



HARNESSING  
OPPORTUNITY FOR  
POSITIVE, EQUITABLE  
EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

# Building a Systems Change Initiative Theory of Change

Support for this resource was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

## BUILDING A SYSTEMS CHANGE INITIATIVE THEORY OF CHANGE MODEL USING NEMOURS' PROJECT HOPE AS AN ILLUSTRATION

**Purpose:** The purpose of this tool is to provide an adaptable theory of change for initiatives focused on systems change. Theories of change are graphical illustrations of what your initiative is intended to accomplish and how. Developing a theory of change can be useful in determining what your initiative should focus on. Having one can be helpful in describing your initiative to potential funders, partners, and allies. This tool was developed based on the Theory of Change for Nemours' Harnessing Opportunity for Positive, Equitable Early Childhood Development (HOPE) Project. The HOPE Theory of Change is shown along with the fillable theory of change on page 13, which can be adapted for other systems change initiatives. The annotations starting on page 3 and ending on page 11 describe the different boxes and their purpose.

## **KEY FOCUS** (THIS BOX IS FILLABLE ON THE THEORY OF CHANGE FORM)

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The key focus box is used for a concept that is intended to be infused into all aspects of the systems change project. For HOPE that concept was equity. Given the importance of equity as a central concern in contemporary society, equity could be included in this box for other projects as a way of indicating that a focus on equity should be foundational in all the work that is done for a project. This could be operationalized, for example, by assessing whether the stakeholder team adequately reflects the diversity of the community being served, including representatives who have “lived experience” being served by the system that is being changed. Once the stakeholder group starts to develop specific policies and processes to propose they can use an equity impact tool to assess whether any proposed changes could possibly have a positive or negative impact on equity and make adjustments accordingly. In some cases, a project might want to use a different concept, for example a project that wants to infuse prevention into a system that has been focused on intervening upstream after problems manifest themselves may want to include prevention in this box to show how this will be a focus throughout the project from stakeholder selection to the intended outcomes for the systems change initiative.

## COMPLEMENTARY INITIATIVES

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Complementary initiatives refer to efforts occurring at the community, state, and national levels that have the potential to influence the direction and outcomes of a systems change project. Individual systems change initiatives do not take place in a vacuum or laboratory. Complementary initiatives with the same or congruent goals are likely to be occurring or have occurred in communities, agencies, states and at the national level. Complementary initiatives can play a strong value-added role. For example, many HOPE projects are using funding from the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG) to extend and amplify work that they undertook using HOPE resources. For HOPE, Oklahoma was making use of Sensemaker, a tool for collecting stories from families and community members to inform community change projects, through a partnership with a University of Kansas public policy research center. The university center was simultaneously using the tool as part of Kansas' PDG. The lessons learned from HOPE in Oklahoma and PDG in Kansas' work on a complementary initiative have shaped how Oklahoma communities are using Sensemaker to develop their "actionables" or quick, local, inexpensive, community-led change projects designed to improve early care and education (ECE) systems. This example shows how a project can take advantage of complementary initiatives that are occurring at the national, state, and community level from which other states and communities can learn.

## CAPACITY

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Capacity is a term that summarizes the knowledge, skills, experience, tools, and partnerships that stakeholders bring to the table. Capacity serves as both an input and an output. Partners, both individuals and organizations, in a systems change initiative bring varying levels of capacity to the initiative. Regardless of whether a systems building initiative has an explicit goal to build capacity, it is likely to have an affect on community, agency, and collaborative group capacity. An effective systems change initiative will leave participants with greater capacity to continue systems change efforts after the initiative ends. Capacity building activities might include training, support for the collaborative leading the systems change effort, and peer learning opportunities across communities or states. For the Nemours CDC-funded Healthy Kids Healthy Futures Technical Assistance Project (HKHF TAP), state partners were funded to work on infusing a focus on healthy eating and physical activity into state ECE systems. Each organization brought capacity to the work and also in the course of doing the work they, and their partners, developed increased capacity through stronger partnerships and greater understanding of both the ECE system and the food support and production system. These capacities will influence their work on HKHF TAP and future projects.

