (unintentionally) holding problems in place?
- What is driving distrust and competition between actors? How can we leave this aside?
- How can we create spaces and resources that facilitate closer working across organisations?
- How can we navigate disagreements and critique in ways that are generative?

### Indicators of change:

- Organisations and individuals view their relationships with others in the system as a tool to influence shifts in practice which feels empowering
- Partnerships develop that go beyond single projects.
- Conversations and interactions in meetings feel different as partners are speaking from themselves rather than from their organisation
- Partners respect others' experiences, pressures and challenges (including lived experience).
- People feel more comfortable with critique and conflict because it's underpinned by respect, care and trust in shared goals.

## Activity 3: Understanding

*Develop a shared understanding of what is happening in the system and why, with a focus on interrogating power.*

### Why is this important?

Understanding the system is a critical step in changing it.

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Getting to grips with how the issue you are trying to shift interacts with many other actors and issues is critical to making lasting change. Digging into how issues are connected forces you to understand how power works, and what upholds the status quo hierarchies around us. This begins to reveal the mental models that need to be shifted to bring systemic change (see the next Activity).

We've found that a tendency to view systemic change work as entirely dependent on an understanding of complexity ("if we only understood this complex system we'd be able to identify how to change it"), means Activity 3 often happens before Activity 1 and 2. Jumping into mapping out and designing for complexity means organisations will often overlook what is uncomfortable and lean towards systems optimisation rather than systemic change. It can also reinforce harmful power dynamics that undermine lived and frontline experience by deferring to 'experts' that understand the system.

We think the work to understand complexity and root causes in the system should be based on a deep understanding of what your own role in it is, established coproduction that upholds the insights of those experiencing systemic harm and collaboration across a broad and diverse coalition that is united in ambitions for change. That's why this is the third Activity in our approach.

## What does it look like in practice?

Once an initial coalition of individuals and organisations committed to systemic change is formed, the next activity is to develop a common understanding of what is driving systemic issues.

This begins with collectively examining the patterns and outcomes that we see in the current system. In practice, organisations and groups often take one of two approaches to deepen their understanding of the system:

1. A formal structured process of exploring the system through research, participatory systems analysis workshops and developing systems maps. This requires bringing together those with different experiences of the system to map out the issues that are contributing to harm, identify where there are patterns and connections and develop a shared understanding of how change will happen.

This requires bringing together those with different experiences of the system to map out the issues that are contributing to harm, identify where there are patterns and connections and develop a shared understanding of how change will happen. Many of the partnerships in the [Connected Futures](#) programme took this approach to explore and understand their local youth employment system, enabling them to now move into testing interventions that can respond to the multiple and intersecting needs that young people at risk of NEET have.

Alongside involving those that you have engaged in Activity 1 and 2, where possible, it is useful to also bring organisations and individuals that might be initially opposed to systemic change into the mapping process. Bringing those who are opposed to change

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together with those advocating for change or experiencing harm from the current system, can build a deeper understanding of the system's flaws and the harm that is felt by individuals. It is a powerful way to shift the perspectives of those that sit outside of the coalition for change and build more allies. Intentionally engage newcomers in the coalition, encouraging them to pick up the interrogation of their own role that your organisation is practicing and building relationships across them and more established coalition partners.

2. Delivering something closer to what you believe a new system should look like as a tool to engage wider system actors and those accessing services, alongside collecting data and insights that deepen your understanding of the system.

The [Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds \(NRPF\) Women's Support Network](#) has taken this approach to change the system that is completely failing women with NRPF who experience domestic violence. They have developed a joint referral system for women with NRPF who are experiencing domestic violence, to provide more person-centred, trauma-informed services in the short term while also collecting evidence about how the system needs to change and working with a group of women with lived experience to collaboratively to influence a shift in perspectives and practice outside the network.