## **RESOURCES** (THIS BOX IS FILLABLE ON THE THEORY OF CHANGE FORM)

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Most initiatives provide resources to enable communities, states, or national organizations to carry out activities to improve systems. These resources may include funding, technical assistance, administrative support, expertise in particular areas, and the organizational or financial support for peer-to-peer activities such as conference calls, web conferences, and in-person meetings. HOPE provided states with funding, equity training, connections to other national initiatives working on community systems change, along with other resources.

## **ACTIVITIES** (THIS BOX IS FILLABLE ON THE THEORY OF CHANGE FORM)

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Activities include those efforts supported by the initiative's resources. This might include trainings, strategic or long-term planning, pilot initiatives, community and family engagement activities, and sharing of lessons learned across sites. HKHF TAP has had strong success with cross-state learning that has helped states strategize and adapt other state initiatives in their own communities. As a result of regular peer-learning webinars, a number of HKHF TAP states are exploring adopting Iowa's strategy of developing family childcare peer learning ambassadors who are family child care providers who are given an incentive to provide counsel and support to other family child care providers who are interested in participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to enable them to more easily navigate the program.

## SYSTEMS ELEMENTS

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System building involves activities related to at least one, but often more, systems elements. Interconnectedness between the elements often requires addressing multiple elements in a systems building initiative. Working on systems elements through the development of partnerships is at the core of systems building work.<sup>1</sup>

**Governance** refers to how resources and programs are organized. This can include things such as which agency or organization is responsible for managing particular resources or programs or how a collaborative is structured and able to shape partner activities. For HOPE, Washington State was working on an initiative to develop a statewide Help Me Grow resource and referral system. In doing so decisions had to be made about the distribution of responsibilities for governance between different organizations and between the state and community level.

**Leadership development** refers to the process by which system leadership is developed. This includes processes related to leadership of agencies or organizations that make up the system that is the focus of the initiative. It also includes efforts to build community leadership with the goal of allowing the people who are served by programs and resources to provide meaningful input into how systems are governed and operated. In HOPE, Florida sent a group of emerging parent leaders from across the state to a national parent leadership training program with the goal of creating a linked network of parent leaders who could work at the both the community and state levels on issues related to families and children.

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<sup>1</sup> Similar systems elements are included in the theory of change for the evaluation of the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems initiative which covered 49 of 50 states and 5 jurisdictions and in the Early Childhood Systems Working Group's "What are the Functions of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System" graphic.

Mathis, S., Botsko, C., McGovern Sternesky, L., Lifsey, S. Raymond, S., Burrell S. and Brown, A. (2012). Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Evaluation.

## SYSTEMS ELEMENTS

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**Financing strategy development** refers to work related to how programs, resources, and systems are paid for and how systems building work is supported. This element can include developing strategy for long-term funding for innovative system strategies. For example, for HOPE, one of Washington state's long-term goals involved determining how to fund the long-term operation of the Help Me Grow system that was being built through a variety of short-term funding sources. For HKHF TAP, multiple states are involved in trying to determine if they can devise a long-term funding strategy to support Go NAPSACC, a research-based tool that supports ECE providers to assess and improve their healthy eating and physical activity practices.

**Data strategy development** involves determining how best to use data for monitoring, accountability, and evaluation. This may include efforts to develop more effective measures and efforts to present data in ways that are meaningful to stakeholders including the people who are served by the system. For HOPE, Oklahoma found that partner agencies, organizations and community members often were unaware of the extent of ECE disparities. Sharing the data helped partners see where the need were greatest. As Washington moves forward with Help Me Grow development it has begun discussions about what kind of data need to be collected in order to monitor and assess the effectiveness of the system once it is developed.

**Communications** refers to how different parts of the system are kept informed about system processes and operations. The communications element also includes outreach efforts designed to help those who use the system understand how to access it and maximize their benefits from it, or to have an influence on systems change efforts. As part of HOPE in New Jersey, state agency partners visited with program beneficiaries in low-income areas of the state. The stories that were told were then used by these leaders to explain to their state-level colleagues about service deficiencies and the need to improve service at the community-level and oversight of community-level staff and contractors.

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Final Report. Prepared by Altarum Institute for HRSA's Maternal and Child Health Bureau.

The Early Childhood Systems Working Group. (2011). Updating the Ovals: A Guide to Our Rationale. Prepared by Rachel Schumacher for the BUILD Initiative.

## SYSTEMS ELEMENTS

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**Program and policy development** is often required to enact systems changes. This could include efforts to develop policies for a new mechanism for connecting families to resources as in the Help Me Grow example described above. One of the ripple effects<sup>2</sup> of HOPE in New Jersey was that HOPE's representatives from the Department of Labor began encouraging the use of an equity impact review tool when the department was planning significant program or policy changes. For HOPE, Florida developed a policy workgroup that used a modified version of Zero-to-Three's self-assessment policy toolkit to explore ECE policies that their collaborative group could agree to work on with a focus on promoting social and emotional health. This work included obtaining input from parents and professionals around the state to help inform their decisions.

**Professional development systems** refer to changes that are made in how system staff are trained and supported. Program and policy changes are simply words unless they are implemented effectively. Often times that requires changes to professional development systems to, for example, put a greater emphasis on equity or prevention. For HKHF TAP, multiple states were providing training and developing processes in their childcare professional development system in order to support the implementation of research-based tools focused on increasing physical activity and encouraging healthy eating in child care.

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<sup>2</sup> While there is no standard definition of "ripple effects," for the purposes of the HOPE evaluation, ripple effects were defined as activities, events, or developments that HOPE contributed to that may potentially shape ECE partners, systems, policies, or practices, but occur outside of the central or directly funded activities of the main project being evaluated. Ripple effects can be an important contribution of systems change projects.

## OUTCOMES (THIS BOX IS FILLABLE ON THE THEORY OF CHANGE FORM)

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Outcomes are the intended results of a systems change initiative. Short term outcomes are outcomes that are planned for early in the project, usually in the first or second year. The first set of outcomes in the fillable version of the Theory of Change are short term outcomes. Because more is likely to be known about these than later outcomes, there is space to include three outcomes. Ideally all outcomes are measurable and plans are in place to assess whether they have been achieved using measurement tools. For HOPE, the first three outcomes were the intended changes for the first few years of the project. They were focused on systems change that was intended to lead to improvements in the system overtime.

Medium term outcomes are those that occur a little later in the project. Medium term is typically defined as between two and five years depending on the project and the scope of change required. The medium outcome for HOPE was improved access to services and resources. The goal of all the HOPE projects was to make the ECE system more responsive to the needs of families and communities whether through creating a statewide Help Me Grow resource and referral system in Washington or supporting small, community-driven projects or “actionables” in Oklahoma.

Long term outcomes are what the initiative ultimately hopes to achieve. For HOPE, this was very general because the initiatives undertaken by each state varied so much. For HKHF TAP, the long-term outcome is a “reduction in childhood obesity and other precursors to future conditions.” Many initiatives may not be around long enough or have resources to conduct a thorough study of whether the initiative achieved its long-term outcomes, however, it is important that the Theory of Change audience understand to which outcome you ultimately hope to contribute.

To support states in setting goals and selecting data indicators to track and measure these goals, Nemours has developed a resource, **Selecting Indicators for Early Childhood Systems Change Projects: a Reference Guide**. This resource can be accessed [here](#).