When taking this approach, developing shared processes to measure how the system is changing and identify what works can support partners to align more and more around a shared ambition for change. If partners cannot align their approach to learning and measuring success it is unlikely that the coalition will understand or value the same things, making deep collaboration challenging. Even when there are barriers to data sharing (often cited as a barrier to collaboration) aligning approaches to collecting and using data to adapt and learn can align everyone in the same direction of change.

Both approaches to Activity 3 can be effective ways to support coalitions to build in-depth of understanding of the system. But both can also fall short when the voice of those with lived experience is not centred or when relationships across the coalition are not strong enough to push organisational agendas aside. **Understanding the role of power dynamics is critical** to overcome this. To deepen your understanding of the system you have to identify where power is held in relationships across the system, why it is held in some places rather than others, and **what steps might be necessary to redistribute it**. This can surface some of the underlying narratives and attitudes that underpin the system, which dictate how decisions about power are made.

But discussions around power can be difficult and uncomfortable for many involved, particularly those that might not want to acknowledge their power and influence. That's why we believe that going through the reflective process in Activity 1 is critical for any organisations and individuals engaging in this work – as its important to become comfortable with sharing power and acknowledging and owning the harm you contribute to, in order to honestly engage with others around systemic change.

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## Questions to explore:

- If you want to change a system, it is likely that this is because it is causing harm. What issues are driving or contributing to these harmful outcomes?
- What patterns do you see across those experiencing harm in the system? Why do these patterns exist?
- What structures, processes and institutions create these patterns? Or hold them in place?
- What narratives, beliefs or attitudes hold back those with power to change structures, processes and institutions that contribute to harm from changing them?
- Who currently holds power in the system? Who might need to hold power in order for the system to work differently?
- What does it look like in practice to shift where power sits, and how can we make that happen?
- Do all partners have access to the same information to understand how the system is working and take decisions about how you approach change?

## Indicators of change:

- Harmful power dynamics, structures and processes are surfaced, encouraging individuals to take another look at their own role and what they need to change.
- Relationships deepen and sometimes broaden as actors develop a shared understanding of roles and what is going wrong.
- Processes for data collection shift and align, informed by the voices of those with lived experience of harm.
- Learning is shared and used collectively to adapt elements of the system.

## Activity 4: Mental models

*Unpick and rewrite the narratives, values and attitudes that hold the system in place*

### Why is this important?

Changing our belief systems – what we hold as valuable, normal and true – makes change lasting and deep rooted

Mental models are attitudes, narratives, value systems and ways of seeing the world. They are the most deep-rooted parts of a system. Without surfacing, unpicking and rewriting the mental models that hold systems in place, shifts in processes, structures and relationships of power are likely to be short-term or superficial.

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## What does it look like in practice?

The mental models that underpin the current system should become clearer to you as you progress through Activities 1-3. They will be revealed as you interrogate the rationale behind decision-making in your organisation. They will be the motivation for resistance from those that say they can't commit to your coalition for system change and the foundational beliefs underpinning infrastructure that creates the patterns of harm you uncover as you learn about the system.

Mental models are often the most challenging and painful parts of the system to face up to and change, as they are often deeply connected to our identities and what we value. Changing these takes time and individuals engaging in it should keep circling back to the introspection in Activity 1.

Shifting mental models has been a primary goal of the [No Wrong Door Partnership](#) convened by Black Thrive Lambeth. Within this work we saw some partners beginning to surface how ableism and White Supremacy are revealed in many of the behaviours and practices we see as normal in professional workplaces, such as definitions of what is needed in leadership, what is appropriate to share in professional contexts and how to support mental health in work contexts. This work required that partners both devote time to shift mental models in our own organisations alongside scrutinising our collective behaviour to call out where dynamics across the partnership reflect mental models that are driving the harm we want to shift.

We've found that changing what we value, prioritise, and consider normal involves both:

- personal reflection to untangle ingrained thought patterns
- collaborative efforts to shift towards mental models that ensure permanent shifts in power and minimising harm

These aren't activities you complete and move on from but practices that have to continue as your systemic change work progresses. Activity 4 is an ongoing process in systems change that requires continually scrutinising if the new relationships, structures, and processes that you shift towards really reflect different mental models, or are underpinned by the same, harmful ways of viewing the world.