## CONTEXT

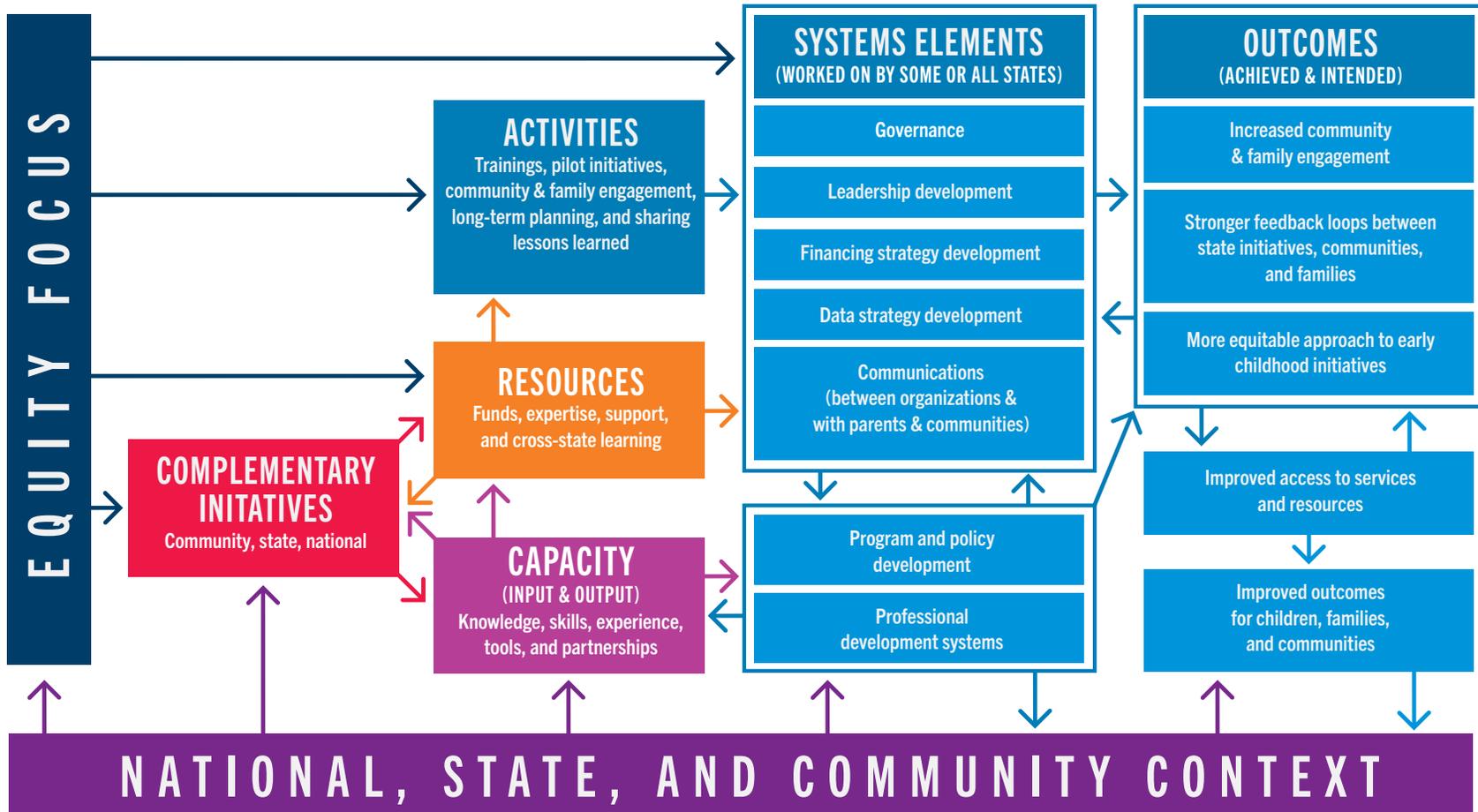
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Context refers to the wide range of factors that shape the outcomes from a systems change initiative. In general, most of these are outside the direct control of the systems change initiative. These include general economic conditions and historical and political factors that might shape systems change. Towards the end of the first phase of HOPE in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was a key contextual factor shaping how systems work was carried out. Context often plays a powerful role in shaping systems change initiatives. While it is not easy, systems change initiatives can shape context over time. For example, the development of the ECE system over time has shaped the economy by enabling parents of young children to participate in the labor force.

Project HOPE works with states to redesign infrastructure components, including leadership, communications, governance, financing and data, to support impactful policy and program changes across sectors (systems change). The end goal is to ensure equitable access to high-quality services and resources for young children, prenatal to age five, and their families.



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# NAME OF INITIATIVE:

# THEORY OF CHANGE