Building a new system takes creativity and the ability to imagine something new. Shifting mental models can open up space for this reimagining. It can give us the freedom to think outside of the current system and what it tells us to value.

## What should we reflect on?

- If you have identified harmful attitudes, narratives and beliefs in the last stage, how do these connect? Are there any overarching belief systemic or narratives that holds them together?
- How do these narratives and beliefs influence your interactions with others in the system? (even those interactions you perceive of as harmless)

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- What narratives and beliefs would we have to hold to ensure there was a shared commitment to minimise harm?
  - How do we work with others to collectively shift our ways of thinking? How do we build the trust and care to be able to do this?

## How do we know if it's working?

- Perceptions of where funding should go and what it is designed to do shift.
- Changes to decision making structures and perceptions of risk
- Stories we tell move away from stigma around an individual, group or issue towards how the system causes harm

## Activity 5: Embedding

*Building new processes and structures that reflect new ways of being to preserve a different system*

### Why is this important?

Developing the infrastructure for a new system, using all the learning, relationships and shared perspectives uncovered so far.

Once the coalition for change has developed a shared understanding of what is driving systemic issues, aligned around a shared ambition for change, identified the roles that current structures, processes, attitudes and relationships have in driving harm, and began shifting mental models, it is time to build the infrastructure to change these over the long-term in a new system.

### What does it look like in practice?

While unsurprisingly this phase of the journey did not emerge in our year-long systemic enquiry, our experience with systems change shows that the work to intentionally rebuild a new system in Activity 5 is not linear or final. It is about taking your shared learning about what is going wrong and what this is driven by to collectively build new structures and processes that reflect different ways of seeing and interacting with the world and more equitable power balances. In doing this you are likely to broaden your coalition, understand more about the system and surface more about how to change mental models, so we know that this activity will require ongoing engagement with all the activities that come before.

Developing the infrastructure for a new system requires that actors commit to collectively changing embedded values, structures and processes, including shifts in investments and incentive structures. Systems perpetuate themselves in part because of the incentive structures they have. For example, rigid numerical targets and outcomes can incentivise

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quality over quantity and short-term and siloed funding disincentivises long-term planning or collaboration.

These incentives are powerful because they keep a system behaving the same way, often shaping the flow of funding and how we think about risk. Changing a system requires rewriting these, and ensuring they maintain the new system rather than creating resistance to change.

## Key questions to unpick in this activity:

- Are we directing our investments (of time, money, energy, expertise) in things that will maintain the current system or only respond to short-term issues?
- How can we direct investment toward supporting systemic change over time?
- What incentive structures hold back change? How can we rewrite these to incentivise the ways of working that we want to see in a new system?

## Indicators of change:

Setting out indicators for change here is a lot less clear cut. We would expect to see decision-making processes change, leading to different investments and a reprioritisation of skills and expertise but cannot set out what those would look like in a generalised way, as the change that we are looking for should fall directly out from the first 4 Activities.

## Conclusion

Thanks for reading through our guide to systemic change!

As prefaced in our introduction, this set of activities is not a step by step process, but a sequence of activities that can collectively support systemic change. Each is a process you should continue and circle back to throughout your systemic change work. We also know that organisations, individuals and coalitions will lean more into each activity more than others depending on the systems they are targeting, and the resources that are at their disposal as they work toward systemic change.

This guide reflects our ongoing learning as we support organisations to engage in systems change, and we are sure there is more learning to come. We envisage updating this as we learn more and are currently using it in the following ways to progress this learning:

1. As a tool to guide the development of coalitions for systems change
2. As a set of practices to structure our capacity building work for organisations aiming to work more systemically
3. As a framework to support funders to design and develop systemic funding programmes
4. As a set of indicators to structure learning and evaluation across our evaluation and learning partnerships for systems change programmes

If you are interested in using it for any of the above, or want to learn more about how we are putting it into practice – please get in touch.

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## We are Renaisi

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